

The Flying Inkpot Theatre Reviews 08

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The Nutcracker
Esplanade Theatre
12, 13, 17 to 20 Dec 08

By Dr Stephanie Burridge

You feel you are already at the *The Nutcracker* even as you approach the theatre. The foyer is packed with a variety of young princesses in their best dresses and tiaras eagerly awaiting the show. Every Christmas this ballet is staged around the world to ecstatic audiences of family groups, children that dream of being Clara (the star of the ballet) and ballet lovers that turn up to see how this production differs from the last. Singapore Dance Theatre's production did not disappoint either regulars or first timers - it was full of magic, colour and verve with some wonderful dancing.

The Act I village scene opens with the cast of company members and extras mingling in around the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. Choreographer Jeffrey Tan has done an excellent job of interweaving these groups and handling the large number of young dancers onstage. They are grouped by age and ability and given choreography that they can perform well. The costumes, set and lighting design contribute to the cohesion of this scene. All eagerly await the entrance of Dr Drosselmeyer (played superbly by Paul de Mason), the town's magician and toymaker, who traditionally unveils some surprising Christmas gifts - this time there is a Nutcracker doll for Clara.

Of the many versions of this ballet that I have seen (one Christmas in San Francisco I saw seven!) there was never such an exquisite Clara. This part is often given to a senior ballet student who cannot accomplish such wonderful arabesques, surety en pointe and vivacious expression as the incomparable Chihiro Uchida who danced the part. Her petite stature meant that she not only fitted in with the group of youngsters onstage, but she was also able to inspire their performances so they caught her enthusiasm. By the time the battle of the toy soldiers and rats was underway everyone in the audience was captivated. For anyone who has ever attended ballet school, the fight of the rats and mice brings back fond memories. It is a dance for very young children, and there is always an initial anxiety as we watch their fast little running steps and pawing movements as they try to remember their spacing, entrances and exits. Here, they were ably led by Sinasi Alask in an acrobatic interpretation of the Mouse King role.

The highlight of the whole production was the segue to the Kingdom of Sweets - an opportunity for sheer fantasy and Christmas wonder. Clara's sleigh journeyed through a stage of white mist while snowflakes fell and dancers in white tutus entertained her. It was a magical moment.

The second act could not match the fantasy of the first. This was partly due to the requirements of the music that dictates the action: it results in a series of short divertissements that Clara simply sits and observes with the Prince. These divertissements include Spanish, Arabian, Russian and Chinese dances, as well as

solos from the Sugar Plum Fairy and the famous *Waltz of the Flowers*. The dancing was strong and the technique of the soloists solid, although at times there was a lack of personality and expressiveness. With such lyrical music I felt everyone could have enjoyed themselves and been more indulgent with their movement. By comparison with the fun and banter of Act I, this was formally structured and lacked choreographic and scenographic elements that might have brought Clara and her prince into the scene more.

However, overall the company did capture the essence of the ballet and created many memorable magic moments throughout the performance.