Ballet Review "The Nutcracker" ★★★

'Nutcracker' a warm family treat for holidays

By Bid Smith

One word sums up Robert Joffrey's "The Nutcracker:" and it's not a bad one for the season: warmth.

Now 21 years old, the Joffrey Ballet's version, on view through Dec. 26 at the Auditorium Theatre, may not be as spectacular as some. But it has a glow in every choice and detail, in just about every moment, for that matter, from Oliver Smith's Americans' setting to the creamy, cotton-padded costumes that appear at times to be flimsy. After nearly a quarter-century, this "Nutcracker" isn't always as keen as in its early days. But the revival unveiled Friday seemed a tad sharper than the performance at last year's opening, certainly a welcome holiday treat as scrumptious as any full-length ballet you're likely to encounter year-round.

One joy stemmed from the casting of Yumelia Garcia as opening night Sugar Plum Fairy, bringing a different presence and spirit to this critical role.

She's a strong and in some ways more grounded ballerina at times, until, for instance, she lifts her arms upward in a way that suggests they're not so much moving as allow. Her form is exact and her technique clean and assured, somehow a muscular soloist who sacrifices not a whit of beauty or poise in any sense of that thanks to her self-effacing mien and exuberance. Her long-legged balance on one leg is a stunner.

Mauro Villalkeu continues his rise as one of the troupe's more striking men, buoyant and immaculate, a fine Nutcracker Prince. He and Garcia don't boast much chemistry, at least not yet. But they're what folks in the little settings of this version might have called a handsome couple — a sexy partnership to relish and anticipate.

Taking the somewhat less celebrated role of Snow Queen, star ballerina Victoria Jaiani made it a majestic, silky star turn, leaping backward into the arms of able partner Fabricio Calixto as if she can literally fly. Her Act II "Coffee From Arabia" duet (about the only stretch of this family ballet that hails at a-s-e above with her limber sensuality and awesome extensions.

Relative newcomer Ricardo Santos danced Fritz, the Snow Prince and Tea From China with pure technique and infectious exuberance, less flashy than some predecessors, but refreshingly void of their scene-stealing tendencies, too.

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Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway.
Running time: 2 hours
Tickets: $30-$115; 800-982-2787 or ticketmaster.com

A plum assignment for Joffrey's costume team

By Dawn Rhodes

It's 8 a.m. on a frigid Tuesday and wardrobe assistant Travis Halsey is already hard at work. He has been measuring and cutting fabric at the Joffrey Tower in the Loop for an hour before his boss, department head Marianna Marks, arrives at the building's third-floor workspace.

Any day for the Joffrey Ballet wardrobe team is hectic and palpitating, but this one particularly so. The team has little time to make a new Sugar Plum Fairy costume for the weekend premiere of "The Nutcracker" Joffrey dancers typically rotate roles and share costumes — Yumelia Garcia will portray the character in Friday's premiere.

Victoria Jaiani will dance in the role on Saturday and most frequently throughout the show's run — but the wardrobe team has decided it would be practical to make a second costume exclusively for Jaiani, 25. In eight hours, Marks, Halsey and lead stitcher Lavinia Morozan must stitch the bodice and create the 12-layer tutu — the last task alone normally is given 40 hours of labor.

Halsey begins work on the tutu by drawing rounded (scal-