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## Review: 'Nutcracker' shines anew in Burgoine production

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Christmas is coming and nowhere was it more apparent than in the Maumee Performing Arts Center, where Ballet Theatre of Toledo's production of The Nutcracker was under way, for its third year.

Led by founder Nigel Burgoine, the company once more delivered what is, for thousands of dance lovers, a highlight of Christmas. After all, who can resist the charming Hoffman tale of Clara and her magical nutcracker set to Tchaikovsky's brilliant score, especially in a production both artistically consistent and entertaining?

The first half is dominated by a splendid party scene where young dancers mingle with seasoned adults amid a festive setting of magic and mystery.

Spencer Hack, an up-and-coming star with great extension, was impressive in the role of Fritz, and Grace Dzienny sparkled as Clara. (Anya Kress will portray Clara at today's performance).

Tommy Cobau and Patrick McCrae in a variety of roles starting with Ragamuffin, displayed versatility, control, and impressive stage presence throughout the two-hour production. Ernst Hillenbrand and Rich Helldobler, returning guest dancers, joined other adults including Eric Johnson and Linda Alexander in feature roles.

Caitlin Riley and Lauren Burns, as Colombine and Harlequin, with Mallory Pettee and Emily Hostetler as Soldiers added sparkle and fine dancing to the party mix.

Cobau as Rat King and Douglas Burkhart as Nutcracker come-to-life led a large band of rodents and a company of soldiers through a convincing mock battle, with some good swordplay.

Returning as Snow Queen and Prince were Cincinnati Ballet soloists Tricia Sundbeck and Jay Goodlett, whose exceptional dancing must inspire many in this young company.

This year's production seemed more simplified, especially in some of the corps sections. Crystal Maidens, Frost Fairies, and Snowflakes performed effectively even if the dancing was not terribly challenging.

As Spanish dancers, Burns, Sarah Squillante, and Burkhart achieved a fine level of ensemble, surpassed only by the sextet of Arab dancers - Jenna Frederick, Akaicia Gerken, Hannah Meyers, Avery Sujkowski, and McCrae and Cobau.

As Chinese dancer with four acrobats, Riley continued her streak of excellent solos. And how nice to see Tony Dandino, a company graduate, reprising the role of Russian dancer.

A sold-out house spoke volumes on the wisdom of moving the performance date ahead to Thanksgiving weekend, allowing all those holiday guests to watch young relatives dance.

The Nutcracker will repeat at 2 p.m. today in Maumee Performing Arts Center. The performance is sold out. To join a waiting list for returns, call 419-861-0895.

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