

Arts San Antonio 'Nutcracker' last but not least

By Jasmina Wellinghoff, For the Express-News :

December 20, 2014

'Tis the season for "The Nutcracker," and several already have been presented since Thanksgiving, but Arts San Antonio smartly waits until the weekend before Christmas to offer its "Nutcracker" treat. And it is a real treat.

Choreographed by the talented [Paul Mejia](#) and performed by his Dallas-based [Mejia Ballet International](#) with the assistance of young dancers from the [San Antonio Metropolitan Ballet](#), the show has all the right ingredients: great dancing, colorful costumes, cute critters and some novel staging elements that enhance the familiar story.

The opening party scene is the usual happy living tableau of adults and children enjoying themselves on Christmas Eve, complete with divertissements brought for the kids by the caped toymaker and Clara's godfather, Drosselmeyer, portrayed by the handsome Antonio Arrebola. In this version, Clara is actually a small child (Nadia Primer) rather than an advanced teen dancer playing a child, as is often the case.

Where Mejia shows his hand as choreographer the best is in the scenes that follow the party. As Clara's dream begins to unfold, the room gently vanishes from the stage, and the Christmas tree starts flashing its lights against a totally black background as Clara, a small white-clad figure, rushes back and forth in wonderment and excitement. This effective visual simplicity soon morphs into a busy battle between mice and rats against the toy soldiers led by the life-size Nutcracker (Roman Mejia), but there is a painterly feel to this melee not seen elsewhere.

Lighting designer and director [Tony Tucci](#) obviously has greatly contributed to the scene.

Equally eye pleasing is the next transformation, which gradually turns the stage into a snowy wonderland inhabited by 16 delicate ballerinas dancing the "Waltz of the Snowflakes." Soon the combination of the music, the falling "snow" and all that fluttering white tulle produces a mesmerizing effect.

Act II doesn't disappoint either. The structure is slightly modified to give star performers [Olga Pavlova](#) and Yevgeni Anfinogenov (Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier) a little more upfront presence, and their final pas-de-deux is also reworked and condensed. Both are performers with great stage presence, and their beautiful lifts fulfill the audience's love of grand ballet moves.

Everyone is entertained by the various ethnic variations, all nicely danced but with no great surprises. However, in this version, the Russian Variation features dancers brandishing

hula hoops and dressed in red-and-white striped costumes a la candy canes, which is all sweet but not as powerful as some recent folk-dance inspired whirlwind Russian numbers.

With a big finale that reassembles the entire cast on stage, this is a fun and festive show to get you in the mood for the holidays.

The last performance of "The Nutcracker" is 2 p.m. Sunday at the [Lila Cockrell Theater](#); tickets, \$29-\$110 plus fees, are available at 210-226-2891, [artssa.org](#) or [ticketmaster.com](#).