

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bill Hebert

Liberty Belle Anne & Her Nutt Crak-Up Crew

by Sara Graybeal

The Philly Nutt Crak-Up, performed by ContempraDANCE, is advertised online as “a comical dance-filled spoof of the Nutcracker.” As such, I imagined a kid-friendly affair—something like *Shrek*, with extravagant outfits, spin-offs on every familiar trope, and a lot of laughs. My suspicions were bolstered when I walked in the door. The auditorium was filled with women and children; in the entire sea of faces, I couldn’t find another childless adult besides myself.

The outfits were indeed dazzling: from the City Hall Dolls (featuring Barbie, Princess Leia, Michael Jackson, and more) to the Railway Rats, decked out in ripped gray garb with wedges of cheese clasped in their hands. And there were a lot of spin-offs: the Sugar Plum Fairy turned rapper, who winced while dancing en pointe and grabbed the microphone every chance she got. Or the City Cheesesteak Guy, in lieu of the Nutcracker-turned-Prince, who stole the heart of Clara (aka Liberty Belle Anne) with his geeky glasses and a five-foot-long cheesesteak in tow.

Here’s the thing: it sounds funny, but it wasn’t. Many audience members chuckled and whooped upon learning, while the show was being introduced, that the Eagles were currently ahead. But once the curtain came up, there was barely any laughter. The show was vivid, colorful, fast-paced and exciting; scenes shifted constantly; new characters leapt on and off stage. And there were slapstick moments: one of the pajama-clad Slumberettes taking the gift bag that Liberty Belle Anne had her eye on, or Uncle Franklin Rosselmeyer separating her in spectacular slow motion from her love, the Cheesesteak Guy.

But these moments were fleeting, usually occurring in the seconds before dancers snapped back into place for the next choreography. As such, they didn’t prompt laughter, just a kind of detached interest. Seated amidst a slew of children, I glanced at their faces during some of the more dramatic exchanges, curious whether the humor was hitting home with their age group more than mine. It seemed that it wasn’t. Most of them had the sleepy-eyed gaze that children direct toward commercials, mouths hanging open, absorbed by the

pageantry but unmoved by the actual drama.

The pageantry, though, was beyond compare, and here's another thing: the dancing was phenomenal. The show featured a plethora of dance forms: ballet, tap, modern, hip-hop, breakdancing, and all executed stunningly. As Liberty Belle Anne, Stephanie Vasta dominated the stage, in a series of choreographies that led her into breathless spins and splits, lifted skyward by several dance partners, flying through the air. She pulled off this litany of moves in spectacular form, with a host of sassy, wide-eyed expressions for the audience. The breakdancing crew was similarly fiery, with acrobatics that even the most lethargic of children couldn't resist sitting up a little straighter for.

Across the board, the male dancers displayed enormous levels of talent, often alternating between three or four partners at a time and maintaining high energy and expressiveness throughout. Perhaps no dancers stole the hearts of the audience, though, like the children did, summoned on stage by Ms. Betsy Ballerina to perform as Penn's Cherubs. Their timing was imprecise and their movements shaky, but in their impassive gazes lay the conviction that they were the stars of the show. They performed with the self-assuredness of their age, convinced they would be adored. And so they were: it was with thunderous applause and an almost audible sigh of regret that they concluded their piece and were ushered offstage again.

Audience members didn't get the hearty laughs we were promised. We did, however, get a lot of other things: a host of fantastic choreographies, enough flashy costumes to tide us over until next Halloween, and a couple hours of entertainment by a hugely talented team of dancers. I can't speak for the children in the audience. Maybe they've forgotten the whole thing by now! But as a twenty-something fan of both Philly and the Nutcracker, I'd call it a highly enjoyable afternoon.

Philly Nutt Crak-Up, ContempraDANCE Theatre Company, The Painted Bride Art Center, December 11-13.

By Sara Graybeal
December 20, 2015