



Dance

The Crack-Up: A Nutcracker Marathon—Four in Two Days—Saw Balanchine Fare Less Than Well on TV

Keith Michael's new New York Theatre Ballet version is enchanting

By Robert Gottlieb 12/20 5:36pm

It's been a week of Nutcrackers—Nutcrackers to the left of us, Nutcrackers to the right of us, Nutcrackers wherever you look. And it's been a mixed bag of nuts. Now it's time to roll over, Tchaikovsky, and tell Beethoven the news.

But first, a dash through the four Nutcrackers I recently saw within two long days.

For most of us, it's the Balanchine version that reigns supreme, not only because we've grown up on it (and so have our children and our grandchildren), but because it's a great work of art as well. No matter how many times you see it, which in my case is scores of times, there's always something more to be discovered in it; another perfect detail of narrative or musicality or profound subtext. It understands children, it understands Christmas and it understands life. It's magic.

Last week brought us a "Live From Lincoln Center" broadcast of the City Ballet production—the Balanchine production. How did it look? Not so bad. But it could have looked a good deal better. The problems weren't with the dancers, although the casting was less than perfect, but with the near-demented deployment of the cameras. We've been told that there were eight of them in eight different positions in the theater, and I believe it—the point of view never stopped shifting: move in for a close-up, pull back; swing to one side, swing to the other. Why not a reaction shot here, just when we're watching an important dance moment? How about a long shot here, a short shot there, now a medium shot? Why not break up this other passage by changing the point of view? Why trust the ballet?

That's the crime of so much televised dance (you get the same thing with *Dance in America*): bring culture to the masses, but dilute it for them. It's as if the directors don't believe an audience can focus on anything for more than 10 seconds without getting bored—sometimes five seconds is too long for them. There were moments when I was almost dizzy from having my eyes pulled here, then there, then somewhere else.

Who knows why Megan Fair-child was the Sugarplum of choice. She's a greatly improved

dancer—she's worked hard and intelligently—but she's essentially a soubrette, sweetly pretty. That's fine for Sugarplum up to a point—but then comes the great second act pas de deux—the glorious climax to the music and the choreography. It isn't sweetly pretty; it's grand, on the largest scale. Fairchild simply lacks the amplitude. (For one thing, she isn't supple enough to carry off the wonderful and essential swooning back-bends.) Still, she did an honorable job. Ashley Bouder as Dewdrop gave her usual powerful stirring performance. Tiler Peck as Marzipan gave her usual superbly musical performance, but then she's also a wonderful Sugarplum and an extraordinary Dewdrop. When is she not a paragon? Now, roll over, Nutcracker, and let the winter repertory begin.

Oddly, the single best thing about the broadcast of the Bolshoi's Nutcracker, seen at the Big Cinemas Theater, was the camera work. Every moment was right, every camera angle, every shift in point of view; there wasn't a hitch; the flow was perfection. And to be fair to the company, the orchestra was terrific too—full, vibrant, exciting, moving. That's it. Everything else was unspeakable—no surprise, since it's the Yuri Grigorovich version. In the entire two acts there isn't a single moment of distinguished or even interesting choreography.

To begin with, who can tell where it's set, or why? This is surely not the bourgeois home of the Stahlbaums—people are got up in fancy gowns, with 18th-century wigs. Since little Marie is played by a grown-up ballerina (Nina Kaptsova) and her younger brother, Fritz, by a small boy, confusion prevails from the start. The mice are defeated in the first act—and then again in the second. The Nutcracker himself is a thin, thin blond fellow with a bright red costume—he does lots of jetés in circles around the stage, but mostly he carries Marie aloft in those Soviet lifts that come in three sizes: fairly high, very high, over the head and often upside down. (Cheers!) Billowing skirts, rhapsodic glances. Every effect repeated again and again. Drosselmeyer was danced by the most effective dancer on view, the elegant Denis Savin, who actually seemed to have an idea about what he was doing, but there was too much of him.

Such a production is a throwback to the bad old days, like Putin. No wonder Alexei Ratmansk quit the Bolshoi. (Luckily for them, they retain his *Bright Stream*.) Nothing will be possible there until the Grigorovich repertory and everything it represents are dead with a stake through the heart. As for the Royal Ballet's Nutcracker, seen in a back-

to-back marathon with the Bolshoi's, it was a film from 2009 of Peter Wright's two-decade-old version, full of invention and charm, its backbone Drosselmeyer as the magician who conjures up the characters and events. There's nothing sinister or ambivalent about him, unless you count his addiction to swirling his big blue cape around him. The problem, if you think it is one, is that, as in the Bolshoi version, the Marie character (called Clara here) is a ballerina from the start: the tree grows, but she doesn't. She and her prince are the whole story; they're active throughout, even in the diversion where Clara, for instance, becomes a secondary Dewdrop (sorry, Rose Fairy). In other words, the "children" aren't observers, they're grown-ups right in the midst of things, changing the entire balance of the second act and—again as in the Bolshoi—robbing the ballet of its sense of wonder.

Mr. Wright's Nutcracker becomes a colorful excuse for a conventional love story, turning its back on what we love so much in Balanchine: Christmas as seen and felt by children, for whom Sugarplum and her cavalier are ideal adult versions of themselves. There's no subtext here, no universality. And unfortunately, the Sugarplum is danced by Miyako Yoshida, giving a dance-by-numbers performance with confident technique and no resonance. (Her partner is the estimable Steven McRae, appealing if half-hidden under his powdered wig.)

There are many other versions, of course. Mr. Ratmansk's for ABT, now playing at BAM, makes big mistakes but has tremendous virtues, in particular its thrilling Snowflake scene, turned into an unsettling pas d'action. Mark Morris's *The Hard Nut* is not to my taste in its bad-boy affect, but it's original, and many love it. Mr. Wright, for all his ability, gives us a pretty and well-managed standard ballet that has everything but the imagination that Tchaikovsky provides and demands.

An appealing surprise turned up at the small but always intelligent and attractive New York Theatre Ballet at the Florence Gould Auditorium. Keith Michael has replaced his own Nutcracker, performed from 1985 to 2010, with a new version, and it's a honey. On a tiny stage with a limited number of dancers—the Snowflakes, for instance, are just four girls and two boys—he has made an hour-plus mini-ballet intended primarily for little kids but equally enchanting for ancients like me. It's completely ingenious the way he deploys the pretty cut-out scenery (by Gillian Bradshaw-Smith) and the equally charming costumes (by Sylvia Taalson Nolan), and it's extraordinary the way he achieves so much with so small an ensemble. What's more, the choreography is musical and inventive—and fun. These are committed dancers, as much at home in this classic as they were in Tudor, Cunningham and Alston the last time I saw the company.

The atmosphere is relaxed and rowdy, the experience a happy one. Don't forget this one at Nutcracker time next year!

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New York Theatre Ballet in Keith Michael's *The Nutcracker*.
Bottom: City Ballet in George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*. Dewdrop, with Ashley Bouder at center.