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## Oakland 'Nutcracker' sweet but uneven

By Allan Ulrich Updated 10:55 am, Monday, December 19, 2016



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The Oakland Ballet Company's Ramona Kelley as Marie and Seyong Kim as the Nutcracker take to the air in Graham Lustig's "Nutcracker."

Saturday, Dec. 17, marked the 124th anniversary of the premiere of "Nutcracker" in St. Petersburg, Russia. The czar and his party, reportedly, loved it; the critics were cool. But audiences have had the last word, and the youthful crowd at the **Paramount Theatre** on Saturday afternoon, Dec. 17, expressed their pleasure with the **Oakland Ballet's** staging with cheers and, alas, chatter.

The weekend marked the sixth holiday season for Artistic Director **Graham Lustig's** "Nutcracker," and the production has become a part of the Bay Area holiday schedule. There are reasons. Like its Oakland Ballet predecessor (by **Ronn Guidi**), the newcomer is viewer friendly to a degree. The ballet seems about real people dealing with real vexations and pleasures. That affability often compensates for a variable caliber of dancing.

Lustig goes his own way setting the first act in pre-World War 1 Vienna, made concrete with Zack Brown's appealing Secession-era designs and costumes. We're at a family skating party, and the guest list includes Mr. and Mrs. Kokoshka, who, unfortunately, brought no paintings along. Heroine Marie stands on the threshold of maturity and gets to dance a bit. Uncle Drosselmeyer is no ol geezer, but a genial young Viennese metrosexual (**Scott McMahon**) who fancies a walk on stilts (his green formal wear is a mistake)

There's a battle with the mice, but these rodents are too adorable to exterminate, and, in fact, Marie establishes her humanity by saving one from the knife. Lustig makes his own choices, and you succumb to the charms, even if, like the air balloon, you'd feel churlish for resisting.

Nevertheless, a few lapses bring you back to reality. The transformation from toy to human nutcracker (behind a curtain) lacks magic, while Lustig never quite synchronizes the growing Christmas tree with its corresponding place in the Tchaikovsky score.

The journey to Confiturembourg (Land of the Sweets) goes smoothly, but the divertissements are blandly plotted and danced competently, and only **Vincent Chavez's** Spanish dancer brought intensity to the job. One inescapable fact: This second act, much like the frozen forest at the end of Act 1, looks underpopulated. The Oakland Ballet lists only 20 dancers, and they are not enough, especially in the waltz of the flowers, to make the intended effect.

The Oakland "Nutcracker" stands halfway between a professional performance and a community celebration. Lustig recruited 40 young Bay Area dancers who appear as everything from peppermints to snowballs, and they all seemed disciplined. Among the professionals, Megan Terry's sugarplum fairy (warm and supple) and her cavalier, **Jesse Campbell** (good partnering), commanded attention in the grand pas de deux. Except for intermittent balance problems, Seyong Kim was a worthy squire to **Ramona Kelley's** Marie.

Again Saturday, the Mount Eden's Women Ensemble supplied the wordless chorus in the snow scene (most companies settle for a recording). Again, **Michael Morgan** conducted the **Oakland East Bay Symphony** in the Tchaikovsky. The pacing was measured, the sound luxuriant. Morgan seems to have figured out how dancers breathe, and there was something organic about his splendid performance. He has become indispensable to this annual ritual.

*Allan Ulrich is The San Francisco Chronicle's dance correspondent.*

Oakland Ballet Company: Graham Lustig's "Nutcracker." 2pm, Sunday, Jan. 18, **Paramount Theater**, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. \$25-\$90. 800-745-3000

For a preview, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mV3V8zfZJNk>

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