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Ballet Austin's *The Nutcracker*

The company's 56th run at this holiday classic retains its magic – enough beauty and wonder to transport you to enchanting realms

REVIEWED BY ROBERT FAIRES, DECEMBER 14, 2018, ARTS

Going home for the holidays can be a tricky proposition – especially if you haven't visited in a while. Will everything be how you remember it, full of warmth and color and joy? Will you feel the same magic you did during those holidays once upon a time?

Well, the Silberhaus residence isn't exactly home, but paying a visit there after almost a decade away had me wondering whether the enchantment I had once experienced with *The Nutcracker* would still be there. It wasn't just that I was older. My daughter had long since graduated from the preteen demographic that finds ballet so entrancing and this ballet especially so since it sees itself reflected in the tale's girl heroine, meaning I could no longer see the work through her eyes.

The rains Friday seemed an ill omen for my return, threatening to dampen spirits for the opening of Ballet Austin's 56th run at *The Nutcracker*. But once inside Dell Hall with Christopher Swaim's Herr Silberhaus, this beaming, generous paterfamilias had me feeling as warmly welcomed as the guests at his family's Christmas soiree. In no time at all, I was swept up in the familiar festivities: the adults' courtly dancing, the rowdy interruptions of the boys, and, of course, old Drosselmeyer – truly the life of the party in Edward Carr's sprightly portrayal – cranking up his life-sized dancing dolls and distributing gifts to the children, the most notable being the princely nutcracker given to Clara.

That night, Violet Reid's Clara was fiercely protective of her prize and only grew more so as the living room grew to colossal proportions – a sweet transformation as achieved by scenic designer Holly Highfill and lighting designer Tony Tucci – and she found herself face to face with living toy soldiers and nose to snout with a rampant rodent population. (Though I was delighted by the scampering mice who, in Judanna Lynn's rustic clothes and full-head masks, looked like they'd wandered in from a Beatrix Potter storybook, isn't it high time the Silberhauses checked into a pest control service?) With the Rat King set to decapitate Clara's prince with a scimitar-sized butter knife (priceless!), Reid's Clara seized the nutcracker's sword and without a second's hesitation ran the rat through. As an expression of real grrrl power, this trounced the tradition of Clara clobbering Ratso with her shoe and made her even worthier of royal treatment in the Lands of Snow and Sweets.

The journey that Clara and her prince make to these fanciful realms has always been the heart and soul of *The Nutcracker* for me, the place where I am transported by the beauty of the movement and the athleticism of those who perform it. On Friday, I learned that the choreography by BA Artistic Director Stephen Mills retains its power to carry me away, into the midst of a gentle flurry of snowflakes embodied by the corps de ballet, swirling before a forest of snow-laden firs, or to a *plaza de toros* in Spain, where a caffeinated couple stamp out a thrilling flamenco as matadors twirl their *capotes*. And the dancers? In the Russian dance, Max Azaro took to the air with such power that it seemed he could leap tall buildings in a single bound (and the red boots and blue tights peeking out from his native costume had me sure he was wearing a Superman suit underneath). In the "Waltz of the Flowers," Jaime Lynn Witts exhibited grace from the tips of her en pointe toes to the ends of her fluttering fingers; every unhurried motion flowed through her entire body, as fluid as a stream. And as the Sugar Plum Fairy, Ashley Lynn Sherman was the picture of poise, moving with an elegance that was positively regal: leaning backward with an ease that would shame a willow, rising on the lifts of her Cavalier – an impressive James Fuller – as if air were her natural element. As she danced for Clara, it seemed this was a command performance being given by a queen.

Such are the wonders of this edition of *The Nutcracker* – proof of one instance in which you *can* go home again. And no doubt again and again and again.

The Nutcracker

Dell Hall at the Long Center, 701 W. Riverside

www.balletaustin.org

Through Dec. 23

Running time: 2 hr., 10 min.

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