

## ‘The Nutcracker’ is a Triumph for Los Angeles Ballet

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Photo: Reed Hutchinson

Los Angeles Ballet stepped into its sixth season with a delightful holiday performance of *The Nutcracker* at The Alex Theatre in Glendale last weekend. LAB alternately charmed and thrilled its audience with dancing that conveyed emotional depth, and bravura displays that combined strength and grace.

Act I, Scene One (hallway) features wonderfully expressive acting by Clara (Mia Katz) and her annoying brother Fritz (Aidan Merchel-Zoric). The charm continues into Scene Two (The Party) with engaging choreography and a stunning performance by the Cossack Doll (Chehon Wespi-Tschopp): ten consecutive turns (*tour a la seconde*) followed by a quadruple pirouette. And Scene Three is both playful and serious in its dispatch of the Mouse King. Act II, Scene One is a feast of superb performances that range from exquisite to vigorous. And the final scene when Clara awakens marks Mia Katz as a gifted actress as well as dancer.

Like *The Wizard of Oz* would do in the 20th century, Tchaikovsky’s 19th century masterpiece celebrates the amazing worlds a young woman unleashes in her dreams. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the heroine Dorothy creates a world that enables her to work through relationship issues with the adults around her. In *The Nutcracker*, our heroine Clara is a bit more ambitious. She dreams of a romantic ideal.

The scene opens just before the guests arrive at the Christmas Eve party at the Stalbaum Family’s festive home. Clara is being tormented by her brother Fritz, who attempts to wrestle her baby doll away from her. Later on, when the party is underway, we see Fritz and other boys waving toy guns and running through the crowd as Clara and the girls hug their dolls all the more tightly. And so we see, through a child’s eyes, society’s central problem: how to harness the male energy so that it protects fragile life rather than destroys it.

Clara’s dear Uncle Drosselmeyer presents Clara with a life-sized Nutcracker, an example of male energy properly harnessed: the Nutcracker is able to crack the shell without destroying the nut. And was it just a coincidence that Fritz got knocked over in his presence when he persisted in teasing Clara?

That night, Clara’s dream is that of an innocent young girl, not yet sailing into the storms of adolescence. So, her vision of men behaving badly is not a gang of wolves or even rats, but overgrown mice. Uncle Drosselmeyer, personifying the civilizing tradition, summons The Nutcracker, symbolizing the young hero who must defend civilization anew. The Nutcracker dispatches the Mouse King; man’s better nature has triumphed over his baser one. As a result, Uncle Drosselmeyer can now usher both Clara and her Nutcracker into a world where the delicate things—like snowflakes—can safely dance. A world where strength serves beauty and grace.

*The Nutcracker* is a young girl’s wonderful dream of civilization as it might be. And for a few hours, Los Angeles Ballet made that dream a glorious reality. If one of your New Year’s resolutions is to become more culturally involved, put LAB on your list. Then you’ll have at least one resolution you’re likely to keep long after the pounds have returned.

*The Nutcracker* plays at Royce Hall, UCLA on Saturday the 17th and Sunday the 18th, at 1:00 p.m. and 5:00 pm. Then it plays at the Redondo Beach performing Arts Center on Thursday the 22nd at 7:30 p.m., Friday the 23rd at 7:30 p.m., and Saturday the 24th at 1:00 p.m. Call the Box Office at 310-998-7782 or visit [www.losangelesballet.org](http://www.losangelesballet.org).