

# Oakland becomes Land of the Sweets with disarming annual 'Nutcracker'

By Allan Ulrich | December 24, 2017 | Updated: December 24, 2017 4:20pm

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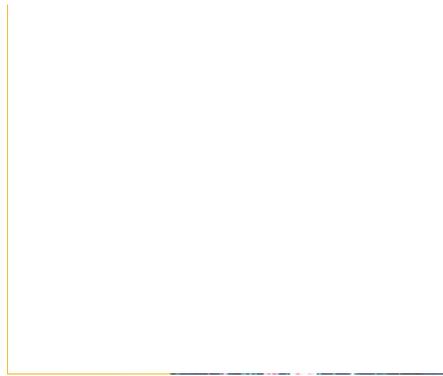


Photo: John Hefti

IMAGE 1 OF 4

Ramona Kelley as Marie and Seyong Kim as the Nutcracker, with company dancers in Oakland Ballet Company's production of Graham Lustig's "The Nutcracker."

For Oaklanders, a sure sign that Christmas is fast upon us is sighting the 19th century balloon taxi that whisks heroine Marie to the Land of the Sweets. That glorious contraption was spied at the Paramount Theatre on Saturday, Dec. 23, when the Oakland Ballet Company opened its all-too-brief annual run of "The Nutcracker."



Now in its eighth year of performance here, Artistic Director Graham Lustig's production will disarm the most jaded soul and fascinate the youngest viewers.

Yes, one can voice minor complaints about this "Nutcracker" (none I have ever seen is free of blemishes). But Lustig's feeling for narrative and his knack for using the shallow Paramount stage for his own dramatic purposes have yielded a couple of engaging hours.

For some of us, Tchaikovsky's overture should be heard unadorned, not as accompaniment to a winter sledding scene at the rear of the stage. Once over that lapse, we are plunged into a busy house party in early 20th century Vienna, with Zack Brown's decor and elegant costumes reflecting the period.

Marie is the protagonist in this version, and Lustig does much to humanize her. She treats the lovable mice like pets and suffers pangs of guilt over slaying one of them. Saturday's Marie, Ramona Kelley, is a veteran of this production, and whether rising in releve or bourreeing impulsively across the stage, she proves an extraordinary classicist, as well as a creature of the theater. When she awakens the Nutcracker Prince after the battle and the Tchaikovsky score swells, she stands back, trembling over the affection she feels. It is a moment most versions of "The Nutcracker" ignore.

Considering that the Oakland Ballet numbers only 19 dancers, Lustig must recruit freelancers and students for "The Nutcracker." In the Act 2 Land of the Sweets, six meager waltzing flowers are supplemented with an interpolated pas de deux for Marie and the Prince (which makes no sense); and it's a bit odd to see Mr. Stahlbaum (Garth Grimball) return as a supporting hunk in the Arabian divertissement.

But sometimes, the doubling is intriguing; the rat girl, Alysia Chang, returns as the Chinese nightingale. Cousin Vera (Jackie McConnell) and her boyfriend (Thom Panto) come back as the sugar plum fairy and her cavalier (that's what happens in dreams) and dispense the customary thrills in the grand pas de deux. Panto is tall, rangy, gifted with superior partnering skills. McConnell shows good proportions, but slows down her variation to the point where it loses continuity.

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Again this year, Seyong Kim is the boyish and teasing Prince. Vincent Chavez danced an uncreepy Uncle Drosselmeyer, who can also walk on stilts. Sanchit Babbar made much mischief as kid brother Fritz. Erik Debono aced the Spanish variation. Ensemble values were higher than ever in this company Saturday.

Part of that cohesion may be attributed to Michael Morgan, who conducted the Oakland Symphony in a lushly textured reading of the Tchaikovsky music. In the snow scene's wordless chorus, the Piedmont East Bay Children's Concert Choir made everybody's Christmas a bit sweeter.

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

**Oakland Ballet Company in Graham Lustig's "Nutcracker":** 1 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 24. Paramount Theater, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. Tickets, \$19.50-\$90. (800) 745-3000, [www.oaklandballet.org](http://www.oaklandballet.org)



11:50 AM

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