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LAB Nutcracker – Sweet!

by Penny Orloff

The press releases screamed, “Los Angeles Ballet Soars into 3rd Season with World-Class Production of ‘The Nutcracker.’” Soars. World-Class. I forgave the publicist’s hyperbole.

Having seen two LAB dance programs during the fledgling company’s 2nd season, I expected a credible, competent, well-rehearsed performance by promising young dancers, enhanced by the presence of a few Guest Artists.

Jaded and disappointed by decades of failed attempts at establishing a real ballet company in Los Angeles, nothing had prepared me for the Christmas miracle on the stage of Royce Hall Sunday night. (<http://www.losangelesballet.org>)

It’s difficult to select outstanding elements from so uniformly excellent a production. First and foremost, however, is this company’s corps de ballet. Guest artists and flashy soloists are available to any company with the shekels to hire them. What makes or breaks a ballet company is the group precision and perfection on display in LAB’s Dance of the Snowflakes. Just as I was getting all teary-eyed with joy, the five-year-old on her mom’s lap behind me whispered, “Mommy, I love this!”

Even more extraordinary is the fact that ballet mistress Colleen Neary was rehearsing two new dancers into this very piece fifteen minutes before curtain. Executive Director Julie Whittaker tells me that, after the matinee, one of the corps was taken seriously ill and rushed to the hospital, while a second dancer nursed a badly swollen ankle.

Among a plethora of highlights: Prodigy ballerina Lilit Hogtanian, as Clara, whose every gesture is a poem. At sixteen, she exhibits an arresting Star Quality. One can’t begin to guess what she will be in ten years.

Melissa Barak performs the role of Marie (Sugarplum Fairy in other productions) with cool elegance and precision, marvelous balance and clarity of line. Her partner, Peter Snow, dazzles with gorgeous jetees, pirouettes, and lifts, after an off-center landing of a difficult aerial turn early in Act 2.

Guest artist Sergey Kheylik astonishes with impossible leaps and turns. Kheylik and company dancers Li Chen and Tian Tan elicit startled gasps and prolonged cheering in the Act 2 Russian Dance.

The exquisite Corinna Gill, ably partnered by new LAB soloist Drew Grant, offers a molten, sinuous Arabian Dance. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KdqPmOziQw>) Her breathtaking extensions and lyrical ports des bras sear every phrase into memory. Soaring and world-class, indeed.

Kudos to Jonathan Sharp as Drosselmeyer, Craig Hall and Annia Hildalgo as Harlequin and Columbine Dolls, Andrew Brader as the Mouse King, and to the well-rehearsed children's corps.

The Colleen Neary-Thordal Christensen choreography brings a theatrical freshness to the oft-told story of a little girl who dreams that her Christmas toys come alive. Their Christmas Party scene opening the ballet, for example, is the most engrossing and fun among dozens of 'Nutcrackers' I've seen during my long life.

A show curtain painted in colorful Mexican style with two angels (City of the Angels - get it?) greets the audience, rising to reveal lovely storybook sets by LA designer Catherine Kanner. Opulent costumes by Danish designer Mikael Melbye reinforce the fantasy.

My companion of the evening - a classical ballet-hater, whose sole enticement for agreeing to be dragged to this performance was the prospect of ogling exceptionally fit young women cavorting in revealing costumes - turned to me at intermission to say, "I'm beyond impressed - I'm entertained."

LA area residents have three more chances to enjoy this magical production, at Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center on Dec. 27 at 2 and 7:30, and Dec. 28 at 2.