

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: ContempraDance

Nuts for All Tastes

By Whitney Weinstein

The Nutcracker brings together family and emphasizes tradition. In Philadelphia this year, audiences have the opportunity to experience the holiday classic in some alternative ways. *Nutcracker 1776* slightly alters Tchaikovsky's musical tale while the *Philly Nutt Crak-Up* really gets nutty, appealing to those who sleep through visions of the old-school Sugar Plum Fairy. Yet familiar aspects remain in these unique productions, like the young female lead, a loving uncle, dolls, toys, a large Christmas tree, and the pointed index finger of the Chinese dancers in Act Two. Philly offers several Nuts: the city's own assorted collection.

From jazzy voguing, to a dark and dreamy Uncle Franklin Rosselmeyer, to James Brown routines, *Philly Nutt Crak-Up* has been entertaining audiences for 10 years, and it made its debut in the Keswick Theater this December. The audience instantly recognized that this was no traditional Nut when an exasperated Sugar Plum mimed a cigarette break and later emerged rapping, with tights rolled up and pointe shoes gone. ContempraDance Theatre prides itself in creating a nontraditional atmosphere, encouraging applause and cheers for this *Nutcracker*, inspired by culture unique to Philadelphia. Examples? How about the Chinatown's kung-fu fightin' men or the South St. Rocky-Ettes, with members who resemble homeless, goth, and mellowed individuals tappin' down South Street on any given day. If that's not enough, the male lead was referred to as the City Cheesesteak Guy.

When I arrived to see *Nutcracker 1776*, smiling faces from the Rock School for Dance Education greeted me in the lobby. I tiptoed into the show and almost forgot that I was watching a Colonial version of *The Nutcracker* as bright lights and party girls and boys illuminated the stage. On closer examination, I noticed the set resembled a log cabin, with barrels lining the walls and Christmas presents in more muted colors of beiges and greens. The Christmas gathering was set in the Olde City Tavern Inn, a meeting area where men such as Jefferson and Washington came to feast and write of freedom. Benjamin Franklin presented the magical *Nutcracker* to Abby--who

replaced the standard Clara for the evening--in an explosion of sparks. Lady Liberty furthered the patriotic tone with Stars and Starlets, who could bouré and cartwheel as smaller dancers energetically flipped backwards and upside-down across the stage. Holding sparkling gold stars high, dancers en pointe majestically paraded the stage in linear patterns. Red, white, and blue swirled through the space as mice entered from the back of the house and sides of the stage to battle toy soldiers. A gripping battle--swords clanked, American flags waved, and Colonial attire adorned the characters. I found myself back in middle school history class, wondering if the soldiers in the Battle of Trenton also had mouse tails.

The second half of *Nutcracker 1776* seemed to neglect creative revisions , until the appearance of some renamed characters. Ben Franklin and Lady Liberty returned for the grand finale to gather the cast and set off fireworks. The dancers were very well rehearsed and Abby, in particular, marched her way across the stage with precision and confidence. Though talented, the performers were mostly young children, and the feeling in the theater reflected this: a little angel tripped on her long costume, parents took videos, siblings squirmed in their seats, cameras clicked.

The Nutcracker is a warm, seasonal treat. Snow flurries into our thoughts, sweet treats intrigue our senses, and nostalgia for our own nutty experiences affects our demeanor. Not only is the show a highly respected tradition, but it is also enjoyable! With new twists on an old favorite, Philadelphia offers shows that rejoice in ever-changing similarities and differences. This holiday season, there is a Nut for every taste.

Philly Nut Crack-Up, ContempraDance Theatre, Keswick Theater, December 15-16; *Nutcracker 1776*, The Rock School, The Merriam Theater - December 1, Centennial Hall - December 8-9.

By Whitney Weinstein
December 26, 2012