

The 'other' Nutcracker a dancing jewel

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The dancers in Jose Mateo's exuberant "Nutcracker" fill Tchaikovsky's familiar score with energy

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and light. That's largely because Mateo, perhaps one of the most "organic" ballet choreographers around, has given them so much to be excited about: Rather than crafting his version of the seasonal tale out of pageantry and extravagant stagecraft (though the set does boast a most impressive growing Christmas tree), he lets the story of young Clara and her Nutcracker Prince unfold through dancing that springs straight from the music itself.

The difference between Ballet Theatre's "Nutcracker" and most others is apparent from the start.

The curtain rises not on a mime-driven tree-decorating scene in the Silberhaus parlor but on a dream-scape shaped by 12 "fairies" en pointe. Clara, too (the remarkably articulate Wendy Shinzawa, 14), performs en pointe, and has actual steps to do, including long, stretchy arabesques and delicate fouettes. Even the mice - children from Ballet Theatre's school - have real movement to work with, from finger twitches to lolling heads as they're led away by the Soldiers following the Rat King's defeat by the Nutcracker Prince (ably danced by Julian Reyes).

Susan MacNichol's Columbine neatly fits the wind-up doll bill: Though her beats are occasionally sluggish, her flat-footed gait and right-angled posture as Dr. Drosselmeyer (Mateo himself) tosses her over his shoulder are right on target. Her cool seriousness is offset by the

THE NUTCRACKER

Choreography by Jose Mateo, Ballet
Theatre of Boston

At: The Emerson Majestic Theatre, last
night. Performances continue through
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electric Jae Kwak, who takes the role of both Harlequin and later, in Act II, Trepak. When Kwak leaps he seems to hover in the air for days, and when he pirouettes the entire room seems to whirl.

The dancing accelerates in Act II, but because Mateo has worked so hard to break the typical "Nutcracker" mold (wherein Act I is play-acted and Act II is danced), the transition to The Kingdom of the Sweets is nearly seamless. Some of the best dancing of the evening occurs in The Divertissements: Kim Swihart and

Scott Austin, in black and gold, let loose a lush, zesty Chocolate. And Carl Adams, in Coffee, whips out remarkable spins, smooth as cream.

Mateo's Waltz of the Flowers could be more limpid, but any shortcomings in the eight Flowers' technique is made up for in spirit. And though the Dew Drop Fairy is usually sprightly, Debbi Burns's strong, solid take on the role resonates with charm. The choreography in the ballet's showpiece, the Grand Pas de Deux for the Sugar Plum Fairy (Leticia Guerrero de Rosario) and the Cavalier (Rolando Troconis), is, in Mateo's hands, tricky but distinct.

Mateo has said that dancers typically treat the "Nutcracker" as a chore: something they must do. Not so the dancers of Ballet Theatre of Boston. Their interpretation of Mateo's version of this holiday classic will only make you smile.