

BalletRox's 'Urban Nutcracker'

The Boston Globe

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | December 16, 2004

Just can't get enough of dancing toy soldiers and waltzing flowers? BalletRox's "Urban Nutcracker" doesn't forgo the old chestnut entirely, but in this edgy production, Tchaikovsky's familiar score often segues into Duke Ellington, and young Clara is a sweet inner-city kid named Clarice.

The brainchild of choreographer and BalletRox founder Anthony Williams, who danced most of the major male roles in "The Nutcracker" during his decades-long professional ballet career, "Urban Nutcracker" mixes classical ballet with contemporary dance, hip-hop, jazz, swing, and tap in a vibrantly irreverent, yet surprisingly moving, visual collage.

Set in modern Boston, "Urban Nutcracker" tells the story of Clarice and her brother, who live with their single mom. The Prologue, set at Downtown Crossing, introduces all the different dance styles, as well as two African drummers, and a doo-wop group assembled by the G-Clefs' Ilanga.

It's there that the family meets Drosselmeyer, whose magic gift launches the ballet's fantasy -- only this time, Drosselmeyer comes with a Chaplinesque sidekick, Minimeyer, played by the talented modern dancer Yoel Cassel, currently working with Julie Taymor's "Pinnocchio."

The production features dancers of all skill levels and backgrounds, including more than 40 children, a cadre of aspiring young professionals, and some impressive guest artists.

Ramon Thielen of the Dance Theatre of Harlem returns for the third consecutive year as the Cavalier, and Ana Lobe, formerly of the National Ballet of Cuba, makes her debut in the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Local luminaries include Khalid Hill, who danced in Savion Glover's Broadway hit "Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk," break-dancing virtuoso Liem Nguyen, and Dr. Michael Shannon, who reprises his role as Drosselmeyer.

For Williams, the artistic director of Ballet--Rox, "Urban Nutcracker" is a way to give back to the community. Williams, who was Boston Ballet's first African American dancer, has danced with such ballet luminaries as Fonteyn, Nureyev, and Baryshnikov: "All that I learned from them is part of me," he says, "and I'm passing the torch on."

Williams says the production not only provides a performing showcase for the students at his Jamaica Plain School of Dance but also offers a venue for a diverse audience reflective of the multiracial character of the city. "It's not about the choreography so much -- though that's important -- it's just the communal feeling of everyone coming together," Williams says. "There's not a division between audience and stage."

Williams calls his show "a United Nations of Nutcrackers," a production he believes inner-city kids can relate to easier than the traditional Victorian one.

"It's a real mix -- the audience, dancers, a mix of dance styles, a mix of music, sort of like a big stew," he says. "But this all came together with the spices just right." ■