

Enough for the Kids and the Connoisseurs

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The Nutcracker

Music by **Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

Choreography by **Ib Anderson**

Ballet Arizona with **The Phoenix Symphony**

Orpheum Theater, Phoenix

(602) 281-1096

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\$12.00 - \$102.00

While growing up, *The Nutcracker* at the New York City Ballet was a family holiday tradition. I would be bundled up in my little suit and tie and those Buster Browns that always pinched. “If you think those pinch, think about those poor dancer’s pointe shoes” my mother would counter if I whined. **Ballet Arizona’s** Artistic Director **Ib Anderson** was a member of the company during that time, and I’m certain that I saw him dance in their *Nutcracker* at least once. I had my favorite parts, such as the battle of the soldiers and mice and the dance of the snowflakes, but there were also the points where I would wander off to explore the expanses of Lincoln Center. It’s been over 20 years since I enjoyed this holiday treat, but in an effort to expand my review options, I have decided to give Ballet Arizona’s offering a viewing. This is always a big moneymaker for any ballet company, much like *A Christmas Carol* is for theatre companies. Like *A Christmas Carol*, sometimes commerce gets in the way of creation, and with Ballet Arizona’s production, there are moments of absolute charm and professionalism mixed with moments of substandard performance.

Anderson's choreography is quite engaging with some beautiful images and intricate movement. Whereas the first act was always more interesting to me as a child, here I found the first act filled with a lot of imprecise movement and dependence on cute children over strong dancing. The strongest members of the ensemble in this situation include Clara (**Alyssa Daly**) and the Nutcracker who fights the Mouse King and transforms into the Prince (**Andrew Ranshaw**). The second act is a dance of celebration with several different groups in the kingdom of the Sugar Plum Fairy (**Kanaka Imayoshi**) and her Cavalier (**Michael Cook**), both beautiful and impressive dancers. It is here that amazing choreography and performance intertwines in a way that overcomes the limitations of the first act. Highlights of these dances and dancers include the sinuous offering of the Arabian Coffee couple (**Kenna Draxton** and **Joseph Cavanaugh**) that is the most erotic ballet I have ever seen without any pretense of sexuality, the acrobatic dancing of Chinese Tea (**Paola Hartley** and **James Russell Toth**), and the beautifully synchronized movement of Dew Drop (**Nancy Crowley**) and her waltzing flowers. There are three separate casts that perform this strenuously demanding production, so there may be differences in quality.

Kayoko Dan alternates with **Timothy Russell** in conducting **The Phoenix Symphony**, which presents **Tchaikovsky's** beautiful and internationally recognized music nearly flawlessly. The lush sound of this large orchestra serves to point out how much has been lost in the amplification and digitizing of orchestral presentations of all types. This full performance harkens back to the glory days of orchestral music.

Thomas J. Munn's scenery is impressively realized from the arching wood-toned living room of the family to the Christmas tree made of hand-dyed ostrich feathers that magically grows. **Mark Stanley's** original lighting, here remounted by **Malinda Brommel**, adds a magical element to all of the settings. The costume designs of **Judanna Lynn**, **Angela Kostritzky-Haws**, and **Leonor Texidor** are all beautifully realized. Perhaps it is the fault of the Orpheum Theatre itself, but I have never heard so much thumping during pointe ballet performance.

While the first act is muddy and unfocused, there is still enough for the youngsters to enjoy. Where I tended to become bored in the second as a kid, the restlessness of the children around me did not overwhelm what was the much more superior act. It was at this moment that I came to appreciate the brilliance of this *Nutcracker* as an adult, enjoying the art where once it was only the spectacle that kept me interested.