

## DANCE REVIEW

### 'Urban Nutcracker' is a nice twist

By Thea Singer, Globe Correspondent, 12/13/2003

BalletRox's "Urban Nutcracker" may be different in intent from other versions of the holiday classic, but what makes it sing (or not) is the same: the quality of the dancing. And therein lie the surprises of this contemporary take on the traditional E.T.A. Hoffmann tale.

The aim of "Urban Nutcracker," as defined by creator Anthony Williams, is to open up the traditional story to people of all colors and multiple styles of dance. Hence the vocabulary of the show is multilingual: it's about 50 percent classical ballet (including elements from Boston Ballet founder E. Virginia Williams's original snow scene), and 50 percent contemporary styles (urban tap, hip-hop, flamenco, swing, and more).

The music is mixed: The familiar Tchaikovsky score is supplemented by Duke Ellington's "Nutcracker Suite" and live drumming. And the setting is decidedly modern: The Stahlbaum family has been recast as the Williamses, with children Clarice and Omar, who shop in a Downtown Crossing-type venue and live in a city apartment.

Yet, with a few exceptions, it's the classical dancing -- the 19th-century stuff -- in this most up-to-date of "Nutcrackers" that resonates the loudest and the longest.

Chief among the standouts is Ebony Williams, who dances the part of the Snow Princess and the female lead in Desert Chiffon (the Arabian pas de deux). Williams dances from her gut -- you don't just watch her move, you *feel* her move. Everything she does -- from liquid pirouettes to long extensions into arabesque -- carries a kinesthetic punch. The bevy of Snowflakes that back her up move with a serenity and grace as they trace now half-circles, now lines in the space.

The nine Soldiers here are dressed in camouflage gear and put en pointe (they wear black toe shoes). The conceit lends a wonderful acuity -- and classical line -- to the roles. Matt Ancil in Ginseng Brise (the Chinese dance) executes quick angled beats and buttery

spins. The Marzipan divertissement features pas de chats as crisp as the tambourine taps that accompany them. Larry Trice as Dew Drop Bop-Leif Branch (he takes the place, with five Flowers, of the Dew Drop Fairy) seems to stretch from floor to rafters and spins with abandon. And Ramon Thielen, who's been a member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem since 1998, is an elegant and ribbon-smooth Cavalier to Marisa Soltis's Sugar Plum Fairy. His leaps land soft as dust. Soltis, for her part, is the one classical figure who disappoints: There's a brittleness to her dancing, as if she could crack.

Worthy of mention among the funkier roles are these: Cyrus Brooks, a popping-locking Soldier Doll in Act I who shudders as he shakes; he makes it seem as if the traditional Harlequin role should always be in the contemporary mode. Break dancer Liem Nguyen who spins not only on his head but, remarkably, on his wrist. And the tapping team in Old Lady and the Shoe, particularly, tap choreographer Khalid Hill, Sherice Grant, and the tiny, crackling Jack Humsey (who also plays Omar).

### **BalletRox's Urban Nutcracker**

At: the Strand Theatre, Dorchester, last night (Program repeats today and tomorrow, with some cast changes)

This story ran on page C8 of the Boston Globe on 12/13/2003.  
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