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## A holiday must for dance lovers

December 18, 2009, 02:55 AM By Keith Kreitman

Something new has been added to the Peninsula Ballet this year.

It is partnering with the Oakland Ballet in its annual production of Carlos Carvajal's choreographed "Nutcracker," which, of course, expands the number of talented dancers it is able to draw upon.

More than that, it has an internationally prominent new Artistic Director Bruce Steivel to lend to the production new perspective and new life in the 15th year of the Carvajal version.

Of course, by this time, we all know there is no definitive choreography or staging for this immortal fable and Peter Tchaikovsky's score. It is the various choreographers who create and stage their own unique versions and I continue to believe that the Carvajal's is one of the very best, at least in the Bay Area.



Jeremiah Crank and Edilsa Armendariz star in Peninsula Ballet Theatre's production of 'Nutcracker.'

Someone needs to tell me, in the 50 years of seeing "Nutcracker" productions, why I have never tired of it? It is an ironic legend that Tchaikovsky, himself, disliked the score after he wrote it. If he did, he has been all alone because it is, likely, the most beloved and the most produced ballet in the United States, since it was introduced into this country by the San Francisco Ballet in 1944, by Artistic Director William Christensen, the father of Chris Christensen, the conductor of the excellent ballet orchestra in this production.

Which brings up that Peninsula Ballet is one of the few that engages a live symphony orchestra for "Nutcracker." If one wonders what difference that makes, think of the canned music so many productions have coming out of loud speakers and music that is actually produced, as alive as you are, reverberating around you in the same auditorium in consonance with the dancing on the stage and you will know what a difference it makes.

Including live orchestras, Peninsula Ballet Theatre has become the employer of the largest number of professional artists in San Mateo County.

As an unexpected treat on the opening night, Carvajal himself, once an international dancing star, performed the key role of Drosselmeyer, the mysterious magician who creates the nutcracker in the shape of a military figure as a gift for his goddaughter, Clara Silberhaus (Morgan Kohoury) on Christmas Eve. at a party at her family's home.

An interesting variation in this production is one of the windup Dresden Dolls that perform at the party is a male, Damon Mahoney, dancing with Adrianna Benson. He is impressively fluid and agile, as well as when he partners with Amelia Marciano in the "Arabian Coffee," sequence.

The guests' dancing scenes in the first act at the party are always engaging and Clara's little brother Fritz (Matthew Haddad) is still the irresistible, impertinent little scamp who tries to steal the nutcracker from his sister. And no one is having more fun than the dancing children drawn from local dancing schools: Dance Arts Center, Kirkpatrick's School of Dance, San Carlos School of Ballet, Menlo Park Academy of Dance and Tiffany's Dance Academy. They are real scene-stealers, as they mimic the adult dancers.

Although, only 12 years old, Clara falls for Drosselmeyer's nephew Johann (Gabriel Williams) who, in the opening fantasy part of the ballet, becomes the Nutcracker Prince who does battle with the thieving leader, the Mouse King (Norberto Martinez).

Then we mustn't forget the amazing, expanding Christmas tree with its fantastic lighting that opens the excursion into the dream world of the "Nutcracker" second act.

As usual in all PBT performances, all the other pas de deux and ensemble dancing at the opening performance were at the height of artistic: Snow Queen (Anna Carnes) and Snow King (Jeremiah Crank); "Spanish Chocolate" Amanda Mc Govern, Norberto Martinez and the Bull (Alexandra Venter); "Harem" Gina Antonucci, Christine Crowley, Elena Kozlova and Sarah Wellman; "Chinese Tea" Janice Hu and Emily Anton; "Mirlitons" Anna Carnes, Deidre Kirk, Chelsea Hix and Lindsey Fitzmorris; "Candy Ribbons" Alexandra Venter, Melinda Neal and Justin Kaul; the Rose Queen (Edilsa Armendariz) and Rose Consort (Jeremiah Crank) and the Sugar Plum Fairy (Bobby Bernstein-Bonvin) and the Cavalier (Ikolo Griffin).

Who knows? The advent of a new artistic director may bode even greater artistic growth for the organization.

In any event, in one review, I asked: "I would wonder why any Mid-Peninsula resident would wish to travel elsewhere for a production of "Nutcracker" when one of the very best is right here?"

With the gift of such easy access and free parking, I would still wonder about that.

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'Nutcracker'

Story by: E.T.A. Hoffmann

music by: Peter Tchaikovsky

choreographed by: Carlos Carvajal

PRESENTED BY: Peninsula Ballet Theatre and the Oakland Ballet Company

Directed by: Bruce Steivel

Orchestra Conducted by Chris Christensen

WHERE: San Mateo Performing Arts Center, 600 N. Delaware St., San Mateo

WHEN: 4 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 19 and 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 20

TICKETS: \$20 to \$50

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