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## Dazzling Nutcracker Opens Los Angeles Ballet's 4<sup>th</sup> Season

By Penny Orloff /CultureSpotLA.com /AisleSay.com



Snow , *The Nutcracker*; Photo: Reed Hutchinson

Again and again, balletomanes with deep pockets have attempted to bring classical ballet - the most esoteric of traditional European amusements - westward to the pop culture mecca of southern California. Rare visits by our venerable national treasure, American Ballet Theatre, and a buffet of international imports have enthralled local audiences – but not enough to inspire regular consumption of the domestic product. For decades, dance companies have optimistically fought to stay afloat long enough to be considered L.A.'s resident professional ballet company, only to drown in local apathy after a season or two. Beating all the odds, the Los Angeles Ballet opens a 4<sup>th</sup> season with 9 performances of its annual holiday treat of a Nutcracker.

With original choreography by co-artistic directors Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary, this perennial chestnut takes on new life as a love-letter to Los Angeles. The Christmas party opening scene is set in a colorful Mexican-style hacienda in the L. A. of 1912, courtesy of LA designer Catherine Kanner.

Returning in the role of Marie (Sugarplum Fairy in other productions) is company prima ballerina, and former New York City Ballet featured artist, Melissa Barak. Last year's cool precision is this year's confident joy, as her elegant reserve gives way to a new, more passionate involvement. Permanent Guest Artist Eddy Tovar dances the Prince, partnering Barak with sensitivity and effortless lifts. A revelation in LAB's *Prodigal Son* last season, the charismatic Tovar is clearly a major star in the making.

Also returning is guest artist Sergey Kheylik as the Cossack Doll. By now an audience favorite, Kheylik leads newcomers Justin Liu and Chehon Wespi-Tschopp through the acrobatic leaps and turns of a virtuoso Russian Dance that brings the full house to a prolonged, screaming roar of cheers.

Having owned the role of Clara for 3 seasons, child prodigy ballerina Lilit Hogtanian is now dancing as an adult in Europe. She is replaced by a radiant 12-year old, Anna Barnes, who studies at LAB and appeared in the children's corps de ballet for last year's Nutcracker and La Sylphide. Barnes is fragile and vulnerable in the part, proficient on pointe, a total pro. Clara's annoying brat of a brother, Franz, is danced by 4-year LAB veteran Billy Shaffer, whose physical comedy chops wring major laughs from the sold-out house.

A product of the School of American Ballet and veteran of many New York City Ballet productions, lanky 15-year-old Harrison Coll dances the role of the Nutcracker with authority and blazing footwork. His slender frame giving no indication of his strength, Coll executes impeccable grands jetes and nails the landing of a series of double tours en l'air with dazzling panache early in the first act. This young dancer is clearly someone to watch as he matures.

Company newcomer Monica Pelfrey, alternating with Barak as Marie, dances the Rose in the Waltz of the Flowers with breathtaking ports des bras and lovely extensions. Highest praise is due the exceptional LAB women's corps de ballet for their flawless precision as the Flowers, and in the Dance of the Snowflakes. Most companies of this caliber have 24 or more women for these dances, which allows some individuality in a sea of arms and legs. But with a corps of only 12 dancers every movement is exposed, and the slightest variation diminishes the spell. Deserving individual mention are multi-season women's corps regulars Erica Bandy, Bondy Owens, Nancy Richer, Kelly Ann Sloan, Lucy Van Cleef, and Monica Stephenson, joined by recent arrivals Courtney Deri, Katrina Gould, Kate Highstrete, Chelsea Johnston, Britta Lazenga, Aurelia Peixoto, Sophie Silna, and Grace McLaughlin.

Rising to major soloist this year, Katie Tomer is mesmerizing in the Arabian Dance. Her partner is poised 2<sup>nd</sup> year LAB soloist Drew Grant, who performed the role last year. Kudos to a flamboyant Andrew Brader as Uncle Drosselmeyer, Peter Snow and Katrina Gould as Harlequin and Columbine Dolls, newcomer Zheng Hua Li as the Mouse King, and to the disciplined children's corps.

LA area residents have three more chances to enjoy this magical production, at Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center on Dec. 26 at 2 and 7:30, and Dec. 27 at 2. For more information, visit [www.losangelesballet.org](http://www.losangelesballet.org).