

Atlanta Ballet's *Nutcracker* still charms after 50 years

The annual performance remains a holiday tradition for families

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CRACK HEADS: Atlanta Ballet dancers in *Nutcracker*

Nutcracker

Through Dec. 27. \$42-\$114. Times vary. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. 404-817-8700. atlantaballet.com.

As an artistic event, *Nutcracker* does practically everything but crack nuts. The Tchaikovsky ballet provides a holiday tradition for families, a rite of passage for aspiring young dancers, and a kind of outreach program for ballet companies nationwide. This year's Atlanta Ballet production of *Nutcracker* features about 250 young area dancers in small roles, in addition to the company's cast of professionals. When I arrived at Saturday's matinee, I ran into a family friend who proudly pointed out that her daughter was one of the "party children" for that performance.

This year the Atlanta Ballet celebrates *Nutcracker's* 50th anniversary. In 1959, the New York City Ballet's legendary George Balanchine granted permission to the Atlanta company as the only regional theater to stage his version of the show. With *Nutcracker's* history, community importance and cash-cow status, it's almost a challenge to view it simply as a self-contained show. The Atlanta Ballet's *Nutcracker* proves to be charming entertainment, although at times the dance and live orchestra take a backseat to the spectacle.

Audiences gape at *Nutcracker* even before the show begins. The curtain features a painting of the Petrov mansion's exterior, frosted with snow and slightly cartoony, so it looks almost like a giant gingerbread house. A life-size tower clock and Uncle Drosselmeyer's (Nathan Griswold) workshop flank the stage, and some Dickensian business precedes the show with a lamplighter and a peanut seller.

Nutcracker famously follows young Marya (Alessa Rogers) – sometimes called Clara – on a midwinter night's dream that often serves as an adolescent coming-of-age metaphor. Directed by John McFall, the Atlanta Ballet's production at times has an *Alice in Wonderland* quality, particularly in its recurring use of Marya's mirror. At one point, Marya's wizard-like Uncle Drosselmeyer leads her through the looking glass and into the magical realm of marauding rats, steadfast toy soldiers and grateful fairies.

The Atlanta Ballet's production avoids the material's Freudian implications (emphasized in Maurice Sendak's version, filmed in 1986), giving Marya surprisingly few dance duets with the actual Nutcracker (Brian Wallenberg). In a great, empowering touch, Marya fatally stabs the monstrous Rat King with a sword. The rats, presented in scraggly costumes with a street-like attitude, offer one of the show's highlights: They rakishly swing their tails and, at one point, four rats join hands for a brief parody of *Swan Lake*.

The Christmas party and rats-vs.-toys combat of the first act moves at such a clip and flaunts so many props and yards of costume fabric that the dancers seem a bit limited, although Rachel Van Buskirk impressively balances grace and rigidity as one of Drosselmeyer's dancing mannequins. The second act, featuring the performances of the court of the Sugar Plum Fairy (Christine Winkler), essentially clears the set to present a lovely showcase for the artistry and athleticism of dance. The sinuous Arabian dancers (Anne Tyler Harshbarger and Joshua Reynolds) and the confident, flamboyant Spanish dancers (Kelsey Yip and Christian Clark) prove particularly impressive. Winkler's Sugar Plum Fairy and John Welker's Cavalier move together in such effortless unison, it's as though they have some kind of psychic link.

Mindful of the kids in the audience, the second act also features plenty of Cirque du Soleil-style clowning and showmanship, particularly the "Trepak's" performers (Daniel Mayo, Kevin Flores, and Brian Burkhardt), who leap, bellow and comically milk the spectators' applause for the Russian dance. Brian Wallenberg performs remarkable theatrics with a hoop in the Chinese dance, while Mark MacKillop dons drag as Mother Matrushka, whose gazebo-sized skirt provides an entrance for a group of pint-sized tumblers capable of terrific flips.

The group dances of the snowflakes in Act 1 and the flowers in Act 2 collectively resemble kinetic sculptures, and offer luscious images of the interplay of limbs and colorful dresses. Overall, there's no conflict in the second act and Marya undergoes little character development in this version of the play, which eschews drama to offer an evening of sheer loveliness. *Nutcracker* better serves as a young person's introduction to ballet than an example of the heights that dance can reach. Nevertheless, it's all of a piece, and the ballerinas prove as pretty and delicate as the countless snowflakes that drift down from the Fox Theatre's starry ceiling.