

New effects add sparkle to fanciful 'Nutcracker'

By DEL McCOLM

"The Nutcracker" is boring, according to author-illustrator Maurice Sendak, but he's never seen the ever-changing Davis production, directed by Bob Bowen.

"It's the same story . . . the same growing tree," Sendak grumbled in a recent newswire interview.

Not so in Davis.

Each year Bowen adds more clever special effects — a hot-air balloon hovering above the Soldiers as they come to the rescue, billows of fog rising during the Waltz of the Snowflakes, a Sugar Plum Fairy in a fanciful purple carriage drawn by pages — in the panoramic production which opened Tuesday at the Veterans' Memorial Theater.

Not only are there more colorful details each year, but it appeared as

if this seventh annual version had more children — all in costume — squeezed on stage than ever before.

The central figure, Clara, was well played by Elaine Camuso as an innately sensible, logical girl in an increasingly illogical world populated by a heroic Nutcracker/Prince (John Westergaard), a Snowflake Queen (Jessica Polito) gently directing a battalion of angels with sparkling wands, and a smiling, gracious Sugar Plum Fairy (Stephanie Roh).

Add battles between mice and soldiers and entertainment by dancing bears, cavorting clowns, Chinese, Spanish and Russian dancers, and you can understand Clara's continual amazement.

It does resemble Alice in Wonderland in concept.

Unlike Alice however, Clara has a handsome companion, the Nutcracker/Prince, portrayed convincingly by Westergaard. The catalyst for her adventures is of course, Clara's brother, Fritz, who was characterized by Chris French not as a dominating bully but as a teasing but essentially kind-hearted friend.

Also original to the annual Davis Parks and Community Services Department production were special little touches of humor:

—A "washerwoman" mopping up the fog so the Snowflakes can dance;

—Yes, a growing Christmas tree, which stretches higher and higher as children exclaim, then it flashes yellow lights, to be topped by green sparkles;

—"Mother" Marshmallow, a wig-

ged Lee Riggs, who lost "her" eight Gumdrops tucked under a hot pink hoop skirt and spun dizzily around trying to retrieve them;

—A roller-skating Clown, who cued the audience with mammoth cards, "Tug of War," "World's Strongest Clown," while cohorts in wigs of green, blue, even rainbow colors, entertained the crowd;

—Pipsqueak (Emily Current) reappearing for her forgotten blanket; and

—Drosselmeyer, portrayed in a broad comedic Teutonic style by Jeff Zenger.

About 200 children appeared costumed on stage as acrobatic Pennywhistle Dancers; splendidly costumed Soldiers, glittering in blue jackets with giant yellow epaulets and buttons, white pants and commanding high hats; glittering

Snowflake dancers sparkling in a light-show while the glittering ball twirled, sending polka-dot lights around the room; and ethnic dancers.

Special mention must be made of the costume crew — Kim Eichorn and Dianna Fenocchio — who managed to dress everyone in incredibly varied and imaginative ways.

There were some minor errors. Tchaikovsky's melodic music was taped and some cues were missed on opening night; the 45-minute production started 15 minutes late, but it was a most enjoyable evening. Every seat was filled for this family show and so were many laps with eager toddlers, who seemed thrilled by the action, lights, color and music.

It even had a Christmas card ending. Decorative lights framed the stage and a projected "Season's Greetings" flashed on an enormous screen as the entire cast came out for a bow, extending from one entrance up through the stage and over to the other entrance.

As Fritz said to Herr Drosselmeyer, "Boy, that Nutcracker you gave Clara sure caused a lot of excitement around here."

"My boy," replied Drosselmeyer, "Wait until next year."

"The Nutcracker" will be repeated today at 7 p.m. and Thursday at 2 p.m. Admission is \$2 for children under 12 years, \$3.50 for adults, and tickets are available at the Parks and Community Services Department, 23 Russell Blvd., and at the box office.

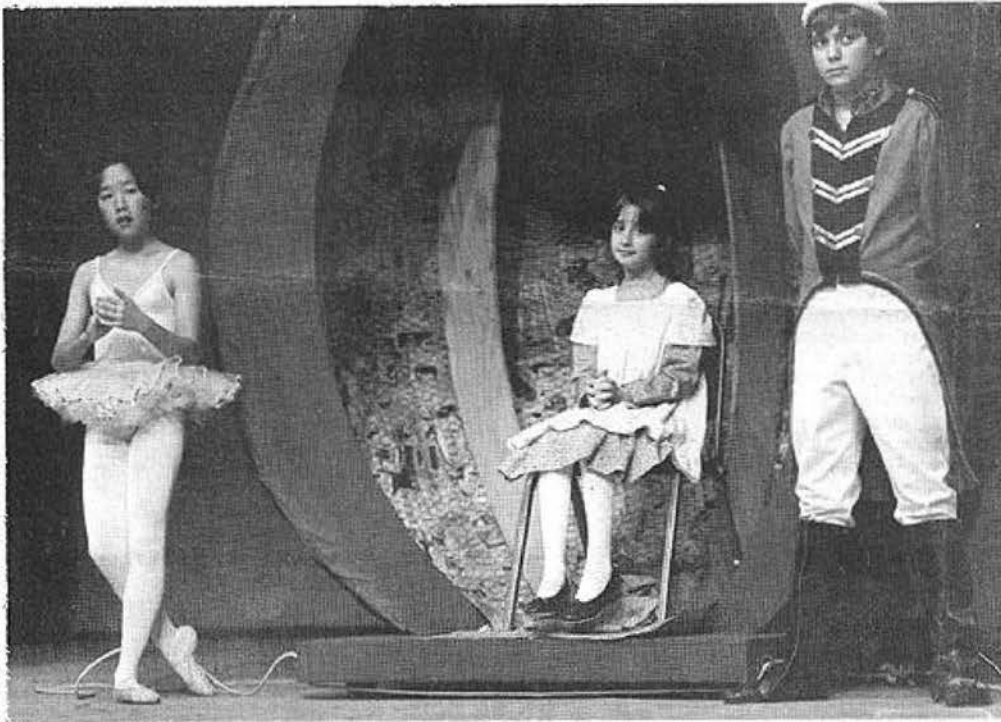


Photo by Ken Browning

Holiday production

The Sugar Plum Fairy (Stephanie Roh) graciously introduces Clara (Elaine Camuso), sitting in the fairy's purple plum, to a fantasy world as the heroic Nutcracker/Prince (John Westergaard) watches.

The Davis Parks and Community Services Department production, which includes a cast of nearly 200 6- to 12-year olds, continues through Thursday at the Veterans' Memorial Theater, 203 E. 14th St.