

# THE PHOENIX

## Urban cheek

BalletRox's Nutcracker

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**STREET SPORTS:** The Prologue includes Double Dutch rope jumpers.

There are several meanings to the word popular, and BalletRox's *The Urban Nutcracker* satisfies the truest of them, as a production that reflects and includes all kinds of people. The show, which runs through December 16 at John Hancock Hall, incorporates ballet as well as tap, hip-hop, flamenco, Turkish folk dance, swing dance, and street sports. There's magic and mime, doo-wop and snow. The cast members, in all colors, range from pre-schoolers to seniors. And the music bounces between Tchaikovsky and Duke Ellington riffing off Tchaikovsky, with a backstage bass and percussion filling in on rhythm.

*The Urban Nutcracker* resembles its staid, traditional antecedent in many ways, but it seizes on the diversity of the original ballet to provide a platform for the talents of a wider community. David Rottenberg's adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffmann follows the original story, but only just so far. The barely perceptible plot is set in motion when a single mom invites the street magician Drosselmeyer and his frenetic assistant Mini-Meyer to a Christmas party in her apartment.

Played by BalletRox artistic director Anthony Williams, Drosselmeyer sweeps in and produces sleight-of-hand surprises and toys that dance. After the usual contretemps and resolution over the eponymous Nutcracker between Clarice (Ana Bueso) and her bratty brother Omar (Sam Squires, a dynamic trooper who looks about six or seven), Clarice falls asleep. It's her dream that propels all *Nutcracker* ballets into the theater of the imagination.

Clarice's mice prepare to have a picnic on the living-room floor. They're quite harmless though hungry, but when they scare Clarice, Mini-Meyer sprints to the rescue with an oversized Flit gun and a back-up squad of girl guerrillas. After the battle and the defeat of the mice, Mini-Meyer revives the fallen Nutcracker by sprinkling silver dust over him. He emerges as dancer Rick Vigo, to lead Clarice to Fantasy Land. Vigo, for some reason, doesn't stay around, but Drosselmeyer and Mini-Meyer introduce Clarice to the Sugar Plum Fairy (Elizabeth Mochizuki) and get her settled for the entertainment that follows.

As in the first act, the *Urban Nutcracker* divertissements follow the traditional scenario and score, with inspired additions and adjustments to fit the local population. Anthony Williams set most of the dances, with other numbers by head of production Alfonso Figueroa, Jane Allard, Khalid Hill, Sybil Huggins, and leaders of specialty groups. With the help of interpolated Ellington, all the dances project some contemporary flavor.

The most fun was provided by the "Six Rox Riff," otherwise known as Marzipan, with Amanda Bertone shepherding six small children bouncing on blue polka-dotted beach balls. Mother Ginger (Erin Washington) unleashed 10 children in baggy pants and

baseball caps who did a spirited tap routine.

In the Snow scene and the Waltz of the Flowers, the women of the BalletRox company did arrangements of the standard ballet choreography, with jazzy inflections. Alexandra Redelico and a female cohort of two appropriated the Russian acrobatics usually done by men ("Caviar Caper"). Dean de Luna and the Candy Canes morphed into twisting, swiveling hula-hoopers. The Arabian dance of Zultari Gomez and Langston Fishburne was accompanied by four harem girls and a swath of orange chiffon.

Isaac de los Reyes played castanets and did a short solo ("Ritmo Latino"), then disdainfully partnered ballet dancer Christy Williams in Tchaikovsky's Spanish dance. De los Reyes, though one of the most experienced professional dancers in the cast, seemed uneasy about fitting his own style into the mandatory musical fusion. In a challenge dance with tapper Sean Fielder during the Prologue, he never relaxed his flamenco hauteur. He did throw down some impressive footwork, but he seemed to consider himself out of Fielder's class. Fielder easily stayed in the game.

The whole production is introduced by a Prologue that shows off a streetful of good-natured passers-by: Double Dutch rope jumpers, Turkish folk dancers (courtesy of Ahmet Luleci's Collage company), hip-hoppers, and a quartet of doo-wop-singing uncles.

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