

# THE NUTCRACKER

Let me confess from the start that I'm no expert on the ballet. What I do know about the ballet I have learned from working backstage on a couple of occasions and attending some performances in the last few years. The performances could be counted on the fingers of both hands. After all, there aren't that many dance companies that strut their stuff here in Edmonton. My ignorance aside, if I had to describe the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company's presentation of *The Nutcracker* in one word it would have to be: Bravo!

That's a judgement I feel quite confident in expressing since it was echoed all around me at Thursday night's presentation at the Jubilee. I walked away from the performance feeling that the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company had done something very special to the dance, they had destroyed the ballet's snob appeal. The kind of work they present transcends any appeal that has habitually been aimed at the fur and jewels hoi polloi of metropol.

The company brings a rare attitude of joy to its work and a professional discipline that is geared at communicating just that impact to its audience. When in the presence of such an attitude its success is unmistakable and the excitement is a very tangible, almost fleshy, presence, in the auditorium.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company achieved this through a fortuitous combination of several factors; not the least of which was their exceptionally opulent staging of *The Nutcracker*. The costumes and scenery of Jurgen Rose were quite stunning. This was particularly true of the rehearsal scene in the dance studio. A

magical *au vista* scene change exposed a setting, the fragile brilliance of which Degas would have approved. It was a case of art paying homage to art.

The choreography and direction of John Neumeier I'm hardly competent to comment on but I did like his adaptation which turned the dance into a birthday party instead of the usual Christmas setting. It seemed to work quite well, although the opening sequence was overly busy. It set the stage for some quite unnecessary scene-stealing and peripheral up-staging on the part of some dancer-actors who were given coy but extraneous bits of business to accomplish.

About the music, I'm even more in the dark, although even a musical clod like I was able to recognize a few familiar passages which seemed well enough rendered by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra under the baton of James Keene. There wasn't much question that Tchaikovsky's spirit was alive and well and in the presence of old and loving friends who cherished their acquaintance with the master.

The dancing? There were times when I thought that gravity just wasn't working properly under the Jubilee stage Thursday night, but that was no surprise, that's what one expects in the ballet. What was a surprise and pleased me exceptionally was the dramatic flair shown by some members of the company. Dramatic flair is not something that one expects from dancers.

Bonnie Wyckoff took the honours in her most engaging portrayal of Maria, the birthday girl being led through a balletic garden of strange and wondrous delights. Dramatically she was enchanting as the young girl and quite exquisite as she revelled in the glories of attaining the

promise of her first pair of pointe shoes. Lyrical in her ecstasy, Miss Wyckoff never lost the innocence of the child that loved the dance and all of its incumbent charms.

Terry Thomas was captivating as the ballet master, Drosselmeier. He has a keen sense of the comic and the austerity of the mime artist. It proved to be a winning combination when added to his agility as a dancer. A small man, Mr. Thomas nonetheless danced and partnered with unexpected strength. On the whole he was a light hearted guide to the balletic initiate and a stern taskmaster to those students who would toil in the vineyards of the cruelest art. His eccentric bend was redeeming and never dulled his accomplished sense of the dance which he constantly revealed with his satiric scalpel.

I was slightly disappointed in the stars of the show, Craig Sterling and Laurel Benedict. They struck a rather sour note when Drosselmeier showed them off in the grand pas de deux. Unquestionably they danced well, perhaps even extremely well but they danced alone and not with each other. Oh, they touched and did the lifts together and what have you, it's just that there were two egos on the stage and that thwarted the possibility of any artistic partnership. It would seem that in a pas de deux the sum of the parts should be more than the whole. In this case it was decidedly less which was a poor example to hold up before Maria and the audience.

Kimberly Graves was most winning as the Chinese Girl partnered by Terry Thomas in a coy but polished sequence in Maria's dream.

There are a lot of good dancers in the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company and there was

good work to be seen everywhere. There was obviously a lot of promise in the corps and *The Nutcracker* was the perfect ballet to show them off. It occurred to me that there is a similarity between this dance and the player scene in *Hamlet*. *The Nutcracker* is almost an "inside" dance; it is a dance about the dance. The magic of this dance lies in exposing the magic of the dance. A more experienced critic could probably render the entire ballet down into a major treatise on the dance itself, taking full

measure of its scope and delivering it within the narrative line of *The Nutcracker* itself. The whole affair is like a rosetta stone which reveals a hitherto hidden world of art.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company did the magic proud and surely worked that magic on others like myself. I've been transformed into a confirmed ballet fan and that has to take some pretty powerful magic. Like I said: Bravo! Thank God the Canada Council knows where to spend its money.

Walter Plinge



theatre lives

*L'Effet des Rayons Gamma sur les Vieux-Garçons* by Paul Zindel, translated and adapted by Michel Trambly. Directed by Jean-Marcel Duciaume at Theatre Francais d'Edmonton, 8406-91 rue. Feb. 1, 2, 3, and 8, 9, 10th. Students \$1.25. Tickets at the door or phone the box office at 467-3626. En francais.

*The Fantasticks* directed by Peter Feldman at the Walterdale Playhouse. Saturday, February 9 till 16. Curtain at 8:30. Tickets are available at the Bay for \$2.50 except Friday and Saturday when they are \$3.00. Address is 11407-107 St. You'll have to scramble for tickets as the seats are few and far between.

*The Country Wife* by Wycherly, directed by John Terfloth, February 6 till February 16. In the new thrust theatre in the Fine Arts Building. A restoration farce of zest and high theatre. University Students are admitted free if you can get a ticket from Room 3-146. Nightly at 8:30 EXCEPT FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8 at 9:00 P.M.

easy on the ears

John Antle in concert at Garneau Church Hall (84th Ave. and 112 St) this Saturday and Sunday night (Feb. 9 and 10). John, a singer, songwriter, sometimes satirist, is originally from Portland, but has gained quite a following in Edmonton. Starts at 8:00 p.m. Admission is \$1.25; 50 cents for Edmonton Folk Club members.

Paul Hann, Richard White, Robert Peterson, John Antle, and Bev Ross will be featured at a singer-songwriter workshop at the Edmonton Folk Club tonight (Tues.) beginning 8:00 p.m. No admission charge, though donations are appreciated. Held at Garneau Church Hall (84th Ave and 112 St).

The Voice/Opera Division of the Department of Music will present a one-act version of Bluck's *Orfeo and Euridice* and will present the premiere performance of *Sganarelle* by Violet Archer, Professor of Music. Tickets from the Department of Music office, Fine Arts 3-82, and at the door.

poetry reading

Earl Martin, author of *A Poet Goes to War* will be reading from his works at a Forum, Thursday, Feb. 7 at 8:00 p.m. in TL-11. Admission is only one dollar.

Friday, Feb. 8, Susan Musgrave, the fine Victoria poetess and author of *Songs of the Sea-Witch*, will be reading from her works at the Centennial Library.

for the eyes

University Art Gallery and Museum, Feb. 3-28, 1974. 1. Don Mabie and Wendy Toogood - Quilts and Drawings. 2. Jacques Hnizdovsky - an exhibition of thirty woodcuts by the Ukrainian master printmaker. The University Art Gallery is located directly south of the Faculty Club on Campus, just off Saskatchewan Drive.

Edmonton Film Society presents the classic western comedy "Destry Rides Again" starring Marlene Dietrich and James Stewart. 8 p.m. on Feb. 4 in Tory Lecture Theatre. Season ticket to the comedy series is now \$3 for students. Also on the program: a thrilling chapter from the 1934 serial, "Vanishing Shadow".

Abstract paintings by ten "new" Canadian artists, five from the East, five from the West. Although each finds personal solutions, they are unified by a common fascination with colour and surface. The artists are David Bolduc, K.M. Graham, Paul Hutner, Daniel Solomon, of Toronto; Milly Ristvedt of Shanty Bay, Ontario; D.T. Chester of Regina; Robert Christie of Saskatoon; Harold Fiest of Calgary; and Anne Clarke-Darrah and Graham Peacock of Edmonton. At the Edmonton Art Gallery.

## Don't Look Now

Nicolas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now*, currently playing at the Garneau, is something of a mindblower. I saw it on a Friday night, looking for a bit of relaxation at the end of the week, and the effect of the film really didn't sink in until much later in the evening, when I started thinking about it. The more I thought about it, the more I appreciated the scope of Roeg's brilliance.

The plot concerns a young English couple, the Baxters, the husband being a restorer of works of art, most notably pieces of sculpture. The couple live in the English countryside, and the film opens with a very pastoral scene of their two children playing in the grounds with the early morning sun sparkling on the dew.

Their daughter is playing with a ball, and we see it fall into a slough. Switch to the house, where mother (Julie Christie) is reading and father (Donald Sutherland) is studying slides of old churches. The first bizarre note comes in at this point when Baxter sees a red stain slowly spread over the film, but this is forgotten within moments as a chilling scream shatters the morning stillness and we follow Baxter to find the girl drowned, slowly floating to the top of the water.

Well, the best way to forget is a working holiday in Venice, where Mr. Baxter can restore the church he had been studying and Mrs. Baxter can calm her frayed nerves.

Unfortunately, things don't work out quite as planned. No sooner have they set foot in Venice than omens start coming. In a restaurant, the Mrs.

encounters a blind mystic who tells her that her deceased daughter is with them, and is trying to give them a message to leave the city. The mystic also reveals that Baxter, although he does not know it, is gifted with second sight.

Baxter scoffs at these remarks, but after a couple of near misses with death inside the church he is restoring, becomes a bit more careful. He sees his wife off to England for a short visit, and on the way back from the airport, appears to see the mystic and her sister with his wife on a funeral barge, dressed in mourning. He calls after his wife, but no one else appears to have seen the barge. The warm sunny Venice at the start of the film evolves into a chilling, misty, macabre Venice, accentuated by the occasional sighting of a small figure wearing the same clothes the little girl wore when she drowned. All the while, the mystic keeps on telling them they are being warned to leave Venice. The suspense slowly grows, with elements of the supernatural crawling out of the crumbling stonework until the slashing climax and the stunning visual denouement.

In the role of John Baxter, the husband, Donald Sutherland comes up with a blend of outward skepticism, the strong reassurer to comfort his wife, while inside, the nagging doubt planted in his mind grows ever larger, till he is driven to the verge of paranoia. Sutherland has always been a good character actor, be it Hawkeye Pierce in *MASH* or the detective in *Klute*, but in this role, he has reached deep and used his talents with a

great deal of diligent effort.

Christie, as the wife, Laura, has come a long way from the winsome, mystical maiden of Fahrenheit 451 and fits the role of the distraught mother very well, grasping at any tiny straw of hope that her daughter wants to contact her, taking every little incident to heart, trying to convince her husband to believe in her.

Adapted from a story by Daphne du Maurier, the film requires a great deal of close scrutiny because Roeg has thrown in foreshadowing and plot twists by the caseload, it is the type of film where the deeper you delve, the more you get out of it. There are some stock scenes that are unusual in cinema today, like a married couple making love on a bed. Some directors prefer to stick to unusual couples making love in unusual places, and usually throw in these scenes for the lack of anything better. Roeg uses this tastefully torrid scene to show the regaining of confidence between the two, the establishment of a closeness, to show the sharing of a very deep sorrow.

Roeg's direction uses sharp transitive sequences, frightening night shots, and generally excellent work to keep the effects of this haunting drama drilling into the brain with an ever increasing pace.

It is certainly an evening to stimulate the mind, although I wouldn't recommend it unless you are prepared to do some heavy thinking, and it is a sure fire winner for those of you into the occult and the supernatural trip.

Satya Das