

DANCE REVIEW

## 'The Nutcracker' by Los Angeles Ballet



Christine Cotter / Los Angeles Times

Erik Thordal-Christensen as Nutcracker and Liilit Hogtalian as Clara in a scene from Act 1 of the Los Angeles Ballet production of "The Nutcracker" in Glendale. [More photos >>>](#)

**The young company's version of the classic tale is a bright season opener, even if it could use refining.**

By Victoria Looseleaf  
December 15, 2008

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. Or at least a homegrown ballet company Los Angeles can call its own. Continuing to buck the odds, the husband-and-wife team of Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary, who launched [Los Angeles Ballet](#) in 2006, ushered in their third season Friday at the Alex Theatre in Glendale.

And the house was full.

The happy occasion was the troupe's original production of "The Nutcracker" (seven additional performances with cast changes are on tap in two other venues), and though this version still needs refining -- overly busy choreography still tends to blur some of the dancing -- it nevertheless manages to pay dividends.

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As Clara, the 16-year-old phenom Liilit Hogtalian, with the company since its inception, continues to blossom. Displaying grace and confidence beyond her years, Hogtalian makes us believe in magic. So too does Melissa Barak, who, as Marie, combines a delicate vulnerability with dramatic hauteur, and an elegant line most can only imagine. Breezing across the stage in a series of sparkling pirouettes, Barak punctuated the lush sounds of Tchaikovsky's score (alas, heard on tape), with floating arms and pliant beauty.

Her coupling with Peter Snow, however, was not an ideal match: Snow struggled with one-armed lifts, but managed to finesse their fish-dive finales. In his own variations, this rugged prince offered rapidly beating feet and a certain airborne prowess, but his landings, far from buttery, tended toward the wobbly.

Keeping things in the family, Neary again held stylish sway as the party-throwing Mrs. Staulbaum in the first act, which also featured a rollicking battle between mice and soldiers. And, as the company continues to thrive and grow -- it now numbers 30 dancers -- so too does the founders' son, Erik Thordal-Christensen. Assaying the role of Nutcracker, at 13, he towers over Clara. The youth is also heavy cargo for Andrew Brader's Drosselmeyer, the oddball uncle who, with fleet-footedness, supernatural powers and bad wig and fuzzy coat (costumes designed by Mikael Melbye, with Franco Martinez supplying Snowflake garb), not only brings toys to life, but also transports the young pair to the supercool lands of snow and sweets (Catherine Kanner designed the colorful painted backdrops).

Also standouts in the toy box: Guest artist Sergey Kheylik remains a scene-stealing Cossack Doll, tossing off armless cartwheels and high-flying split-leg jumps (when will this terpsichorean rebel be given more stage time?), and Annia Hidalgo and Craig Hall do admirable duty as the robotic Harlequin and Columbine.

Partnered by an able, bare-chested Drew Grant, the lovely Corina Gill, who dances Marie at matinees, wowed with her sleek, slinky Arabian. Finally, perkiness, not precision, best describes the corps of Snowflakes and Flowers, where smiles tend to trump strictness.

Still, L.A. Ballet is alive and kicking. It also offers promise, hope and a new season of challenging works -- both classic and commissioned. In keeping with the holiday spirit, then, we're grateful for the company's gifts.

Looseleaf is a freelance writer.

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