

Review: 'The Nutcracker' a lush treat for Thanksgiving weekend

Written by Leah Stacy
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Rochester youths perform in "The Nutcracker" in the 14th year the Rochester City Ballet and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra have staged the classic.

Dozens of little girls in richly colored dresses, tights and Mary Janes held tight to the hands of their parents and grandparents leading them down the carpeted aisles of Kodak Hall to settle them into plush seats.

Hushed voices discussed prospective costumes and makeup of friends, sisters and daughters who were performing in the afternoon's show, rising to a fevered pitch before the lights dimmed for the annual Thanksgiving weekend tradition of The Nutcracker by the Rochester City Ballet and Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra.

From the moment the thick, red velvet curtain rises, set designer and costumer Sylvia Hanlon (with help from Deborah Tretter and Gordon J. Estey) provides plenty to keep wandering little eyes and minds occupied throughout the two-hour program.

Sumptuous costumes in winter shades of maroon, forest green and gold are draped upon the shimmering dancers onstage. Hanlon doesn't miss a detail from bodices to bloomers. Glitter and snowflakes make a welcome appearance

in almost every scene, and a 12-foot Christmas tree towers over a pile of daintily-wrapped presents.

Put simply

, The Nutcracker is every child's happiest dream. Clara (Maggie Rickel) finds herself in a Christmas fairyland filled with sweets, romance and life-size toys. The experience is comparable only to watching the inhabitants of a miniature dollhouse move, glide and breathe.

For a city the size of Rochester, a 25-year-old ballet company with more than 10 permanent company members is a credible feat. Artistic Director Jamey Leverett and her crew don't disappoint this year with tight technical executions, simple

staging and impressive character development.

The largest audience reaction of Friday's matinee came during new company member William Moore Jr.'s rendition of the "Russian Trepak" in the second act. Moore avoided the traditional prisiadka (kicking the legs from a squatting position), instead employing high leaps, Russian splits and pirouettes. His strength and accuracy prompted applause and cheers from an otherwise sleepy afternoon crowd.

The holiday season has changed quite a bit since 1891 when Tchaikovsky composed the music for this ballet; yawns and recounted savings

from early Black Friday could be heard throughout the auditorium.

But there's some things that remain the same. Young ballerinas still lie awake dreaming of the day they'll dance the role of Clara (or better yet, the elegant

Sugar Plum Fairy). Eccentric uncles still give the best gifts, and children still drift to sleep on Christmas Eve with "visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads."

Or, they can have that dream a bit earlier after seeing The Nutcracker this weekend.

Leah Stacy is a Rochester-based freelance writer.