

4-1-1978

"The Nutcracker": The Milwaukee Ballet Company

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

"THE NUTCRACKER":

THE MILWAUKEE BALLET COMPANY

By Curtis L. Carter

Added to the line of "Nutcracker Ballets" that begins with the Ivanov-Petipas production at the Imperial Theater in Russia in 1892 is the Milwaukee Ballet Company's full length production, which premiered December 22 at the Milwaukee Performing Arts Center. To many, the event marks a high point of achievement, signifying a "coming of age" for the ballet and for fine arts offerings in the community.

The magical fantasy and myth of youthful longing, whether in the more psychological versions of Nureyev and Baryshnikov, or in the classical Balanchine rendering, never fail to capture the imagination of boys and girls, not to mention the large adult audiences which continue to support "Nutcracker" performances across the world. It remains true that "Nutcracker" ballets will sell out where no other dance performances draw.

Indeed, it is not surprising that the ballet appeals to the imaginations of so many. For every little girl, there is a fanciful romantic image of magnanimous proportions. Every boy is fascinated with the exciting battle scene between the Nutcracker Prince and the King Rat. Each little girl hopes that the dream will continue, and the boys await possible developments of the exciting battle scene.

But if the evening's success depends upon the story alone, the performance can be a long one. In the final analysis only the spectacle of the dancing and choreography will sustain or undo the experience of an evening of "Nut-

cracker." Here Jean Paul Comelin and the Milwaukee Ballet's dancers face a challenge. There are, already, some relatively recent points of comparison. Television has recently provided alternative versions for comparisons in the Baryshnikov and Balanchine productions by American Ballet Theater and the New York City Ballet.

The first act, showing the Christmas party, Herr Drosselmeyer's three live dolls, the battle, and the journey into the land of ice and snow holds up rather well, with some good dancing by the corps and by Leslie McBeth and Tom Nicholson in the roles of Marie and the Nutcracker Prince. The three dolls -- Columbine, Harlequin, and Pierrot -- danced by Kathryn Moriarty, Stephen Lockser, and Mark Diamond delighted the audience with their darts and dips throughout. The second act, into the land of sweets, moves more slowly through the fanciful procession of fairies and the parade of national sentiments. Each part is individuated by changes in mood, steps and costumes, showing, for example; Spanish dancers as Chocolate Bonbons, and Arabian, Chinese and French dancers, each with their own variation.

The elaborate Victorian setting imposes a certain formal stiffness to the production. From the giant book that appears prior to curtain, to the heavily Victorian parlor, and on through enchanted winterland, and what follows, there is lushness of detail. In the opening scenes, the dancers commingle with formality in this Victorian environment, augmented by the antics of the children and the three magical dolls who accompany Herr Drosselmeyer. The expensive set must have consumed a large chunk of the \$140,000 budget for this production.

Dancing was generally good throughout, but it never excelled to the point that I overcame the feeling of wishing that it

were better. Dramatic special effects such as producing the handsome nutcracker prince out of a puff of smoke could not detract from roughly executed lifts. At one point, in a duet during the first act, Leslie McBeth literally appeared to be in fear of falling out of a shaky lift. The moment was most unfortunate. Instead of being carried into ecstasy by the brilliance of the dancing, I couldn't help wondering if she would fall. Such physical problems with the dancing should not be apparent in the performance of a major company. There were lapses of spirit, for example, when the dancers appeared to lose contact with the occasion for their dancing, and moved lifelessly through the performance. This was especially apparent toward the end of the first act.

The Milwaukee Ballet Company has produced a full length "Nutcracker." In doing so, it satisfies a demand of tradition and meets public demand for a popular item. This, in itself, serves the interest of the company because it will sell more tickets. Alone, it is not a sufficient reason for a new production of this familiar work. To justify its place in the world of art the production should offer some artistic advancement. One must ask, where does this production stand in the history of "Nutcracker" performances? In its present form, the production is standard, competent. I did not see any features that suggest innovative treatment of the materials. The movement, for the most part, is appropriate to Tchaikovsky's music but it is constructed of conventional choreographic means used in familiar ways. Perhaps the production will advance in artistic stature in its future performances.

The Milwaukee Ballet has come far since its 1970 beginnings. Jean Paul Comelin is to be commended for bringing the ballet to a level of competent performance. Competence, however, is the minimum acceptable artistic quality for a performing

group in a major city such as Milwaukee. The company will continue to be of interest and value as an artistic resource for the city and the nation only if it develops to a level of excellence marked by superior dancing and a variety of fine choreography representing the best efforts of past and contemporary choreographers. We can applaud the past and support these future advancements.