

DANCE REVIEW

PACIFIC ARTISTS SHOWS HOLIDAY CHARM

The student company performs with energy and skill in a ballet that could become a tradition

By CATHERINE THOMAS
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre's premiere of "La Boutique Fantasque" ("The Magic Toyshop") on Thursday evening promised a family tradition in the making, a break from the "Nutcracker" mold of holiday ballets.

It certainly has the necessary ingredients: a simple, fantasy-laced story, an energetic and youthful ensemble and a classic score to keep even grownups engaged.



BLAINE COVERT

Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre, including Olivia Ancona (left) and Melissa DiMartino, get playful with "La Boutique Fantasque."

Held on the ample stage of Portland Community College's Sylvania Performing Arts Center, the opening-night performance was by no means a grand-scale stage spectacle on the order of "The Nutcracker." But it was a lesson in astute choreography for a student company of aspiring ballet dancers, many of them children. The cast is not virtuosic, but it is extremely well-rehearsed. And although "La Boutique Fantasque" lacked a glittering professional patina, it had charm and vitality to spare.

Based on the 1919 Ballets Russes classic choreographed by Leonide Massine for famed impresario Serge Diaghilev, PABT's version boasts the choreographic stamp of John Clifford, a renowned George Balanchine protégé and ballet master/repetiteur for the George Balanchine Trust.

Clifford's strategy: Keep the pace lively and varied with action-packed divertissements and an extremely brief running time (no longer than an hour from start to finish). Give the little ones in attendance a simple plot to follow. And don't demand technique the dancers are not equipped to handle.

This last strategy proved the most crucial: The young corps rose to the challenges of the character dances and a beautifully patterned grand finale, and Clifford wisely dispensed with the original story's romance between a Toy Soldier and a Ballerina Doll, which demands refined partnering skills.

Clifford plays to the strengths of the 53-member cast, and his pantomimed character sketches are dead-on. We see the ballet through the eyes of two children (winningly played by Kevin Macy Clark and the feisty Caroline Reverman) who are left behind in an enchanted toyshop on the banks of the French Riviera. They are unnoticed by the doddering shopkeeper (Alec Pemberton) and his long-suffering wife (Sarah Ramig), around whom the narrative centers in later scenes. But it's the animated dolls come to life in the first scenes who steal the show, led by the ringleader Pinocchio Doll (Henry Philofsky, utterly assured in comedic mime).

Danced exhibition-style, the divertissements fuel the energy of the ballet and set the stage for the meatier plot to follow. Haley Bentley shines as the ethereal Blue Fairy who leads a bold escape and transforms the woeful shopkeeper's wife into a dreamy debutante.

Given additional length and refined staging, "La Boutique Fantasque" could well become a signature work for this fledgling company. As it stands, it's an endearingly danced introduction to ballet for younger audiences.