

'The Nutcracker' fills Phi Beta Kappa Hall

Soundings John Shulson

Just as sure as time keeps ticking, so too does Heidi Robitshek's Virginia Regional Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker" keeps giving and giving Christmas spirit to Williamsburg.

With something around 35 seasons of full length "Nutcracker" productions to its credit, both as VRB and Robitshek's former Chamber Ballet, the company's now use live music provided by the Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra under Janna Hymes. When it comes to doing a "Nutcracker," nothing works as well as live music, which allows spontaneity between the dance and the music and offers a sense of presence and excitement. Fortunately, funding has allowed this to happen for two consecutive years and we're the beneficiaries of that good fortune. Hopefully, that fortune extends to future efforts.

Also, hopefully extending into the future would be a Santa's wish list to the architects of the reborn Phi Beta Kappa Hall where this Saturday performance took place to incorporate a large pit into its plans. The pit holding the musicians overflowed to the stage. Flanking both sides were a harp, celeste, tympani and assorted percussion objects. More than once during the performance, there was fear of a dancer pirouetting into the harp on one side or a grand jete into the celeste on the other. Not only did the instruments take up valuable dance space, which resulted in oddly assembled lines and formations, but the placement also skewed the orchestral sound and caused occasional imbalance. It was an awkward setup that hopefully will be addressed in any renovation plans, regardless of who gets to use the facility in the future.

As for the production, Robitshek's overall choreographic concept, ably assisted by VRB co-founder Adelle Carpenter, followed its established past path. Little has changed over the years. And that's fine since the basic elements remain enjoyable. However, there is room for sprucing up some props and costumes, mostly in the party scene, which would enhance appeal beyond music and dance.

While the company membership changes yearly, the choreography continues to remain well within the abilities of all. It offers young and advanced dancers a chance to get in on the colorful tale of Klara, the Nutcracker, and the dream excursion to the land of sweets. The tiny tots, quite unpolished but certainly eager, were a usual delight, as were many of the older dancers who delivered fine results. Among them were Margaret Luck, as Klara, who displayed strong pointe work and grace; Catriona Plourde, who offered a jaunty Tirolese; and Ainsley Carpenter and VRB faculty member William Sterling Walker, who danced an exotic Arabian. Walker also

garnering enthusiastic applause for his acrobatic Court Jester and flair-filled Russian.

One of the Tchaikovsky's most musically magical moments is the snow scene and the pas de deux between the Snow Queen and Cavalier, here gracefully and expressively danced by Karen Fleming and guest artist Shannon Smith.

The other big musical moment is the ballet's grand pas de deux with the Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier. Two dancers from the Fort Wayne Ballet did this year's honors. Kerry Coughlin, dressed in plum, was exceptionally graceful and technically skilled. David Claypoole was similarly skilled, athletic and sure-footed. Their individual moments were visually wonderful, as were their collective ones. The good thing about shared Fort Wayne affiliation is the heightened degree of cohesiveness of movement and feel they brought to their roles. Execution of paired mirror-type movements was exacting, as was the impact of their overall interactions — delicate, caring and impressive.

Musically, Hymes and orchestra offered strong, solid musical support. She perfectly controlled things between the pit and the stage, not necessarily an easy task given the often congested stage activity, allowing the venture between VRB and WSO to produce a "Nutcracker" of warmth and seasonal spirit.

Shulson, a Williamsburg resident, has been covering the arts for over 40 years. He makes a guest appearance in Margaret Truman's "Murder at the Opera."