

**Cleveland Orchestra & Pennsylvania Ballet:
George Balanchine's The Nutcracker (Nov. 30)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Ballet* has been around since 1892, when it premiered at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. But for more than half of its lifetime, the best-known version in this country is the one that George Balanchine choreographed for the New York City Ballet in 1954. Northeast Ohioans can enjoy that *Nutcracker* in a fine and colorful collaboration between the Pennsylvania Ballet and The Cleveland Orchestra. The show opened on Wednesday, November 30 at the State Theater in Playhouse Square, and runs through Sunday, December 4.

Based on Alexandre Dumas' reworking of E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, the storyline centers around the coming-of-age of a young girl — Marie in Balanchine's version — amid the traditional Christmas Eve festivities in a well-to-do household.

Act I depends on a large number of talented young dancers for its liveliness, and the Pennsylvania Ballet has admirably developed such a group through its School. Chloe Humphrey (as Marie) and Aidan Duffy (Drosselmeier's nephew and the Nutcracker) were beautifully self-possessed as actors and dancers, and Rowan Duffy nearly stole the

show as Marie's bratty little brother, Fritz. The gaggle of children, some of them local, pulled off complicated moves with cheerful aplomb.

After delightful cameo appearances by the toys Harlequin and Columbine (Misa Kasamatsu and Yuka Iseda) and the Soldier (Harrison Monaco), Mouse King Dominic Ballard led his Cromwellian-clad army of rodents into fierce combat with the Soldiers (he lost). Marie and her amazing driverless bed flew off into the forest amid sixteen beautiful dancing snowflakes (the women's *corps de ballet*), enhanced by lovely singing by the Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus from the stageside boxes.

The sugar coma of Act II, where the storyline dissolves in favor of a dance festival featuring a succession of fantastical mini-acts, was beautifully facilitated by character dancing and eye-grabbing costumes. Highlights included the Candy Canes, led by Alexander Peters and his athletic jumps through a hula hoop; Mother Ginger (Harrison Monaco) and her Polichinelles — who popped out from under the farthingale of her enormous dress; and the beautiful, pastel-hued flowers (Marjorie Feiring, Alexandra Hugues and company).

All of this culminated in the wonderful *grand pas de deux* by Lillian Di Piazza and Arian Molina Soca — the Sugarplum Fairy and her Cavalier — performing like statuary in motion, followed by built-in solo encores that the two dispatched thrillingly. Reprises of all the dances brought the ballet to a festive conclusion.

Holding all this choreography in a warm embrace was Pyotr Tchaikovsky's evocative score, expertly played by The Cleveland Orchestra. Conductor Brett Mitchell led a finely-paced performance whose transitions will certainly become tighter during the next six shows. Some details of blend and balance in the State Theater are beyond human control: the acoustics of the pit make the winds and brass sound distant. But flutes sounded wonderful in the Mirliton, horns splendid in the Waltz of the Flowers, and Tchaikovsky's addition of a new instrument, the celesta, added the requisite sparkle to the Sugarplum Fairy, courtesy of Joela Jones. Balanchine's own innovation, tucking in an violin solo interlude from *The Sleeping Beauty* into the end of the first act, slowed the flow of the show, though concertmaster William Preucil played it beautifully on Wednesday.

Almost no opening night *poltergeists* toyed with this *Nutcracker*. The Christmas tree grew magically, receiving a round of applause, the owl atop the grandfather clock beat its wings right along with the chimes from the pit, and complicated comings and goings of dancers and supers went off with precision. One little thing to fix: the snow cradle in the Snowflake scene was visible in the flies from the front rows of the house, catching the eye and dissipating some of the magic.

This excellent production by Pennsylvania Ballet and The Cleveland Orchestra is a delectable show that will brighten anybody's holiday season. Don't miss it.

Photo: Roger Mastroianni

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