

A joyful 'New Nutcracker' by Cincinnati Ballet

BALLET REVIEW

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Written by David Lyman

The program cover touts “The New Nutcracker” as the “World Premiere of the Decade.”

Well, maybe. The decade is young. We have a long way to go.

But it’s the holiday season, so perhaps we should forgive Cincinnati Ballet a bit of overstatement.

Besides, the all-new \$2 million production of “Nutcracker” that the company premiered Thursday evening is downright spectacular. You can tack on a whole raft of other happy adjectives, too: enchanting, entertaining, captivating, occasionally eye-popping. Note that “perfect” is not one of those adjectives. There are still things that need to be tweaked.

But all in all, “The New Nutcracker” is a keeper.

Cincinnati Ballet artistic director and CEO Victoria Morgan had been toying around with the idea of a new “Nutcracker” for four or five years. And she decided to choreograph this new version herself. (In the end, she recruited a little assistance on the Arabian dance from Missy Lay Zimmer and Andrew Hubbard, directors of Cincinnati’s Exhale Dance Tribe.)

But Morgan certainly has enough “Nutcracker” knowledge stored away to accomplish the job. It’s been nearly 50 years since she first performed the leading role of Clara as a kid in Salt Lake City. And she’s been involved with “Nutcracker” one way or another ever since.

Morgan has added lots of twists to the story. But first and foremost, she was determined that her “Nutcracker” would be whimsical and filled with joy.

And it is. Morgan has left no gag behind, no dance phrase undeveloped. Sometimes, in fact, the movement and onstage images are so densely packed that you just know you're missing something taking place elsewhere on the stage.

And joyful? Oh, yes, right from beginning, in an immense 1830s kitchen so festive and so filled with extraordinary food that you can almost whiff the scrumptious aromas in the air.

But one of Morgan's most significant changes is that she employs young dancers in young characters' roles.

Clara, for instance, was danced by 11-year-old Lorelei Robinson on opening night. And her dashing young Nutcracker Prince was played by 16-year-old David Donnelly. There are others, as well; 9-year-old Julia Enwright as a tiny poodle who is Clara's sidekick and bobs in out of the action all night long. And 8-year-old Hannah Ford is cast as a tiny kid who keeps bursting into tears during the ballet's party scene. (It's much funnier than it sounds.)

The point is that while this new "Nutcracker" features wonderfully challenging choreography for the company's adult members, it really does justice to the oodles of kids who often populate the stage.

This "Nutcracker" is chock-full of surprises. In the first act, a chef pops onto the stage balancing a towering and extremely wobbly cake. He's only there for a few seconds, but it's long enough for the audience to recognize the "dancer" as chef/restaurateur Jean-Robert de Cavel, owner of downtown Cincinnati's Jean-Robert's Table

Later, in the middle of the Waltz of the Flowers, four "bees" – tiny kids, really – come "flying" down from into the midst of the dancers. It's an adorable touch. And jaw-droppingly unexpected. After they nuzzle the dancing flowers for pollen, they then disappear as quickly as they arrived.

Purists may have trouble with such gimmicks. And it's true that they take something away from the dance itself. But they add immeasurably to the ballet's overall impact.

Not all of Morgan's innovations work. The tree that grows to immense proportions isn't really very festive, looking more like a chunk of displaced Jumbotron.

Morgan has replaced the gigantic and over-the-top Mother Ginger character with a gigantic hen with a brood of tiny dancing chicks. It's cute. And much of the audience loved it. But compared to Mother Ginger, it's flat.

Fortunately, the vast majority of "The New Nutcracker" works exceedingly well.

Costume designer Carrie Robbins gives every scene a lush, lavish and occasionally other-worldly feel. The party scene is awash in sumptuous costumes. Yet moments later, the toy soldiers arrive, looking every bit like they've been teleported from one of those 1950s Technicolor extravaganzas with intensely saturated colors.

Scenic designer John Ezell has the same sort of impact with his sets, from that kitchen that overflows with extravagant foods to a Land of Sweets that looks like it was created by a power-mad confectioner.

Maestro Carmon DeLeone has even managed to enlarge the size of his orchestra, filling the pit with nearly 60 members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Tying all of this together is Trad A Burns' extraordinary lighting, especially the luminous Snow Scene, where he makes it look like we've arrived in a magical Arctic valley just as the Aurora Borealis romps across the sky.

At the heart of it all, though, are the Cincinnati Ballet dancers, most of whom perform in multiple roles at every performance.

So many of them give memorable performances; Gema Diaz as a jubilant Snow Queen, Daniel Powers as a frantic chef, Abigail Maruna Morwood and Maizyalet Velázquez as undulating Arabian seductresses competing for the attention of a flustered Liang Fu, Courtney Connor as the elegant dancing rose in the Waltz of the Flowers.

Devon Carney, the company's associate artistic director, plays Drosselmeyer, the curious family friend whose magical carved Nutcracker sets the story into motion. Looking like a cross between Dr. Who and Willy Wonka, he races through the action – even above it at times, as he, soars high above the stage with movements reminiscent of Jackie Chan or “The Matrix.”

The climax of the ballet, of course, is the final duet for the Sugar Plum Fairy (Janessa Touchet for this production) and her cavalier (Cervilio Miguel Amador).

Alternately majestic and dazzling, elegant and flamboyant, Touchet and Amador bring a moment of unabashed balletic grandeur to a production that occasionally feels like a glorious three-ring circus.

But then, that's what the “Nutcracker” is. In many ways, it's like an enormous, good-natured variety show. And that's probably what has, for decades, made “Nutcracker” such a beloved favorite of audiences.

“The New Nutcracker,” performed through Dec. 24 at the Aronoff Center, 650 Walnut St., downtown. Tickets are available for remaining shows. Call 513-621-5282 or go to www.cballet.org.

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