

Goh Ballet's Nutcracker is a gift

A Goh Ballet production. At the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts on Thursday, December 17. No remaining performances

By Gail Johnson, The Georgia Straight, December 18, 2009



With its inaugural performance of *The Nutcracker*, Goh Ballet has given Vancouver a gift. Not only does the monumental effort let us finally have a holiday production we can call our own—for years we've brought in touring companies to mount the Christmas classic—but it also blows away so many versions of the chestnut.

Anna-Marie Holmes couldn't have been a better choice for choreographer. The ballet program director of Massachusetts's Jacob's Pillow Dance maintains all the essentials of the full-length work, which tells the story of a little girl who dreams of a winter wonderland with dancing snowflakes. Holmes's take is hardly routine, however. She not only keeps the pacing swift and the movement engrossing, she also proves she likes to have fun.

There's the dancing bear with a ferocious sauté, a high-kicking grandma, a drunken maid, and a wee gingerbread doll that loses one of its arms to a rat.

For the role of Drosselmeyer, Holmes chose not a dancer but a professional magician. Damien Carriere has a steady presence throughout the two-hour show, making dancers disappear and reappear out of nowhere. She hired local drag queen Symone—aka Christopher Hunte—for the larger-than-life role of Mère Gigogne. Hunte got everyone in the sold-out theatre clapping to giddy effect.

But unlike so many Nutcrackers, this endlessly entertaining evening never comes across as cheesy. There's as much substance as there is silliness.

Viewers get treated to a waltz by competitive ballroom dancers Don and Marian Adair, all swirling grace, she with her head tilted just so. In the sensual Arabian duet, rhythmic gymnasts Katerena Goston and Orion Sky Radles stun with their astonishing physicality. She can contort her body into mind-bending positions, and he's so chiseled that his upper body makes Michael Phelps's look scrawny. Moving ever so fluidly together, they're as sexy as they are serpentine.

Stanislav Galimkhanov wows in the Russian dance, kicking and squatting mightily.

In the sparkling Dance of the Snowflakes, 18 Goh Ballet students pirouette with perfect timing.

Then there's the grand pas de deux for the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Cavalier Prince, performed by National Ballet of Canada principal dancers Sonia Rodriguez and Piotr Stanczyk. Their technique and expressivity stand out even amid 197 cast members.

There are countless other highlights, including the crazily cute dancing mice and the impossibly pretty Waltz of the Flowers. In a range of candy-coloured hues, the costumes, designed by Dinghao Zhang and Ming Li, are exquisitely detailed.



Elevating the show to even greater heights is the solid live performance of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky's score by the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra and a pitch-perfect number by the Tzu Chi Children's Choir and Vancouver Children's Choir.

Goh Ballet's 2009 Nutcracker Performance; Photo Credit: David Cooper
If Clara only dreams of Christmas magic in the story, Vancouverites get the real thing with this ballet. Here's hoping the Goh's Nutcracker becomes a December tradition.