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West Coast Wonder: Goh Ballet's The Nutcracker in Vancouver



Goh Ballet's The Nutcracker ran at The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts from December 15-20. (Photo: Louis LJ)

Vancouver never had a **Nutcracker** tradition until Goh Ballet gave the city its own version of the holiday classic in 2009, the same year former National Ballet of Canada principal Chan Hon Goh took over the company her dancer parents had founded on the West Coast almost 40 years ago. None of this is apparent, however, from the full houses which greeted the ballet's recent week-long run at the 1,800-seat The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts.

The shows, which ended on Dec. 20, were mostly sold out, attracting audiences from as far away as the coastal islands and across the border from nearby Washington State. The draw is a charming ballet that many readily identify with Christmas, if not the entire month of December. Gorgeously nostalgic, the sets and costumes invoke a bygone era when the Christmas festivities came shrouded in glamour and mystery. Drosselmeyer (guest dancer Adonis Daukaev) is here an actual magician whose conjuring and disappearing tricks highlight Christmas as a time of enchanting transformations. With its scenes of dancing snowflakes, bears and sweets, **The Nutcracker** speaks to the child within, never failing to cast a spell.

This two-act version coming out of Vancouver has the added allure of being hometown, a source of civic pride. As choreographed by Russian dance expert Anna Marie-Holmes, a native of Mission, B. C., who danced with the Kirov and directed the Boston Ballet (among many other accomplishments), this **Nutcracker** is a sparkling professional enterprise exuding the warmth and cohesiveness of tight-knit community.

Goh Academy is the feeder school for Goh Ballet and students fill many of the 200 roles designed specifically with children in mind, from the mice and gingerbread cookies battling it out in Act I to the lambs gambolling in advance of the Waltz of the Flowers in Act II. Annually, Goh Ballet hosts an open audition to cast locals from outside the school in prominent parts, including the lead role of Clara, the girl at the centre of the sugar-coated fantasia erupting upon the stroke of midnight. This year's production had three young Claras in rotation, each dancing on pointe to live accompaniment in the form of the Vancouver Opera Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's marvellously inventive 1892 score under the energetic baton of conductor Leslie Dala.

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Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.

D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

In Memory of David Churchill (1959-2013)



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Photo: David Cooper.

Roles not filled by locals went to guest artists in ballet and beyond. Members of Ukrainian Shumka Dancers, a professional dance company in Edmonton, for instance, performed the high-kicking Russian dance while popular Vancouver drag queen Symone played Mother Ginger, deftly manipulating the large skirt out of which tumbles a city gymnastics squad. They got the show's biggest laughs. From Ballet Manila principal dancers Katherine Barkman and Rudy De Dios took on the challenging Snow Queen and Snow King pas de deux, succeeding magnificently. Also from the Philippines, the athletically virtuosic Mark Sumaylo, dancing both Harlequin and the Nutcracker Prince, animated both characters with panache.

Visiting luminaries usually dance the roles of Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier Prince, and this year **Guillaume Côté** and **Jurgita Dronina**, principal dancers of the National Ballet, were billed for these starring roles. But a recent injury forced Côté to bow out at the last minute, causing Goh. **The Nutcracker's** executive producer, to scramble in search of a replacement. Peter Boal, artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, saved the day by offering two of his own lead dancers to perform in Vancouver for the duration of the run. They didn't disappoint.

Given the short notice – they had only days to prepare for the job in Canada – dancers Jerome Tisserand and Elizabeth Murphy performed the pas de deux which George Balanchine had created for his 1954 production of **The Nutcracker** at New York City Ballet, a version now in the repertoire of Pacific Northwest Ballet. The steps are difficult to execute and the balances even more so because they are lifted and held on an angle – horizontal and vertical lines deliberately thrown off-kilter. This Sugar Plum was more steel and glass than luscious fruit, a constructivist work of art in the middle of a children's fairy tale. Nevertheless, the visiting dancers made it work.

Strong and musical, Murphy mastered the intricacies of the choreography with an alertness which made her fascinating to watch. Trained in his native France at the **Paris Opera Ballet**, the impeccable Tisserand produced clean shapes and whisper-soft landings, even after leaping high off the ground. Despite departing from what Holmes had originally conceived, and only by necessity, their pas de deux blended seamlessly with the ballet as a whole. The performance enchanted as much as **The Nutcracker** did itself. It was the cherry on top an already delicious Christmas delight.



— **Deirdre Kelly** is a Toronto-based journalist, author and internationally recognized dance critic. She writes for *Dance Magazine* in New York and the *Dance Gazette* in London, and is a contributor to the *International Dictionary of Ballet* (St. James Press). A staff writer at *The Globe and Mail*, she was her newspaper's award-winning dance critic from 1985 until 2001 before transitioning to the *Style* section as the fashion reporter. She has also served as the paper's rock critic and as an investigative reporter in the visual arts with a focus on art crime. The best-selling author of *Paris Times Eight* and *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, recently re-released in paperback, she writes on dance, theatre, the visual arts and fashion for *Critics At Large*.

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