

REVIEW OF THE NUTCRACKER AT THEATR BRYCHEINIOG DECEMBER 2023

By Glenn Davis, Assistant Director of Maine State Ballet, USA

Festive theatergoers and balletomanes, along with bright-eyed and eager children, ushered in the season on December 15th at the opening night of Brecon Festival Ballet's now annual performances of *The Nutcracker* at the Theatr Brycheiniog. Artistic Director Katy Sinnadurai brings the entire community together for this holiday classic, featuring over 80 local and professional dancers, the lovely Brecon Festival Ballet Orchestra, under the baton of Eugene Monteith, and a heavenly choir to boot.

The Nutcracker is a coming-of-age story about a girl named Clara who receives a nutcracker from her mysterious Godfather Drosselmeier at the family's Christmas party. Later that evening Clara, after quietly slipping down to the drawing room to see her new gift, falls asleep curled up in a chair, and dreams of sugarplum (fairies) and more dancing in her head.

As is typical, many leading roles are shared among the dancers. On opening night, Lowri Shone reprised the role of Clara with childlike wonder, paired with magnificent lines and technique. Her Nutcracker Prince, danced by Joshua Feist, was equally impressive. Their pas de deux work was seamless, and both expressed the exuberance of youth demanded by the ballet. Similar kudos can be expressed about the alternate performances of Clara and her Nutcracker played by Georgia Smart and Kamal Singh. They were equally expressive and worthy of praise for their beautiful dancing, acting, and partnering.

Drosselmeier, cheerfully played by Gareth Phillips, moves the plot line along with his magical omnipresence throughout the ballet. Act I's party scene was impressive and lively with children and party guests alike moving with ease, led by Clara's father Herr Stahlbaum, elegantly played by Paul Sinnadurai. The harlequin and porcelain dolls presented at the party by Drosselmeier were played by Nathan Keenoo and Aimee Casey (and Sophie Woodbridge on the alternate performances) respectively with the springy toy soldier danced by Harlan Rust. All were especially effective and doll-like. The battle scene in Clara's dream between a colony of rats and toy soldiers (led by the wily Rat King Berwyn Cooper and the Nutcracker respectively) was equally spectacular, with tiny rats played by small children especially endearing.

The end of Act I features the Nutcracker leading Clara to the Land of Sweets through a snow-filled forest. In front of a beautiful backdrop, twenty corps de ballet Snowflakes wove beautiful patterns expressed musically from first flakes to blizzard conditions, all while "real" snowflakes fell from above. Ms. Sinnadurai particularly shines as a choreographer in her corps de ballet work. They were strong and well-rehearsed and consisted of many professionals and some well-trained local dancers all working as one. Original Snowflake costumes, as well as the Snow Forest backdrop, for this and other dances were created locally, by artist Gemma Schiebe and by costume designer Rachel Giacconne and her team of volunteer costume makers.

Act II takes place in the Land of Sweets reigned over by the Sugar Plum Fairy and consists of dancers representing a variety of cultures who share their local treat (and performance) with Clara and her Nutcracker watching (and sometimes joining in) from candy thrones.

Natasha Trigg was spectacular as the Sugar Plum Fairy. Her razor-sharp technique and strength paired with a calm self-assurance revealed that she was the true queen of the land. Her cavalier, played by Jacob Hornsey, expressed equally beautiful lines and feet, complementing Ms. Trigg with his fine partnering. In the alternate performance, Bella Ross debuted as a lovely Sugar Plum Fairy. She shined in this first experience leading the ballet and we expect to see her continue to blossom as a principal dancer. M. Ross' pas de deux with Cavalier Robbie Moorcroft was strong and composed, with M. Moorcroft providing an experienced and steady hand in his partnering skills. Josie Sinnadurai returned as the Spanish soloist with zest and flair. Her traditional Flamenco rendition was spot on with rhythmic tapping and many swirls. The Arabian duet between Clara Rust and Berwyn Cooper mesmerized with their sinewy lifts. The Chinese dance was played by an energetic and engaging group of local children with bright costumes and paper parasols. Harlan Rust leaped and turned as the Russian Trepak with a little help from M. Feist/M. Singh who joined in on the fun with remarkably high split jumps. Classical ballet was again epitomized by four lovely Mirlitons (danced by Aimee Casey, Alice Oakley-Jones, Ellise de Andrade, and Gwen Davies), in addition to Ms. Shone/Ms. Smart. Their pointe work was exquisite. Once again, the Waltz of the Flowers delightfully showed off the corps de ballet with arguably the most quintessential music from Tchaikovsky's score. Finally, the rigorous but elegant grand pas de deux, variations, and coda, danced by Ms. Trigg and M. Hornsey, as well as Ms. Ross and M. Moorcroft, left us breathless with wonder.

Ms. Sinnadurai, the cast and crew, the orchestra, and the choir, should all be proud of presenting a truly Welsh production of *The Nutcracker*.