

# Nutcracker soars ever onward

By JERRY KLEIN

*Journal Star critic*

There probably is no question that the biggest holiday performance spectacle of them all is still the Peoria Ballet Company's "Nutcracker," which — perhaps no surprise — keeps getting bigger and better and more professional year by year. This year's presentation, which plays at 2 and 8 p.m. today and 3 p.m. Sunday at the Civic Center Theater, is sure to bring as many, if not more, cheers than ever, for the dancers are sharper, the costumes more lavish, the numbers crisper and the general effect more sumptuous than ever.

Alfonso Figuero's choreography (after Ivanov), Tchaikovsky's wonderful music and E.T.A. Hoffmann's story combine to create an extraordinary sense of magic here. It is all glitter, candy canes, marzipan, snowflakes and winter wonderland in this brilliantly staged and costumed and superbly well danced holiday feast.

And it must be said that never before has the corps de ballet looked quite so good. It may not be the Bolshoi, but they sure are getting there.

From the extravagantly colorful Christmas party at the home of Dr. Silberhaus in 1850, the action progresses swiftly into fantasy as Clara (Andrea Colen or Shannon Drury) falls asleep on the couch and the Nutcracker (Phil Jordan) arrives to do battle with the army of monstrous mice, led by Peter Chelikas as the Mouse King. Act I concludes with the Snow Queen (Renee Smith or Karen Miller) and the King of Winter (Luc Vanier) leading Clara on her magical journey into the Kingdom of Sweets, where entertainment is provided from the far corners of the world.

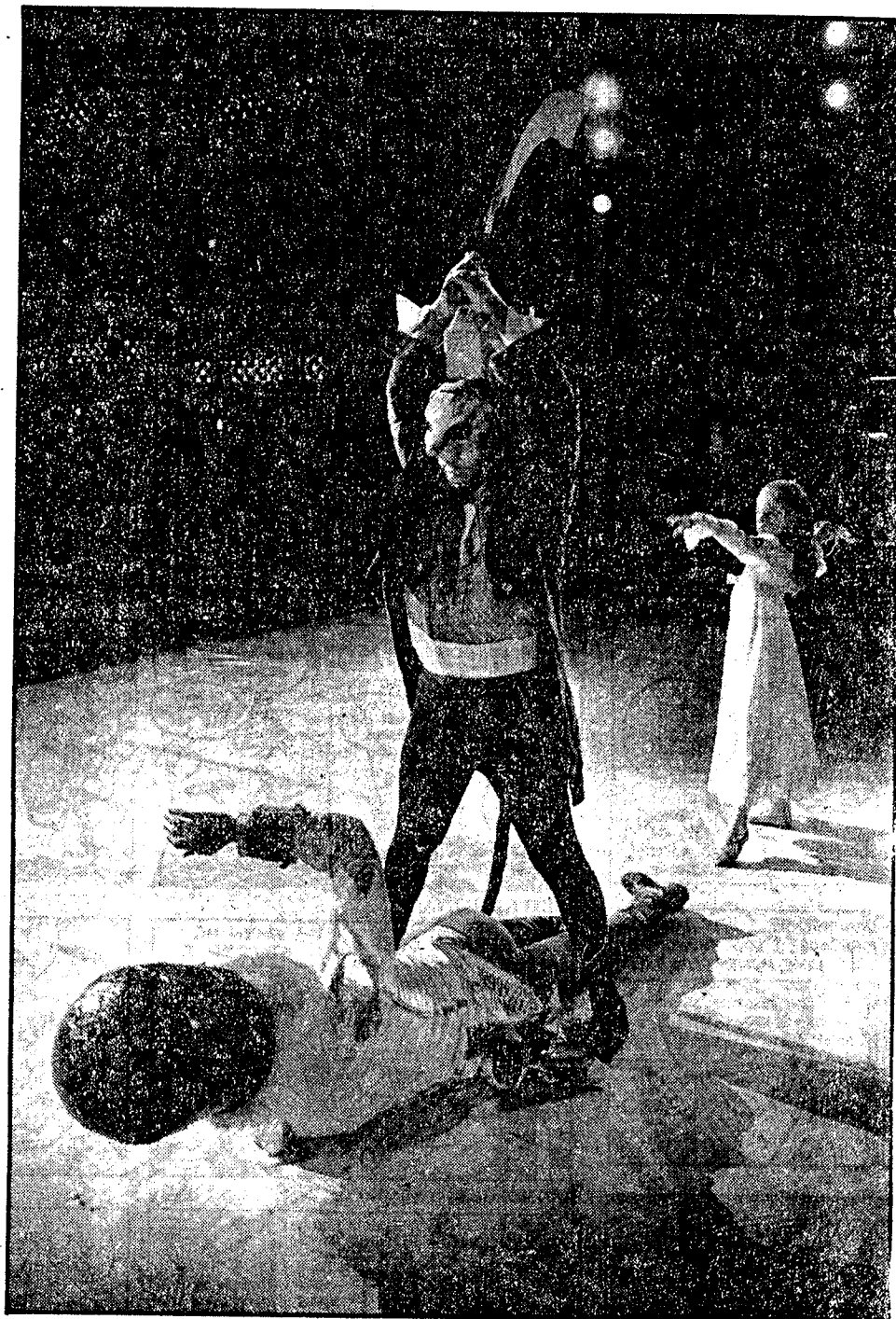
With snow falling and the sleigh drawing the viewers onward, the ballet proceeds into that remarkable series of ethnic dances, from Spain to Arabia, China and Russia, with a couple of new additions this year, the clever Candy Cane, with Miguel Romero and the corps performing with hoops, and a recruited jump-rope team in the Mother Ginger number, which remains one of the more popular moments of the evening.

It is, of course, sheer fluff, but Wilva Alstrom and her horde of off-spring manage that droll little number very well.

Clearly the best balletic moments come in the grand pas de deux, with Janet Moran and Luc Vanier performing in dazzling fashion. She is durable and supple and capable of the most remarkable extensions, and he is an exciting, nimble and athletic performer whose dizzying leaps are going to bring outbursts of applause. They work together very well, and there is both poetry and control in their partnering.

There are many high points here, among them Renee Smith in Marzipan and with Romero in the Spanish number, Nancy Lueders (or Faith Noar) in the Arabian number, Karen Miller in the exciting Russian piece, Miss Smith (or Nancy Lueders) as Dew Drop in the elegantly done Waltz of the Flowers, and the superbly wintry snowflake scene.

Other major roles are played by Renee Smith, Karen Miller and Mi-



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Phil Jordan as the Nutcracker appears to be down for the count as Peter Chelikas as the Mouse King prepares to strike a fatal blow. Andrea Colen as Clara intervenes to save him dur-

ing the Peoria Ballet Company's "Nutcracker," which plays today and Sunday at the Peoria Civic Center Theater. Performances will be today at 2 and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3.

guel Romero as the wind-up dolls, Bill Shrier as the flamboyant Herr Drosselmeyer, Howard Courtney and Nancy Lueders as Dr. and Mrs. Silberhaus, and Phil Jordan as the dashing Nutcracker Prince.

It is an elaborate and, yes, even somehow thrilling show, even after many viewings. Somehow, "Nutcracker" captures that visionary childhood fantasy of what the secular holiday is all about with such beauty and charm as to be an enduring and timeless attraction.

It is choreographed by Figueroa with costume design by Vicki Arndt, Janet Moran and Judanna Lynn, with set by Dana Rademaker and additional design and lighting by Fritz Leffer.