

Light and Bright: Festival Ballet's Nutcracker full of joy and hope



Festival Ballet: Kobe Atwood Courtney as The Nutcracker.
(Photo: Liza Voll)

Festival Ballet Providence has reimaged its annual production of *The Nutcracker*, and the results will be the start of a delightful holiday tradition for families in southern New England. This production was given its world premiere at the show's new home stage, the Veterans Memorial Auditorium.

The last few years have seen numerous disruptions and changes to Festival Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Costumes were stolen in 2016. Festival's "Nutcracker Dog" Archie retired after 19 years on stage. COVID in 2020 led to the entire production being abbreviated and streamed online. Treating all this uncertainty behind the curtain as an opportunity, Festival Ballet Providence Director Kathleen Breen Combes and Artistic Curator Yury Yanowsky decided to revamp the entire show with new costumes, new sets, and new choreography.

Festival opens their new version with Herr Drosselmeyer in his workshop building the titular nutcracker and sprinkling the toy with magic. The story then moves to Clara, a young girl, on the night of her family's Christmas party. Herr Drosselmeyer, who is a family friend and magician, comes to the party and delights both young and old with his mechanical marvels and wonderful gifts. The nutcracker is gifted to Clara and, after the party is over, she sneaks down from her bedroom and falls asleep on a sofa

by the tree.



Festival Ballet: Mamuka Kikalishvili and Eugenia Zinovieva as Snow King and Queen. (Photo: Liza Voll)

Suddenly, Clara shrinks down to the size of her nutcracker doll and the room is filled with giant mice and rats. A battle begins, with the nutcracker fighting the Rat King and his minions. Festival's 2021 battle is filled with fun and humor as combatants launch food at each other and the wounded are removed by an efficient rodent medical corps. Just when it looks as if the nutcracker might be defeated, Clara saves the day and distracts the Rat King allowing the nutcracker a chance to overcome his foe. The overly-dramatic death of the Rat King made his passing more humorous than scary. The nutcracker transforms into a handsome young prince and takes Clara away from her home to an enchanted snow-swept forest where they are welcomed by the Snow King and Queen who provide Clara with gifts fit for a princess, ending the first act.

The second act takes place in the Land of Sweets where various characters dance and perform for the nutcracker-turned-prince and his companion Clara. These dances include cultural homages to Russia, Spain, Arabia, and China; Festival put time and effort into making all the dances show off these cultures in a dignified manner. The Chinese "Tea" dance especially has been reimagined with support from the Chinese community. The Sugar Plum Fairy (one of the sweets) and her partner dance a grand *pas de deux* displaying great strength and control throughout.

New to Providence's production is the inclusion of Mother Ginger, a giant gingerbread house bursting with young dancers; the athletic prowess of some of the little dancers stole the show. The production doesn't just have children in it as a gimmick: they are integral to the cast, well employed as guests at the party, snowflakes in the winter, and propelling Clara and her Prince through the Land of Sweets.



Festival Ballet: Nina Yoshida and Kobe Atwood Courtney as Snow Queen and King.
(Photo: Liza Voll)

Festival's Clara was played by teenager Charlotte Seymour at the December 19 performance reviewed. Using a younger dancer means that the Act I *pas de deux* sometimes performed by Clara is given to adult dancers. The strength of Seymour's dancing and her delight in the role shine through, making it easy for all the aspiring ballerinas in the audience to believe in Clara's adventures, wondering with her about what was real and what was imagined.

Kobe Atwood Courtney danced the role of the nutcracker with powerful jumps and strong acting skills. In Act II he entertainingly relives, in pantomime, the adventures of the battle against the rodents and joins in the Russian Trepak dance.

Herr Drosselmeyer is often portrayed as mysterious or frightening, but in this production he is more of a "fun uncle" creating an opportunity for adventure. Unlike in many productions, Drosselmeyer is a presence throughout Act II as he occasionally guides the couple, watching dances as he stands protectively nearby. Drosselmeyer's final action is in the show's penultimate moments to set things all back in order.

Much traditional Christmas fare is, in truth, rather depressing, almost like watching a television marathon of *Little House on the Prairie*, making you plod through four acts of unhappiness for the payoff in the final few minutes. This production is happy and joyful from curtain to curtain, making it a perfect diversion in uncertain times. It's refreshing to see a show that can be readily appreciated and enjoyed by adults and children of any age. Light and bright, Festival Ballet's *Nutcracker* is filled with youth and hope, a timeless tale made more fitting for our time.

The Nutcracker performed by Festival Ballet Providence,

<https://festivalballetprovidence.org/2021-2022-season/the-nutcracker/>, at Veterans Memorial Auditorium. 1 Avenue of the Arts, PVD. Tickets: <https://www.thevetsri.com/events/detail/the-nutcracker-21> or telephone (401)421-ARTS (2787). Through Dec 26, 2021. Run time 115 minutes. Handicap accessible. COVID protocols in effect: proof of vaccination required for age 12 and up, masks required for age 2 and up.



Festival Ballet: Mamuka Kikalishvili as The Nutcracker, Joshua Tuason as Mother Ginger, Charlotte Seymour as Clara, and Students of Festival Ballet Providence School as Polichinelles.