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DANCE

Oakland Ballet's 'Nutcracker' a sumptuous affair

Steven Winn | December 21, 2018 | Updated: December 25, 2018, 6:00 pm



Seyong Kim as the Nutcracker in Oakland Ballet's production of Graham Lustig's "The Nutcracker."
Photo: Stephen Texeira

Children brightened row after row of the Paramount Theatre on Saturday afternoon, Dec. 22, in the first of three weekend performances of Oakland Ballet's "The Nutcracker." To a

striking degree, they were seen in all their dress-up finery and not heard, as they, like the adult members of the audience, got swept up and absorbed in the Edwardian spectacle, storytelling, wit, ebullient dancing and ravishing Tchaikovsky score that unfurled before them.

There may have been another reason for the young viewers' close attention to the proceedings. Many of them were no doubt busy waiting for and spotting friends and relatives among the 40 dancers ages 7 to 17 who got to sparkle, spin, tumble and show off their ballet-position poise as bulbous snowballs and no-nonsense soldiers, mini sugar plums, mincing mice and silk-clad clowns.

Having all those kids onstage sounds like it might tip this "Nutcracker" into cutesy, community-theater kitsch. That never happened. Under company Artistic Director Graham Lustig's sure-handed direction and choreography, the young performers added just the right measure of innocent luster and well-schooled stage presence without ever crowding or upstaging the professionals. The Piedmont East Bay Children's Choir pitched in prettily on the wordless Snow Scene chorus.

Nylah Kim got some star-quality cheers for his buoyant turn as the Tiny Clown in the second act. But just as sweet, in their scurrying grace and carefully struck poses, were the Sugar Plum Fairy's ensemble of attendants. Lustig is fond of circle-dance forms, which became a kind of merry-go-round motif through his flowing two-hour production. It was as if the energy of childhood itself never stopped spinning through Marie's enchanted Christmas Eve.

The grown-up dancers must carry the day, of course, and no one managed that with more charm and exquisite lightness of being than Ramona Kelley, back in her fifth embodiment of Marie. Wherever she was onstage, pinafores and beribboned, the eye followed and drank in the lovely liquidity of her dancing.

When she was lifted, by her strange Uncle Drosselmeyer (a fleet and almost furtive Vincent Chavez) or her Nutcracker-turned-Prince (an ingratiating if somewhat workmanlike Seyong Kim), Kelley swooned into a luxuriant layout. She was so limber and light-footed in her big pas de deux with Kim that she seemed all but airborne.





Ramona Kelley as Marie in Oakland Ballet's "The Nutcracker."

Photo: Stephen Texeira

But her work on pointe radiated a solidly grounded strength. So did her effortless arabesques, pirouettes and jumps. Everything landed with delicate but decisive clarity. Her characterizations were just as explicit, whether she was fending off the torments of her brother, Fritz (a shamelessly toxic Brandon Perez), mourning over the Nutcracker gift he broke or rescuing some mice from a threatened de-tailing.

In designer Zack Brown's first-act set, which showed off a snowy vista complete with naturally planted Christmas tree through floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows, the wintry outdoors merged with the party festivities inside. Then, when it was time for the rodent invasion – first a Rat Girl and then the Rat King and his horde – a giant curtain cloaked the windows to effect shadow-play and sneaky entrances. The theatrical artifice felt just right for all the fanciful goings-on, from a delightfully staged Toy versus Rat battle to the Oz-worthy balloon that transported Marie and her Prince off to the Magical Kingdom just in time for intermission.

Brown, who also did the splendid costumes, glazed his Act Two set in a crystal sheen. Jackie McConnell and a towering Thom Panto looked regal as the Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier. Their dancing, both together and in separate showpieces, was perfectly respectable but rather remote. Several of the brief globe-spanning vignettes held more allure. Nina Pearlman was a free-spirited Chinese Nightingale. Constanza Murphy and Christopher Dunn, both flashing some bare skin once they dispensed with their gauzy Arabian shrouds, added a dash of sinuous sensuality. In a season that has shined some

attention on cultural and racial stereotyping in “The Nutcracker” in other cities, Oakland’s treatments seemed clear-eyed and confident.

Best of all, in what always seems the ballet’s more static half, was the “Waltz of the Flowers.” The six dancers looked positively floral in Brown’s blooming skirts and torso-hugging stems. That’s the vision that danced in one viewer’s head on the BART ride home.

No telling what Marie was dreaming when she finally made it back to her comfy couch at home as the curtain fell. Like her, a little girl in Row F had fallen fast asleep by then, a contented smile on her face.

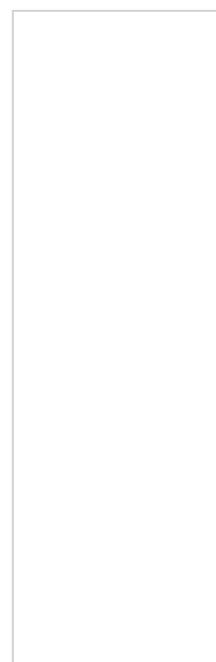
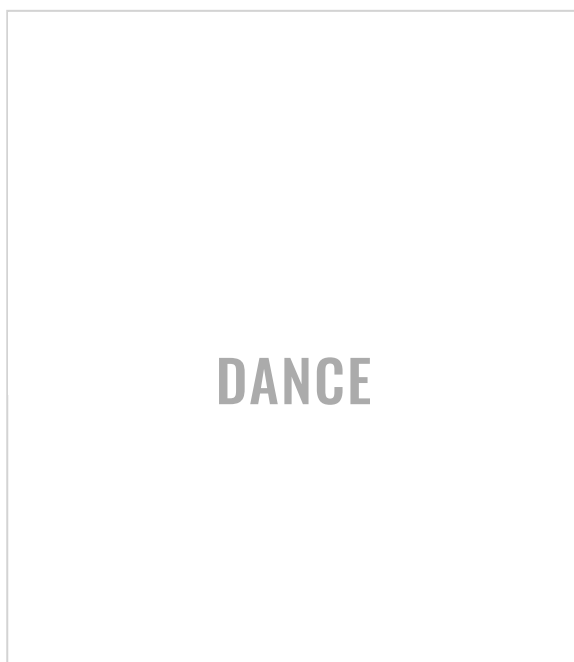
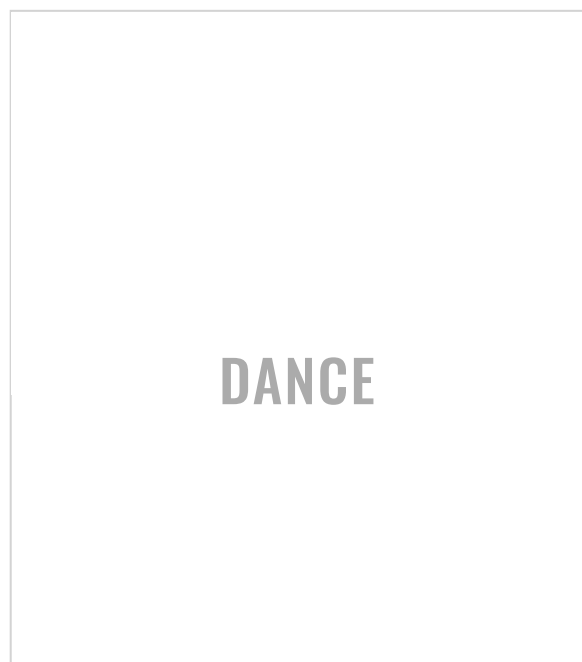
‘The Nutcracker’: Tchaikovsky ballet directed and choreographed by Graham Lustig. Oakland Ballet Company. Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. Final performance at 1 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 23. \$24-\$97. 510-893-3132. www.oaklandballet.org.



Steven Winn

Steven Winn is The Chronicle’s former arts and culture critic

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