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The holiday staple is served warm

Ballet Pacifica safely sticks with tradition in its new 'Nutcracker.'

By **LAURA BLEIBERG**

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At times charming, at other moments dutiful, Ballet Pacifica's new "Nutcracker" is a bridge for a company undergoing extended transition.

To distort an old saw, there's still no "there" at Ballet Pacifica. Two years after director Molly Lynch resigned, this is a ballet company with everything in place except professional dancers. "The Nutcracker" must go on, though, especially for the 150 children of the Ballet Pacifica Academy (not to mention their parents).

Artistic director Ethan Stiefel chose to replace BP's most recent "Nutcracker" (by Lynch) with new choreography by Brian

Reeder, a former dancer with American Ballet Theatre. Stiefel also imported the young professionals of American Ballet Theatre Studio Company and, voilà, the company's unbroken 38-year "Nutcracker" streak was salvaged.

Reeder's budding choreographic career has featured some irreverent past work. This assignment, however, was for a traditional "Nutcracker," and on that he delivered. There were little glimmers of his gentle wickedness; maybe next time Reeder will allow his imagination freer rein.

Reeder did serve Piotr Tchaikovsky's musical cues and lyricism, though, which is always critical, notwithstanding an overly hyped entrance for the Cavalier.

The production used a recording of the score that zoomed.

Reeder's other key assignment was to showcase the children, and he raised the usual kiddie dances up a notch.

The party scene proceeded through the usual gift-giving, tree-lighting and champagne toasts. There was a might too much aimless standing around at the sides of the stage. Still, it was a Christmas from a Hallmark TV special: Mothers and sons promenaded, followed by daughters and fathers. Drosselmeyer (Mark Olson) was

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mysterious but not scary. Two rambunctious teen-agers disrupted the adults' march, but on the second musical signal for pandemonium they polka-ed around the crowd, rather than through it. That imp Fritz (David Pisors) was an annoyance, but not the terror he often is.

The Merlittons variation couldn't have been cuter with the addition of tots in lamb outfits, threatened by two wolves.

Reeder adeptly stamped each duet and solo with clear, defining movement themes. The Chinese dancer (academy student Danielle Schulz) showed off pointe work with crisp attack; the Dew Drop solo (Allison Miller of Studio Company) was a cavalcade of turns; the Snow Queen and King (Isabella Boylston and Cory Stearns, both of Studio) shared a duet of regal classicism. Clara (bright and eager student Jordan Hammond) made her mark through high, nicely held arabesques.

The Arabian duet (Boylston and Stearns again) looked wan, however, built mostly on gymnastics and nose-touching leg extensions.

The students were notably well-rehearsed, thanks to school director Lorin Johnson, associate director John Gardner and ballet mistress Amanda McKerrow, who also deserved kudos for key choreographic additions, such as the fine snow scene, battle

scene and waltz of the flowers. The students were actually more relaxed on opening night than most of the Studio Company members, but they, too, will certainly grow comfortable in the ballet as the run continues through Christmas Eve.

The bright, shiny exceptions among the company members were Leann Underwood as Sugar Plum Fairy and Eric Tamm as her Cavalier. Underwood, only 16, possessed special poise and willowy, expressive arms. She connected all the steps and gestures of this well-known dance with a freshness that made it feel like an inevitable response to the music, rather than an athletic test with which to impress us. Like Underwood, Tamm also is blessed with natural physical ability, but he used it to serve his partner, the ballet and the music rather than as a way to win applause.

Another dancer to watch: student Toshiro Abley, who brought a similar resilience and energy to his role as the Nutcracker Prince.

The first act still looked sadly bare, as Reeder and company made do with Cliff Faulkner's original set pieces. They're fanciful enough, but too spare, and the Christmas tree with its adjoining banquet table look as though they were swiped from some office party. At least the tree grew to an appropriate hugeness. Lighting designer Don Guy filled in the space with a changing

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rainbow of colors on the backdrop.

All in all, most everyone hit the high notes without major calamity, and that's another thing to be thankful for, Tiny Tim.

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lbleiberg@ocregister.com

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