

An unorthodox nutcracker

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An Unorthodox Nutcracker, By: Rosamaria Kostic Cisneros
Submitted to: ENB's Dance is the Word Blog

December would not be complete without experiencing some version of the Nutcracker. This classical ballet is a staple of most dance companies' repertoire and English National Ballet (ENB) is no exception. ENB is one of the leading ballet companies in the UK and also the world. They have revamped their look and brought sexy back to the ballet.

The December 13, 2013 performance of the Nutcracker by ENB at the London Coliseum Theatre had all the usual suspects; Clara, Drosselmeyer, Nutcracker and the Prince. Naturally, Tamara Rojo's performance of Clara, in particular her superb dancing in the Sugar Plum Fairy pas de deux, was breathtaking! She effortlessly captured the innocence of the young Clara together with the ephemeral quality of a fairy! Another noteworthy aspect of the night was the bizarre Arabian scene of Act II which came very close to being inappropriate. Typically this scene, just like the Chinese, Russian and Spanish scenes, is supposed to be a dance vignette influenced by cultural elements and has no direct input to the storyline. The artistic decision to include the Sultan character in the Arabian scene was fresh, however the decision to depict him as an evil slave owner who kept Clara's cousin hostage was a careless one. I failed to see what this added to the storyline and how it enhanced the magic of this "Christmas ballet for all the family". Does this demonization of the Arabian reflect a cultural norm of today's western society?

Although the cultural reference was inconsiderate, choreographically I appreciated the set-up of the group piece in the Arabian scene. Having four female dancers and one male dancer, the Sultan, was refreshing compared with the more traditional interpretations of this scene. The focus was removed from the female body and placed on the male one. The choreography was innovative and beautifully executed. The dancers moved in and out of the floor which is rare to see in a ballet. The four women belly danced around the Sultan and made him the focus, shimmying and rolling shoulders right and left. Their torsos swayed and figure eights were outlined with their hips, contrasting those movements which changed levels. The most striking moment within the group piece was the duet between the Sultan (Arionel Vargas) and the Slave (Barry Drummond). The two men intertwined their arms while linking different body parts. The Sultan forcefully manipulated the slave and his dancing displayed his anger with conviction.

ENB is excitingly moving forward in many ways with their evocative costuming, sets and choreography, but perhaps they missed the mark with this one scene. Some ballets (such as *Raymonda* or *Le Corsaire*) have the "Oriental villains" as a pillar of their original story lines, however this is certainly not the case with *The Nutcracker*, so I question the use of this insensitive cliché in this day and age.