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A Caribbean-Flavored ‘Nutcracker’

Miami City Ballet’s new production of Balanchine’s festive work freshens its costumes and sets while retaining the legendary choreographer’s direction and dancemaking.



Erick Rojas and Reyneris Reyes (center) with other dancers in Miami City Ballet’s production
PHOTO: ALEXAN IZILIAEV

By Robert Greskovic
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‘**George Balanchine’s** ‘The Nutcracker’”—as the choreographer’s 1954 version of the now-familiar Christmastime Tchaikovsky ballet, first given in Russia in 1892, has been branded since his death in 1983—evolved over the years since its beginnings at New York City Ballet. After 1964, when Balanchine restaged the work with new settings and further costuming for NYCB’s then-new home in Lincoln Center—by which time the two-act ballet had become a holiday favorite throughout the U.S. in numerous other versions—the choreographer continued to adjust his staging.

A brand-new production of Balanchine’s work by Miami City Ballet, which first mounted it in 1990 (in a production I’d never seen), had its premiere earlier this month at Los Angeles’s Music Center, which co-commissioned the ballet. Last weekend, MCB’s home city, where I caught two performances, saw the revamped production for the first time. The newness comes in the form of strikingly fresh sets and costumes designed by Isabel and Ruben Toledo. All the while, the theatrical heart and soul of Balanchine’s deft direction and fine dancemaking remain soundly in place.



Miami City Ballet dancers in 'George Balanchine's 'The Nutcracker'' PHOTO: ALEXANDER IZILIAEV

Cuban-born Lourdes Lopez, MCB artistic director since 2012, commissioned the Toledos, who were also born in Cuba and who are husband-and-wife fashion and design collaborators. The results are endlessly fanciful and colorful, with stylish costuming that combines couture finesse with dance-friendly freedom.

Though the fir trees, snows and rooftops depicted in the scenery and in Wendall K. Harrington's animated projections indicate the Nuremberg, Germany, of E.T.A. Hoffmann 1816 story that inspired the ballet, there is an abiding Caribbean coloration to the two-hour show. In the second act's Land of Sweets, James F. Ingalls's lighting often washes tangerine skies behind celebrations framed by a confectionery set telling of Spanish pastries and fruits.



Renan Cerdeiro and Jennifer Lauren PHOTO: ALEXANDER IZILIAEV

Balanchine's dance-driven narrative about a child heroine, named Marie, and her boy-prince shines through the action, as the youngsters make their way from a cozy home on Christmas eve to triumph over a battle between marauding mice and toy soldiers and then journey through a wintry forest to a sweet land over which their goodness can rule. Notably beautiful ballet dresses for the Waltz of the Snowflakes, all soft, bluish whites, and for the Waltz of the Flowers, all layered, blush pinks, heighten the distinct tones of these two ensemble numbers. The energetic artistry of MCB's female ensemble reveals the former as alive with bolting force; the latter, with lilting shimmer.

The more than 50 student dancers here in Miami, all from the company's affiliate school, looked a little more mature than those Balanchine preferred, especially when some of them grinned more self-consciously than naturally. This was particularly the case in the opening, family party scene. But, in the

role of the Nutcracker transformed to Little Prince, 14-year-old Erick Rojas—pencil-thin and elegant—possessed perfectly schooled manners and an aristocratic mien. The youngest and smallest cast members, about 8 years old, played the angels who open the second act. In their floor-length golden dresses with fleecy wings and little halos, they became irresistible innocents who skittered in snaking formations with smiles as bright as those likely found on the faces of their audiences.

As for the demanding leading and solo roles, MBC fielded two impressively strong casts. Confident Jennifer Lauren portrayed the Sugarplum Fairy as a regal queen shaping the intricacies of both the role's piquant solo and its grand pas de deux with ease and surety. Beaming Nathalia Arja made her Sugarplum performance into a most winning, sprite-like affair. Both Renan Cerdeiro and Renato Pentead, dancing, respectively, as these Sugarplums' cavaliers, did so with flair and finish—especially Mr. Cerdeiro, whose attentive partnering effortlessly secured Ms. Lauren's daring, climactic poses.



Nathalia Arja, center
PHOTO: ALEXANDER ZILIAEV

As leader of the Candy Canes—in a mercurial, dancing-through-a-hoop solo in which Balanchine himself excelled in 1920s Russia—Kleber Rebello gave a performance that stands out notably amid all those I've seen in this role in my more than four-decade acquaintance with its choreography. Leading the Waltz of the Flowers, as its Dew Drop, both Ashley Knox and Ms. Arja spun and darted with breezy power.

And so how, one might ask, was the decorated evergreen that plays a major part in the magical transformation of the family parlor? Balanchine once said that this needed to be impressive, since the ballet "is the tree." MCB's tree starts out looking somewhat lackluster, like the shallowly embossed image on a Christmas card. Its music-keyed transformation to towering scale is brought about by projections and moving decor, but the effect is more a smooth scene change than an awe-inspiring display of expansive growth.

Luckily, MCB's tree is but a small disappointment in the grand picture of this beguiling "Nutcracker," a production that adds a new and marvel-filled chapter to the ballet's long and evolving history.

—Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.