

Dan's Papers

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Entertainment In Town

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review: nutcracker at the staller center

It is hard to believe that it took more than fifty years for Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet to travel from St. Petersburg to San Francisco for its first United States production, during the Second World War. Today, the *Nutcracker* Ballet is a Christmastime staple in many parts of the world and is probably the most performed ballet in the whole of the classical repertoire. Because of the many children's roles, dance companies around the country, as well as the major professional organizations such as American Ballet Theater, enjoy staging their productions during this time of year.

The Seiskaya Ballet was founded on Long Island in 1974, when Valia Seiskaya retired from a long and distinguished career as a dancer with the National Opera of Greece. Since then, Madame Seiskaya has turned Seiskaya into a highly-respected school where dancers can develop their talents to the fullest, under a regimen that teaches self-reliance and dedication. Not all of the students will graduate into the world of professional dance, but the school maintains a distinguished list of alumni who have gone on to dance with companies such as American Ballet Theater and the Atlanta Ballet.

For the past twelve seasons, the Seiskaya Company has staged their full-length version of the *Nutcracker* on the stage of the Staller Center at Stony Brook University.

From the time the curtain rises, there is no doubt that everyone in the company, from the most junior dancer to the principals, is extremely disciplined and well trained. Their posture, turnout, correct landings and spot-on dramatic interpretations are uniformly excellent, and the ensemble work is precise meticulously timed. It was exciting to watch such youngsters dance their hearts out for such an appreciative opening night audience.

During the first act, the bustle of a Christmas



Mariana DeMarco as Clara, in the party scene

party gives way to the famous Dream Sequence, where Clara dreams of her Nutcracker coming to life, and helps her Nutcracker and an army of toy soldiers defeat the Mouse King and his legion of mice. In the role of Clara, Mariana DeMarco displays exceptional fluidity, beautiful lines and sensitivity to the music with each movement. She lights up her character with brilliant stage presence and she certainly is a dancer to look out for in the future.

Michael Cusumano, a graduate of Seiskaya who has gone on to dance as a soloist for the Boston Ballet and on Broadway, is a perfect partner for Mariana as the Nutcracker in Clara's Dream Sequence. His portrayal of the Nutcracker is especially impressive, as the Nutcracker is not a ballet choreographed to showcase male dancers. Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* comes from the time in ballet history when male dancers were included in the cast as little more than support for the female ballerinas, who served as the focus of the ballet.

Once the battle is won, Clara is spirited away by her handsome Nutcracker Prince to meet the Sugar Plum Fairy, here danced by Liliana Janson, who shows commendable maturity in the demanding role.

After the pleasures of the specialty sequences

that cover many lands and characters from children's stories around the world, the ballet culminates with the now-famous (*grand pas de deux*) between the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. Gray Davis, who is due to begin dancing with the American Ballet Theater in January, shows all of the style, talent and athleticism in the role of the Cavalier that you would expect from an ABT dancer. He is a diligent partner to his ballerina in his lifts, and ensures that her balances are firm. The result is a charming rendition of the role and his solo variations allow him to fully display his flawless technique.

With so many dancers of all ages and so many separate vignettes, everyone, including each of the Seiskaya teaching staff, deserves a special mention that space, regrettably, will not permit. Here, accolades must instead be extended to the set designers and lighting staff, as this production could easily fit beside the most famous Broadway shows, with effects such as a Christmas tree that magically grows to an enormous size and a sled that flies across the stage and up to the balconies above. Add to this excellent costumes and makeup, coupled with a full orchestral soundtrack and the resulting effect is one in which the audience is made more than ready to slip into the dream-like world of the Nutcracker and enjoy the story, and, of course, the dancers.

I came away from this elegant and very professional production both enthused and entertained, to a level higher than I had anticipated. This production is a perfect holiday treat for families of all ages and backgrounds, and is sure to be a hit, as *The Nutcracker* is a spectacle that does not require detailed technical knowledge to enjoy.

The show continues at the Staller Center on Saturday December 16th at 2 and 7 p.m. and on Sunday December 17th at 1 and 6 p.m. Tickets are obtainable from 1-866-NUT-TICS.

- Roy Bradbrook