"The Nutcracker": The Milwaukee Ballet Company

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THE MILWAUKEE BALLET COMPANY

By Curtis L. Carter

Added to the line of "Nutcracker Bal­
lets" that begins with the Ivanov-Peti­pas production at the Imperial Theater
in Russia in 1892 is the Milwaukee Bal­
let Company's full length production,
which premiered December 22 at the Mil­
waukee Performing Arts Center. To many,
the event marks a high point of achieve­
ment, 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" per­
formances 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
portions. 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 pos­
sible 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 anal­
ysis 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 alter­
native 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 indi­
viduated by changes in mood, steps and
costumes, showing, for example; Spanish
dancers as Chocolate Bonbons, and Ara­
bian, Chinese and French dancers, each
with their own variation.

The elaborate Victorian setting im­
poses a certain formal stiffness to the
production. From the giant book that
appears prior to curtain, to the heavily
Victorian parlor, and on through en­
chanted winterland, and what follows,
there is lushness of detail. In the
opening scenes, the dancers commingle
with formality in this Victorian environ­
ment, 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.