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## On opening night, Vince Young fires up Ballet Austin's 'The Nutcracker'

By **Michael Barnes**

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Because Rose Bowl 2006.

Legendary **University of Texas** Longhorns quarterback **Vince Young** whipped the opening night audience for Ballet's Austin's "The Nutcracker" into a veritable frenzy.

Flashing a big-league smile and an easily deciphered hand signal, Young donned the giant, frilly Mother Ginger costume during the second act of the holiday treat. For his celebrity cameo appearance, Young brandished a mirror and oversized lipstick before urging the house to join him in rhythmic clapping. (The cameo role changes with each performance.)

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Everything about this edition of "The Nutcracker" worked gorgeously.

Act 1, which has sometimes bogged down in the past, compelled our attention, not just because of the lush ever-changing sets and costumes, but also due to Artistic Director **Stephen Mills'** fluid and inventive movement. For instance, his nimble Snowflakes swirled and eddied rather than piling up in rows, while his combative Rats and Toy Soldiers skirmished around each other rather than at each other. These kinetic choices make for eye-filling stage pictures set into motion.

Standouts in the Dec. 7 cast of Act 1 included **Violet Reid** as an unusually elegant Clara, and **Courtney Holland** and **Ian J. Bethany** as more than mechanistic mechanical dolls. All was right with the world when **Elise Pekarek** and **Morgan Stillman** arrived as the regal Snow Queen and Snow King for the act's breathtaking finale.

Act 2, of course, is all dance, all the time. And we approve.

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Just a few special mentions among all this virtuosity: **Max Azaro's** fearless Russian, **Jamie Lynn Witts'** near-perfection leading the near-perfect Waltz of the Flowers, and the ideally paired **Ashley Lynn Sherman** and **James Fuller** as the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier.

But here's the astounding thing: Almost all the named roles are triple-cast! That means that, between Ballet Austin's 22-member professional company, and Ballet Austin II members, along with trainees, they have enough talent to cover each demanding part three times over.

I left the Long Center thinking: I'm never going to miss this "Nutcracker" again.

It runs through Dec. 23.