

Los Angeles Times

Dance Review: December 5, 2011 | 5:01 pm

Los Angeles Ballet polishes ‘The Nutcracker’

by Jean Lenihan

Continuing to establish itself as a spirited and sophisticated -- if itinerant -- ballet company, Los Angeles Ballet opened its 2011-12 season over the weekend at the Alex Theatre in Glendale with a memorable cast for its distinctive, inspired “The Nutcracker.”



Photos: Allynne Noelle soars through the air as the Rose; next page, “The Nutcracker” company. Credit: Rick Loomis / Los Angeles Times

As helmed by artistic directors Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary, Los Angeles Ballet’s “Nutcracker” delivers an admirable depth and intelligence of design combined with a light-handed approach to the ballet’s traditional Christmas-party characterizations and plot line. Catherine Kanner’s luscious Act 1 setting is 1912 Los Angeles, an interior drawing room so plush and timbered that even with its electric lights it still feels redolent of Tchaikovsky’s time.

Inhabiting this velvety parlor, the pale, winsome Clara (Mia Katz) and her incandescent Uncle Drosselmeyer (Nicolas de la Vega) make a poetic pair, and it’s easy to root for their partnership. Usually an aged, menacing creature, Drosselmeyer is drawn here as blessedly young and gregarious. De la Vega’s sweeping gestures and scampering feet swell to light the whole stage.

In lovely contrast, young Katz’s pale, long limbs move tentatively toward full expression, finally unleashing a full rush of joy when she receives her enchanting, full-sized Nutcracker doll (Nathaniel Solis). All the ensuing Act I scenes -- mice battles, tree expansion, blizzard of human snowflakes -- seem to extend from and amplify Clara’s core excitement over this special gift.

Set in the amorphous “Palace of the Dolls,” Act 2 fails to sustain the momentum of Act 1, but that’s no shock. Few “Nutcrackers” figure out how to unify this hodgepodge of revved-up divertissements. Christensen and Neary attend to the structural flaw with some lovely touches (members of the different sections interact frequently on the sidelines; Clara comes from her viewing perch to hug the fairies before they depart), yet there’s room to improve their thematic grouping here.

The divertissements -- a mix of Land of Sweets and Exotics (Arabian coffee, Spanish, Russian, Mother Gingerbread) combined with a reprisal of the commedia dell’arte dolls (in place of Chinese) and no Mirlitones section -- really become a smorgasbord of free-floating fairy-tale dreams.

continued

As Marie and her Cavalier, newly named company principals Allyssa Bross and Christopher Revels hit all the fouettés and fish dives, though Bross looks somewhat defrocked in Mikael Meybye's short, simple tutu with three vertical red bows. Vivid power shone from standout soloists Chehon Wespi-Tschopp (Cossack doll) and Allynne Noelle (the Rose), while the crowd went mad for the repeat partnership of Julia Cinquemani and Alexander Castillo (Arabian).

While Los Angeles Ballet certainly deserves its own theater, the troupe is a mightily impressive touring company. The quality of the recorded music, from musical director Michael Andreas, boosts this further.



Los Angeles Ballet's "The Nutcracker," Royce Hall, UCLA, 340 Royce Drive, Los Angeles. 1 and 5 p.m. Dec. 17 and 18. Also: Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center, 1935 Manhattan Beach Blvd., Redondo Beach. 7:30 p.m. Dec. 22 and 23; 1 p.m. Dec. 24. \$30 to \$95. (310)-998-7782. www.losangelesballet.org