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Singapore Dance Theatre

'The Nutcracker'

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When there is a time for new, there will always be a time for departure. In this case, departure refers to moving on to other opportunities.

2008 is a significant year for Singapore Dance Theatre. A jubilant gala this July celebrated two decades of successful dance in Singapore and the search for a new artistic director. It marks the departure of the respectable Ms Goh Soo Khim, the co-founder and artistic director, and the talented resident choreographer, Jeffrey Tan. With this, Singapore Dance Theatre revived a family classic, The Nutcracker, staged and choreographed by Resident Choreographer Jeffrey Tan, whom used this opportunity to pay tribute to the late Mr Anthony Then, co-founder of SDT and his mentor, and also to express his greatest gratitude to Ms Goh Soo Khim.

It was an eventful opening performance filled with mixed emotions. Chihiro Uchida's debut role as Clara was well cast. Her lovely lines were embellished with her childlike-ness and bubbly personality. Although there were moments, when one feels she could be a little more feminine and less haste. The Nutcracker Prince, was danced handsomely, by Robert Mills, who gave her ample support and attention. The highlight for both my evenings was the pas de deux of Clara and The Nutcracker Prince before the Snow scene. The choreography was beautifully crafted to the music, each movement evolved into the next, it felt as if the steps and music complement each harmoniously. It was breathtaking to watch such magical work performed by the two lovely dancers. Sinasi Alak debut as the Mouse King was absolutely amazing. Ferocious and powerful, his leaps and back flips were enough to make one sit on the tip of the seat. There was a little accident in the middle of the Battle scene. The little toy soldiers, danced by young children, were locked in their 'fortress'. They struggled to break open their 'fortress' gate, and when they finally did so, they resumed dancing without fuss. These young ones kept their professionalism and continued with the show. Well Done!

In Act 2, Liu Xiao Mi partnered Zhao Jun in the Spanish Dance. Xiao Mi exuded a charming demi-character flavor, however Zhao Jun seemed out of place with the choreography and the role. Xia Hai Ying was divine in the Arabian Dance. Supported by three male dancers, Hai Ying was commanding, and sensual. Her movement was luscious and effortless. She was lifted, thrown across from one man to two men and manoeuvred without any difficulties. Similarly for the following evening, where, she partnered William Hu in the Spanish dance, she looked like she was having a ravishing

time. Hu, was clean and sharp in this Spanish number, showing good promise as an assured partner and a soloist. Ginny Gan, as always, a delight to watch, was performing in several roles in Act 2. This young dancer produces gorgeous lines and has wonderful musicality. Chen Wei shared a handful of roles this season, and it was evident that his partnering skills have improved to greater heights. Jeffrey Tan's Chinese Dance sequence, had to be one of the most interesting version one have seen. The choreography is an interesting mix of authentic Chinese dance and ballet. It commenced with male dancers circling the stage on bicycles, as the seven female dancers slowly made their way into position. The female dancers placed themselves, followed by a gong going off, and the dancing began. Dressed in vibrant dark pink, the top is asymmetrical, with one sleeve extremely long and floaty (they are usually called 'water sleeves'). Dancers had to toss their long sleeves in the air, and to catch it in time before it flops. Performed on pointe, the dancers moved about with the Chinese classical walks, called 'cloud walks', where the feet are 'peeled' off the floor keeping the amount of stride to a minimal.

Firstly, one would like to say, kudos to the Sugar Plum Fairy couples. Watching the choreography and one could only imagine how demanding the work is. This Grand Pas de Deux was, in one's opinion, Sleeping Beauty Grand Pas with Swan Lake Grand Pas, along with Don Quixote Grand Pas and the normal Nutcracker Grand Pas mixed together. It has everything that made this version extremely challenging. It comprises of the balances, the flips, the pirouettes, the lifts, and the various itty gritty to make this an eye opener. Natalie Clarke partnered the debut Chen Peng on the opening night, and Park Na-Ri's debut Sugar Plum was supported by Toro Okada. Clarke's Sugar Plum was of elegance; her legwork was neat and crisp, and spot on pirouettes throughout. Peng rose to the occasion, he established himself as a reliable partner and an exciting soloist to watch. On both times, he captured her on an overhead lift into a fish dive, with precise and brilliance. This couple finished their adagio part of the Grand Pas de deux in a fish dive, which differs from the other couple, who ended with a shoulder lift. Na-Ri's strength lies in her sky-high extensions and the graceful persona. She engaged well with the audience and her partner, Okada. The latter's solo was outstanding though academic; he nailed each leap, pirouette and tour en l'air with ease.

The sets had been designed by a group of creative and young individuals. It gave a different feel and look to the heart-warming ballet. The music was pre-recorded for this production. It would be superb if there were live orchestral music for this meaningful season.