Festival Ballet Providence’s ‘Nutcracker’ as thrilling as ever

By Channing Gray
Special to The Journal
Posted Dec 21, 2018 at 11:10 PM
Updated Dec 22, 2018 at 12:53 AM

Each year at this time, Festival Ballet Providence pulls off the near impossible: staging the same “Nutcracker,” save for a bit of tweaking, and somehow making it seem fresh.

At least was the case Friday night, when the company was back on the stage of the Providence Performing Arts Center for its 41st ” The Nutcracker,” the 21st from longtime artistic director Mihailo Djuric.

The formula is simple: a solid corps with a few international soloists thrown in to make things sparkle. Then dress them up in lavish costumes, and sprinkle in a cloud of crystals in “The Snow Storm,” and you’ve got a winning show that continues to make little kids smile.

Djuric’s “Nutcracker” starts out as a heavy story ballet with details galore in the opening party scene. A drunken man sheepishly hands over his flask to his indignant wife only to have her polish off the rest. And for a change, a young girl pummels a boy with her doll.

And could Dylan Giles’ Drosselmeyer be spookier? He’s the bearer of gifts but a sort of Dracula figure with his eye patch, cape and ability to raise the dead Nutcracker after his battle with the Mouse King.

But as the evening unfolds, the show is more about the art of dance, taken to thrilling heights by the likes of veteran Jennifer Ricci, who owns the sultry Arabian-laced “Coffee,’ part of a array of folk dances to entertain Samantha Shorr’s enchanting Clara.

I stopped counting anniversaries after Ricci hit two decades in the company. But last night she proved she is still on top of her game. She’s got the control, the extension, almost touching the floor as she bent backwards. And she’s still got expressive magic, can reveal emotion as well as any dancer out there.
The moment she emerged on stage, she had the audience right where she wanted it, caught up in her every move. And that earned her some of the more enthusiastic applause of the night, along with Kristen Evans for her buoyant Sugar Plum Fairy, who seemed to barely touch down on Earth.

There were a few new touches, however. A few years ago, some of the “Nutcracker” costumes were stolen, forcing the company to make do with what remained and what it could borrow. This year, the troupe has all new outfits for the party, and they’re gorgeous.

Even the mice, who roll across the stage in sync, looked sharp.

There are nine new dancers, too. But the big news is Friday night saw the debut of the replacement for Archie, the spunky Yorkie, who for 19 years has ushered in Festival’s “Nutcracker” by dashing across the stage at the start of the show.

Actually there are three successors, and Friday night, Phoebe, a 6-year-old Petite Goldendoodle, did the honors. But Archie couldn’t resist making one last appearance; call it his dog song.

He was towed across the stage in a tiny sleigh outfitted in a Santa suit. And he looked none too happy.

“The Nutcracker” runs through Sunday at the Providence Performing Arts Center, 220 Weybosset St., with two performances today, at 2 and 7, and a 1:30 Sunday matinee. Tickets are $25-$85. Call (401) 421-2787 or visit ppacri.org.