



Inland Pacific Ballet delivers strong, sophisticated "Nutcracker"

REVIEW

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Some things have become staples during the holiday season -- a decorative Christmas tree, gifts wrapped in pretty paper, wish lists for St. Nick.

This year, make the Inland Pacific Ballet's "The Nutcracker" a part of your holiday "to do" list. The Montclair-based ballet company's 10th-anniversary season production is a wonderful, crowd-pleasing treat.

Sunday's opening performance at Bridges Auditorium in Claremont had all the elements of a top-notch "Nutcracker" --imaginative sets, gorgeous costumes, memorable characters, artistic choreography, sophisticated showmanship.

This season's "Nutcracker" is a stronger, more mature and tighter production. There is an artistic growth noticeable in the dancers, many of whom have grown up with the ballet.

In Act 1, we are introduced to Clara Stahlbaum (played by 15-year-old Natalie Rego of San Dimas). Clara is the innocent, young girl who gets whisked away to a wintry dreamland of candies, icicles and snowflakes. Rego is a most beautiful and graceful Clara, playing her with poise and playfulness.

The party scene at the Stahlbaum home is a treat for the eyes -- "party mothers" wear sparkly ballgowns, the "party girls" and "party boys" have festive attire, a large Christmas tree and colorful presents take center stage.

Thankfully, the storyline in Act 1 wastes no time in getting to the action. The audience meets the mysterious Drosselmeyer (Eric Shah) who bears entertaining gifts, including wind-up toy dolls (great performances by Laura Alexich and Emma Storey) and a soldier doll (clean execution, effortless leaps and twirls by Darrell Haire).

Once the party ends, Clara enters a dreamy world where a Mouse King and life-sized Nutcracker doll battle. This scene moves at a good pace with cute, furry mice battling a group of toy soldiers. The Mouse King is defeated by Clara and the Nutcracker (who later turns into a handsome Prince) and they enter a magical kingdom of snow, complete with dancing snowflakes and icicles.

Just as each snowflake possesses its own unique "fingerprint," each dancer showed her unique style. Ashley Mohadjer (the Snow Queen) had beautiful form, streamlined leaps and precise turns. Jennifer Dille (the

Snow Princess) was a delight to watch as a delicate, bouncing "snowflake."

There were a few technical hiccups in Act 2, including brief moments of silence in between scenes. The air was still as the dancers and the audience waited for the music to begin (one of the risks of using a prerecorded score). A live orchestra would only make the production more magical -- perhaps something for next year?

In Act 2, Clara enjoys dances from around the world -- Spain, China, Russia and the Middle East. The three Russian dancers (Kevin Anthony Adams, Darrell Haire and Yesid Lopez) exploded onto stage and wowed the audience with beautiful leaps, dizzying turns and lots of energy.

The costumes (designed by Jeanne Nolden) in Act 2 were sumptuous. Fluffy, feminine pink for the Waltz of the Flowers, colorful pastels for the Mirleton corps and sparkly, sensual fabrics for the Arabian soloists.

Of course, no Nutcracker would be complete without adorable, dancing candies and bonbons (little ones dressed up as peppermints and gum drops -- too cute!).

The production ends with a beautiful pas de deux between the Sugar Plum Fairy (IPB veteran Kelly Lamoureux) and the Cavalier (Steven Voznick). The Lamoureux/Voznick pairing was a strong one -- they both possessed graceful form, matched each other in height and had good on-stage chemistry.

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