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Today is Friday December 31, 2010

Nutcracker Returns to Russian Roots

By [Kevin Griffin](#) 30 Dec 2010 [COMMENTS\(0\)](#) [Culture Seen](#)

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The scribbled sign at the box office of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre said it all Wednesday night: "Performance sold out." Alberta Ballet's new version of *The Nutcracker* had been described as "blingy" by its choreographer Edmund Stripe because of the sets and costumes designed by Zack Brown. He's designed the scenery and costumes for numerous productions at the Washington National Opera and for Broadway and has won two Emmy Awards for the broadcast of *La Gioconda* from the San Francisco Opera. For *The Nutcracker*, it was easy to see what \$1.5 million buys in flashy costumes and sparkly sets created by a top designer.

Right from the start, it's easy to see how AB's *Nutcracker* differs from others which are usually set in Germany. The opening scene takes place with onion domes in the background which immediately places *The Nutcracker* in Russia - the country where the ballet opened in December, 1892. Other changes - Clara becomes Klara and Rat King, the Rat Tsar - from the familiar and often imitated George Balanchine version for the New York City Ballet make the production resemble the opulent era of the czars instead of a schmaltzy Victorian one. AB's *Nutcracker* has the glitter and delicacy of a Faberge egg.

Along with the bling are some surprisingly earthy elements. In the Act I, the mice have been replaced by rats which display a little of the traditional cuteness but with a lot more animal-like movements. The young dancers - there are 70 students and youngsters in the production - are dressed in rat costumes with long tails that accentuates their darker side. They're more threatening and chase Klara around like the pack of animals that they are. When the Snow Tsarina arrives, she's pulled onto the stage by two white feral creatures with the masks and headpieces of wolves and the bodies of poodles. A breathtaking combination of beauty and the beast, they looked lethal. AB's also provided some surprises for the adults in Act II during the Arabian section. For once, the two men showed way more skin than the lone women they were dancing with. Their skimpy tightie-whities left little to the imagination.

The set for the party scene in Act I is supposedly a recreation of the family home of Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky, the score's composer. It may have been intended to look formal and stuffy so that it provided a sharp contrast with the flashier sets that followed. It made the family gathering more subdued and disorganized than it needed to be. I found the Snow Czarina's costume odd: it was so long, her feet were barely visible when she danced en pointe.

As a professional dance company one thing AB's *Nutcracker* had was lots of good dancing. Yukichi Hattori who danced the role of Karl and the Nutcracker on opening night leapt with such power and height he looked like he was levitating. He also brought considerable acting skill to the role which was evident in Act II when he has to mime his exploits in the war against the Rat King and his army. It didn't bother me that he was the same height or maybe even a little shorter than Klara danced by Asaka Homma. Hayna Gutierrez made dancing the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy look easy as did her Cavalier, Kelley McKinlay.

Since this production is being presented by Ballet BC, Emily Molnar, the company's artistic director, opened the evening by speaking to the audience before the performance began. She said one thing that caught my attention: instead of sternly warning everyone to turn off their cell phones and electronic devices, she instead said that everyone is welcome to Twitter and Facebook during intermission and after the performance. I thought it was a much more sensible and positive way to engage with social media. It's a recognition that it's here to stay. Better use it to build an audience than try to fight it.

Ballet BC presents Alberta Ballet's *Nutcracker* to Jan. 1 at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Performances take place Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 2 p.m. and Thursday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets from [ticketmaster.ca](#)

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