

A cavalcade of visual sparks that doesn't befit The Land of Snow

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Snow Queen (the exquisitely precise Stacey Shiori Minagawa) and the Icicles (Richard Landry and Keiichi Hirano) is [James Kudelka]'s lucid riff on classical purity and it's a highlight of the evening. The children and the Nutcracker Prince ([Piotr Stanczyk]) carry on to The Palace of the Sugar Plum Fairy where Kudelka and [Santo Loquasto] have devised a court of wonders dominated by an enormous gold Fabergé egg that opens to reveal every little girl's favourite ballet icon.

FULL TEXT

The Nutcracker

Performed by the National Ballet of Canada

At the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts

In Toronto on Saturday

Though set in 19th-century Russia, James Kudelka's *Nutcracker* is a ballet for the here and now: Emotionally complex, physically demanding and with scenic elements by Santo Loquasto designed simply to dazzle.

The ballet begins in a flurry of movement and activity. In a barn on the eve of Christmas, stable boy Peter (Piotr Stanczyk) presides as guests gather in communal celebration. We meet Misha (Liam Redhead) and Marie (Stella Leowinata), the child protagonists whose scrapping sets the magic in gear.

Leowinata is especially expressive and feisty, a likeable departure from the anemic Claras (the usually blonde and compliant child heroine from many *Nutcracker* productions) of my youth. We meet their icily distant and elegant parents and their loving nanny, Baba (warm and witty veteran Lorna Geddes).

In these scenes, Kudelka highlights the contrasting values of youth and maturity with care; children inspire chaos, noise, surreal flights of the imagination (here embodied by a dancing horse and skating bears). The elders constantly strive to restore order, and decorously assemble for complex social dances as the children pull each other's hair. The character of Uncle/Grand Duke Nikolai (Jeremy Nasmith, more than capable in this notoriously strenuous role) bridges the two poles; his magic feels anarchic but he dedicates it to keeping the peace rather than promoting mischief and discord.

As silvery snow begins to fall, the stable morphs into the children's nursery and the adventure begins. As with the stable scenes, the action here - the Christmas tree that begins to grow when the clock strikes midnight, the battle between the rats and the dogs and the cats - feels overly busy.

It's a non-stop wash of colour and movement that, while appropriate to our mile-a-minute contemporary culture, makes you long for something less fussy.

Which thankfully arrives next in *The Land of Snow*. A *pas de trois* between the Snow Queen (the exquisitely precise Stacey Shiori Minagawa) and the Icicles (Richard Landry and Keiichi Hirano) is Kudelka's lucid riff on classical purity and it's a highlight of the evening. The children and the Nutcracker Prince (Stanczyk) carry on to The Palace of the Sugar Plum Fairy where Kudelka and Loquasto have devised a court of wonders dominated by an enormous gold Fabergé egg that opens to reveal every little girl's favourite ballet icon. As the Sugar Plum Fairy, Jillian Vanstone is technically solid (despite some initial wobbly moments) but she exudes little of the passion or mystery one expects of fairies. When dancing together, she and Stanczyk form one of those rational, respectful couples that we all know are going to stay together even though there don't seem to be any visible sparks flying.

They hit their marks but they are somewhat boring.

Their duets punctuate scenes of crowded but gorgeous turbulence and a cavalcade of themed virtuositities: The sinuous grandeur of the Arabian Coffee segment; the delightful courtship of Sheep (Jordana Daumec) and Fox (Robert Stephen); the pert flittings of Bee (Tanya Howard) being especially effective emanations of Kudelka's choreographic genius. Even so, we're ready to let go when the fantasy world begins to revert back to reality and the children return to their bedroom. Yet Kudelka doesn't entirely resolve his narrative. He refuses to disperse the magic, bringing the curtain down while *The Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is still receding. It's a gently subversive and satisfying statement. He doesn't really want the world of rational adults to win decisively. And at Christmas time, neither do we.

The Nutcracker continues at the Four Seasons Centre until December 30. Tickets are available by calling 416 (toll free 1 866) 345-9595 or online at thenutcracker.ca

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