

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Christopher Duggan

## A Sugar Rum Cherry of a Treat

by Melissa Strong

Since 2011, [Dorrance Dance](#) has honored the history of tap while exploring possibilities for its future. A unique company of dancers and musicians of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities, Dorrance Dance recognizes that tap is an inherently subversive art form. While this may not sound particularly festive, the company wowed me at [Penn Live Arts in 2021](#), and I expected to enjoy this year's performance. *The Nutcracker Suite* delivered. Not only were the music and dancing terrific, but this percussive and jazzy take infused the holiday classic with new flavors.

Musician Aaron Marcellus kicked things off as the vocalist and emcee for the opening number. Inspired by the music of Ella Fitzgerald, *An Ella'quent Holiday Swing* (2021) combines live music with virtuoso tap dancing. Although the company performed this during its last visit, the improvisation that is central to both tap dancing and jazz music made it a different experience. Michael Jellick accompanied Marcellus on piano, and dancers Jabu Graybeal and Claudia Rahardjanoto played drums and bass. Rahardjanoto, artistic director Michelle Dorrance, and dancer Addi Loving sang backup as Marcellus glided through original arrangements of tunes that Fitzgerald made famous. All the while, colored lines shone against the fringed metallic curtain backdrop.

Dancers wearing festive street clothes entered and exited as the musicians played, the stage miked for the audience to hear the dancers tapping. Christopher Broughton slid onstage from the wings for an energetic tap solo, and Carson Murphy, Maddie Murphy, and Veronica Simpson's complex footwork created patterns to engage viewers' eyes and ears. Hip-hop dancers Ephrat "Bounce" Asherie and Matthew "Megawatt" West performed a breaking sequence to Marcellus's scat singing and vocal freestyling. Elizabeth Burke tapped out deeply intricate rhythms, and Marcellus joined in the dancing before closing out the section with "Jingle Bells."

A clever riff on Clement Clarke Moore's famous holiday poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" provided a segue into *The Nutcracker Suite*. This version imagines a Jazz Age *Nutcracker* in which Clara is the lone lousy dancer in a world wild for the Lindy Hop, and the Rat King

recalls “a mob boss from hell whose only weakness is cheese.” The fringed metallic curtain rose to reveal an early twentieth-century Christmas party complete with a tree, gifts, and Art Deco light fixtures. Set to Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s arrangement of Tchaikovsky’s iconic ballet score, *The Nutcracker Suite* is a fresh take on a classic that everyone can enjoy, from families with little ones to tap and jazz enthusiasts to *Nutcracker* purists.

Dance companies often ignore gender for certain *Nutcracker* roles; for instance, female dancers routinely portray mice and soldiers, while male dancers ham it up as Mother Ginger. Dorrance Dance takes this a step further with a female Drosselmeyer, though I later learned she was subbing for Warren Craft. Played by Dorrance herself in a cape and an eye patch, this worked surprisingly well. Dorrance used mime and gesture to convey a warm relationship between Drosselmeyer and his favorite niece Clara (Gisele Silva). Silva brought wide-eyed innocence to the role, but it would have been interesting to see the company’s earlier version with a male dancer as Clara.

*The Nutcracker Suite* is brisk and abridged, like Ellington’s 1960 brilliant and under-heard recording. It hits familiar plot points with inventiveness and humor. We see dancing dolls, a nutcracker that becomes a prince, and a battle with rodents before a visit to the Land of the Sweets. Yet an acapella sand dance replaces the traditional ballerina snowflakes. There is also a rodent piñata and a giant rat puppet manipulated by five dancers. Josette Wiggan shone as the lead Sugar Rum Cherry, and Graybeal partnered her well as the Cavalier. For Ellington’s version of “Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy,” Murphy, Murphy, and Simpson joined Wiggan. Their fringed flapper dresses fit the music’s nod to classic burlesque music as Wiggan’s long legs kicked skyward. Other highlights include the interpretation of the flower dance and Rahardjanoto’s performances of “Chinoiserie (Chinese Dance)” and Mother Ginger.

Clara returns home asleep to wonder if her adventure was a dream. But *The Nutcracker Suite* is real, and it’s a sugar rum cherry of a treat. Dorrance—along with co-creators Hannah Heller and Wiggan and the other artists who contributed choreography and solo improvisation—realizes a dance interpretation of Ellington and Strayhorn’s arrangement of Tchaikovsky. The result is a more distinctly American *Nutcracker* than traditional versions. After all, jazz and tap are American art forms shaped by Black artists and Black culture, while *The Nutcracker* originated in Europe like ballet itself. Here’s hoping *The Nutcracker Suite* becomes an annual tradition.

*The Nutcracker Suite*, Dorrance Dance, Penn Live Arts, Dec. 8-9.

By Melissa Strong  
December 29, 2023