

by MARC WHEELER on December 17, 2019  
in DANCE, THEATER-LOS ANGELES

### TRIPLE-CRACKED

*It wouldn't be the holidays without The Nutcracker ballet, a wondrous fantasia limited in scope only by imagination — or, more practically, budget. This year I attended three separate SoCal productions: L.A.'s own American Contemporary Ballet's sparkling condensed jewel and Santa Fe Ballet's disappointing tour both pared down the work, while Long Beach Ballet blew it up larger than the Stahlbaum family Christmas tree.*

*Originally based on Alexandre Dumas's version of E.T.A. Hoffman's novella "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," the famous ballet — which premiered in St. Petersburg in 1892 under the direction of Ivan Vzevolozhsky with compositions by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky — has become a seasonal treat for audiences of all ages. With original choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, this family-friendly classic has spawned countless adaptations since its popular rise in the 1960s, featuring many recognizable numbers, including the stately "March," the Russian-themed "Trepak," and the iconic music box-chiming "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy."*

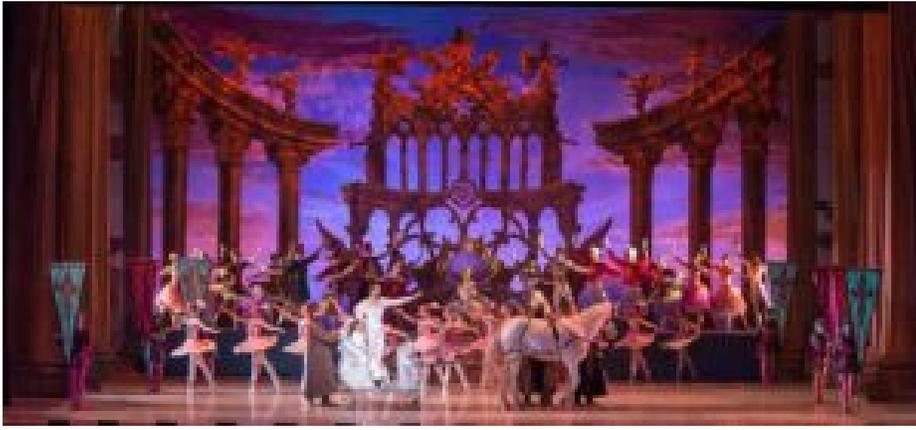
*While companies and choreographers often put their own spin on the work — [Royal Ballet](#), [Joffrey](#), [Wheeldon](#), [SF Ballet](#), and [Balanchine](#) to name a few — the traditional story is simple: On Christmas Eve in a quaint German town, the Stahlbaum family is hosting a party for their many guests. As the Stahlbaum children, Clara and Fritz, are playing, their mysterious Uncle Drosselmeyer, a magician, arrives and shows off his latest inventions, including a beautiful nutcracker he imparts to Clara. Later that night, Clara returns from her bed to grab her new prized possession. Following a quick shut-eye, she awakens to a magical world in which she's whisked away by the Nutcracker Prince, encountering an army of mice, a beautiful dance between the Snow Queen and King, and many worldly enchantments in the Sugarplum Kingdom. While this Christmas adventure eventually comes to an end, her childlike imagination — and ours — lives on.*



*"The timelessness of Tchaikovsky's beloved holiday classic can be found in this majestic production. If there's one Nutcracker you must see, this is it."*

If there's a definitive production of *The Nutcracker*, Long Beach Ballet's holiday spectacular may very well be it. If it's not, it's certainly what a person — whether or not they've ever even seen the work — could imagine a definitive production being. Set in the giant Terrace Theater at the Long Beach Performing Arts Center, it has everything for which one could hope: incredible dancers, elaborate sets and costumes, special effects, and more. For crying out loud, a literal horse walks across the stage, folks — come on!

Now in its 37th season, this annual in-house production — conceived, choreographed, and artistically directed by David Wilcox, with additional choreography by Terri Lewis — has slightly morphed over the years, yet consistently offers Southern California audiences a full-blown holiday extravaganza that one could love, cherish, and return to year after year.



A vast creative team both on- and off-stage come together to make the holiday magic happen. The scenery is gorgeous, lit dramatically by Jared A. Sayeg, taking us from the Stahlbaum family's parlor — featuring an (increasingly) extravagant Christmas tree — to the celestial realms of the

Land of Sweets (set design by Elliott Hessayon, Rex Heuschkel, and Scott Shaffer). Costumes (Adrian Clarke, Donna Dickens, Ann de Farra, Hilde Byrne, Cheryl Cartwright, and Debi Humphries) range from terrifying mice to worldly wonders. Mike Costa's technical direction and John Bordeaux's pyrotechnics add additional flare to an already boisterous production. The 58-member Long Beach Ballet Orchestra, under the baton of Dr. Roger Hickman, gives Tchaikovsky's score the lushness it deserves.

The cast is enormous, featuring tiny tots and seasoned adults alike putting their best selves forward to ensure a wondrous experience. Dana Pugh is hilarious as the maid, while Evan Swenson and Hailey Pemberton deliver a fairy-tale gentility as the Snow King and Queen. As lively Russian dancers, David Block, Julian Sanz, and Brent Shavelle trade leaps and kicks for enthusiastic applause. In the Grand Pas de Deux set to arguably the most romantically rich piece in the score, Seth Orza as the Nutcracker Prince and Sarah Ricard Orza as the Sugarplum Fairy (both appearing courtesy of Pacific Northwest Ballet), command the stage with power and heart.



The timelessness of Tchaikovsky's beloved holiday classic can be found in this majestic production. If there's one *Nutcracker* you must see, this is it.

