

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### L.A. Ballet -- after the Christmas dream

The new troupe learns from 'Nutcracker' and forges bravely ahead with Balanchine and Bournonville in March.

By Lewis Segal  
Times Staff Writer

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Los Angeles Ballet gave its final performance of "Nutcracker" on Saturday at the Alex Theatre in Glendale: a rite of passage, for the next time we see this brand-new company it won't be dancing a homemade version of the Christmas kiddie classic but rather grown-up masterworks from the international repertory.

That's a big step — one that dozens of Southland companies that present annual "Nutcracker" performances never take. It was brave of artistic directors Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary to launch LAB with a ballet presented by virtually every classical school or troupe in the whole region plus visiting ensembles from Russia and Korea. And it's braver still to schedule serious Balanchine and buoyant Bournonville for the company's first 2007 performances in March.

There's no place to hide in that kind of rep, and though guest artists will again ensure high standards in principal roles, the challenge will be to develop a company style beyond the well-drilled but essentially faceless corps dancing that "Nutcracker" provided. If that statement sounds cruel, consider that American Ballet Theatre — our nation's classical behemoth — seldom achieves anything beyond well-drilled and faceless corps dancing nowadays. But ABT doesn't dance Balanchine's super-refined "Concerto Barocco," and maybe that's just as well.

"Nutcracker" looked better organized on Saturday than it had early in December, though the party scene again proved confused and there seemed no sense of purpose — dramatic or choreographic — in the battle between the toy soldiers and the mice. The important scenic and character transformations on view lacked magic. And it

would have helped if the Nutcracker (Erik Thordal-Christensen, son of the artistic directors) actually looked like a nutcracker and not just another toy soldier.

Act 2 confirmed the classical prowess and personal star power of Oleg Gorboulev and Corina Gill in the Arabian dance, provided a flashy showpiece for the 14-year-old wunderkind Lilit Hogtalian as Clara and allowed Maria Kowroski and Stephen Hanna (guests from New York City Ballet) to display formidable mastery in supported adagio intricacies.

You could regret that their solos were moved earlier than Tchaikovsky intended and that the Mirlitons divertissement was cut, but the score was again given loving care by conductor Eimear Noone and her musicians. And, happily, the Alex Theatre offered more space for Catherine Kanner's scenic vistas than the cramped Wilshire Theatre stage allowed when this "Nutcracker" premiered.

That's one lesson LAB learned in 2006 — that Southern California has many midsize theaters that look great from the seats but, because they are converted movie houses, have no room on the stage for elaborate scenery or large-scale choreographies. Another lesson — that the ballet public isn't interested in 5 p.m. shows — helped cause a cutback from 12 "Nutcracker" performances to nine. "We will consider everything we've discovered from this first run," the directors said in a statement, "and make necessary adjustments for our upcoming season."

Necessary adjustments may be one key to LAB's survival in a ballet landscape haunted by memories of companies that started strongly and even flourished, for a time, without enlisting the long-term support of the public that flocks to touring attractions. There are always plenty of people who say they want someone to start a local ballet company with major artistic ambitions — but too many really mean they want ABT to relocate.

Los Angeles Ballet estimates that it danced for more than 6,000 ticket-holders in December. That's a start, but not nearly a large enough audience base to sustain a year-round professional institution. If Christensen and Neary can't rely on the balletomanes

in our community who yammer about homegrown classicism but don't show up at the ticket window, developing a new, loyal audience is the key to their future. And that will take more energy and imagination than everything they've done so far.