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"Coppelia" Premiere

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Uihlein Hall

Jean Paul Comelin's "Coppelia" premiered in Milwaukee's Uihlein Hall, Friday, April 6, 1979. The opening performance featured Leslie McBeth as Swanilda, and Nolan T'Sani as Franz. Sunday's performance which this review is based upon, featured Mireille Leterrier and Gennadi Vostrikov in the leading roles.

"Coppelia" was first presented as a ballet in 1870 at the Paris Opera, and was choreographed by Arthur Saint-Léon. Since then, there have been numerous productions of the three-act work based on E.T.A. Hoffman's story of Dr. Coppelius and the villager's curiosity about his "magic" dolls. Marius Petipa reconstructed the choreography for the Russian Imperial Ballet's performance in St. Petersburg in 1884. Within the past ten years, the ballet has been presented in Milwaukee by the American Ballet Theater and an earlier version by the

Milwaukee Ballet Company.

Act One takes place in front of Dr. Coppelius' house and is filled with sprightly dances. Among the dances are solos by both Franz and Swanilda, danced before the doll, Coppelia, who is seated on the porch above, reading a book. Vostrikov has his best moments in this dance which takes place early in the performance. His dancing remains adequate, but the character acting which is demanded by the part, is unfulfilled by Vostrikov. The physical aspects of his movement dominate the scene in the pas de deux of Act One, leaving something to be desired in the dancing.

The folklike dances of the ensemble add liveliness to the scene. The rivalries between the villagers and the gypsies are exaggerated however, and their jostling becomes distracting as the two groups compete for attention.

Act Two takes place within the studio of Dr. Coppelius. Swanilda and her friends enter the house in Coppelius' absence, intent on satisfying their curiosity about its myster-

ious figures.

Comelin choreographs the opening scene for seven girls who hold hands, forming a chain of fearful creatures. Curiosity overcomes their caution as they explore a roomful of life-size dolls: Chinese, Spanish, Blackmoor, Scottish, Astronomer and Porcelain.

The dancers scatter at the unexpected return of Dr. Coppelius. All escape except Swanilda who replaces the doll, Coppelia, in the window.

When Franz enters, Dr. Coppelius decides to apply magic and bring the doll Coppelia to life by extracting life from Franz.

The highlight of the dancing comes in the interplay between the three: Dr. Coppelius, Coppelia and Franz. This is executed with high drama and excitement. Swanilda tricks the doctor into believing that he is actually transforming the doll into a live person.

Moving at first like a robot, Leterrier gradually becomes transformed into a living dancer. Dr. Coppelius is overjoyed until he discovers the trick which has been played on him.

Act Three is the wed-

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"Coppelia" (Photo by Jean-Loup Dumortier)

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ding scene. The scene opens with a wedding procession and an extended waltz. Most of the act is taken up with a series of dances by six couples, including Franz and Swanilda. The separate duets provide an opportunity to observe the range of talent in the company. Although some are better than others, as it would be with any company, the overall quality of the dancers is more than adequate.

Comelin's "Coppelia" remains lively throughout. It captures the drama of the fairy tale and sustains the audience's interest. Lush sets augment the chor-

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eography and dancing.

By Curtis L. Carter