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Call It Clara's Show

'Nutcracker' lead is a sugarplum

BALLET REVIEW

THE NUTCRACKER. Seiskaya Ballet. Music by Tchaikovsky, choreography by Valia Seiskaya. Friday, Saturday, yesterday and Wednesday at the Staller Center, State University at Stony Brook. Seen Friday

By Letta Tayler
STAFF WRITER

FOR ALL THE pomp and grace of the Seiskaya Ballet's "Nutcracker," which boasts a 70-member cast, lavish sets and sumptuous costumes, it was Sophie Vanier's magical portrayal of Clara that single-handedly stole the show.

Fluid arms, marvelous extension, exquisite placement and legs that never end aren't all that 14-year-old Vanier has going for her. Her expressions and gestures exude excitement and wonder. When she entered her dreamland with her nutcracker-turned-prince on Friday night, she



effortlessly transported us right along with her.

The Nutcracker has been performed with countless variations since it was unveiled in St. Petersburg in 1892. Choreographer Valia Seiskaya's version generally adheres to the original: At a party, Clara receives a Nutcracker from an eccentric toymaker named Herr Drosselmeyer and, after she falls asleep, travels with the doll to a world filled with battling mice, dancing snowflakes, a sugarplum fairy and other fanciful characters.

Clara is in the first blush of adolescence — young enough to believe she's battling a Mouse King but just

old enough to fantasize that her Nutcracker has become a handsome prince. With her little-girl smile and grown-up poise, Vanier fits the role perfectly.

Less convincing was guest artist Jonathan Riseling as the Nutcracker. Despite solid technique, Riseling often looked as if he hadn't quite made the transformation from toy to imaginary prince.

Like most regional ballet directors, Seiskaya, based in St. James, works with a corps whose members range from toddling novices to real pros. For the most part, she deftly tailored her choreography to each dancer's abilities without losing momentum.

Sophie Vanier as Clara and Jonathan Riseling in the title role in "The Nutcracker" at Staller

Her pas de deux for the Sugarplum Fairy and Cavalier skillfully showcased the impressive technique of guest artist Petter Jacobsson, formerly of the Royal Swedish Ballet, and prima ballerina Amy Wilks.

Similarly, Seiskaya provided plenty of high leaps and tight spins for the Snow Queen, ethereally danced by Elizabeth McGrath, and for the Dew Drop, whom Andrea Montechiari transformed into a ball of energy. Sequences for flamenco, Arabian and Asian dancers were elegantly stylized.

However, the party scene at the home of Clara's father, Herr Stahlbaum, wisely featured as much mime as dance, allowing a host of young children to perform without mishap. There were a few close calls, such as when young Cory Stearns, who played Clara's brother Fritz, stuck his tongue out in concentration as he prepared for a pirouette. But Stearns then executed his turn with nary a wobble, earning one of the heartiest rounds of applause of the night.

Children dancing as woolly lambs, snowflakes, angels and acrobats were just as winsome. Their gambols in from of Margaret Piotrowska's vibrant sets of snowscapes and tropical flowers were enough to convince even the crankiest Scrooge that this holiday warhorse is still worth trotting out each year. ■