

'Nutcracker' for 2007 is smoother, more varied

by SALLY VALLONGO. BLADE STAFF WRITER.

The beauty of the Nutcracker is that while Tchaikovsky's glorious score and E.T.A Hoffmann's fanciful tale are familiar enough to inspire holiday nostalgia, savvy choreographers and directors can introduce all sorts of changes without disturbing the overall effect. Such is the case with Nigel Burgoine's Ballet Theatre of Toledo production, which opened yesterday in the Maumee Performing Arts Center for a second year. Some things have changed; some things have stayed the same. This year's production is smoother, more varied, and a tad shorter than the 2006 version. Sets by Thomas C. Umfrid have been enhanced, and lighting by David J. Lowry is well developed and effective. The Ballet Theatre of Toledo Orchestra, under John Dodson, has clearly come to terms with tempo and ensemble issues, providing solid musical support to the stage action. One thing that didn't need to change is the quality of dancing, the overall stage presence of each member of the large and varied cast, and the snappy pace between segments.

Trained with the Royal Ballet School in London, Burgoine has instilled its characteristic elegance and economy in his dancers. The result is that every role, from Mouse to Pastry Page and Gingerspice Girl, becomes a consistent element adding up to the whole effect - which is greater than the sum of its parts. Even guest soloists Tricia Sundbeck and Jay Goodlett of the Cincinnati Ballet, stunning as they were in pas de deux and solos as Snow Queen, Sugar Plum Fairy, and Prince, exhibited the same lovely restraint, albeit at a much higher level. And part of the fun of a local production is watching young dancers grow up through certain roles. This year Lauren Burns, reprising the role of Clara (Caitlyn Riley, another repeater, will dance today) showed greater certitude, strength, and stage presence. Also back as the Russian Dancer, Tony Dandino brought extra sizzle to his leaps and high splits. Other welcome returnees included Mallory Pettee as Harlequin and, later, as Chinese Girl; Riley as Columbine, and Alana Hatcher and Kalina Hillard, first as Soldier Dolls, later as Spanish Girls. Making new roles their own were Spencer Hack as a very lively Fritz, Jenny Yonkof as Flower Queen, and Isaac Jones as Spanish Boy. After a long absence, it was grand to have Rich Helldobler back on a Toledo stage, not to mention a pleasure to watch community dancers Erik Johanson, Lynn Ritter, Amy Sujkowski, and especially Ernst Hillenbrand as the mysterious Drosselmeyer. And of course there were the big white dogs, Gracie and Gabriel, and Blizzard - today in his farewell performance - as well as Burgoine's fanciful special walk-on guest. Ballet Theatre of Toledo's production of Nutcracker will repeat at 2 p.m. today in the Maumee Performing Arts Center, 1147 Saco St., Maumee. Tickets are \$16-\$36 at the door.

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