

9 - 15 DEC 2004

■ DANCE

Bastardized Classic In A Nut Shell

David Parker presents a show for the naughty and for the nice



David Parker appears in a scene from the holiday classic, "Nut/cracked," shown cracking up in front of some nuts.

BY BRIAN MCCORMICK

Few people go directly from thumb sucking to the opera house, but there are always exceptions. David Parker's first gained notoriety with the piece "Bang and Suck," so maybe we shouldn't be so surprised. The erudite choreographer uses tap, ballet, modern dance and the language of Hollywood musicals to craft his witty works, and recently acknowledged, "Twyla showed me I could keep my vocabulary and still do what I wanted."

Parker's rhythmic, comic, ground-slapping works are also suffused with gay themes. Parker, 45, noted that his sensibility is "not just gay," but influenced by middle age—he held up a Debbie Reynolds record album as evidence. His partner in life and "show business," the nimble and lovable Jeffrey Kazin, is the perfect onstage lover, as they demonstrated last season in the duet "Friends of Dorothy," which included music by Reynolds as well as Jane Powell.

Parker called it "a sincere attempt to fit ourselves into that Hollywood romantic imagery." But it was the collection of dances presented as "Cracked" that inspired Parker to make an evening-length work, and the duet with the thumbs that started it all.

"Jeff and I were working on a choreographic problem," Parker said, "trying to come up with ways of partnering that didn't rely on the usual body parts." The traditional "Nutcracker" music was playing. Parker began exploring popular adaptations by composers such as Duke Ellington and Glen Miller, discovering disco and Klezmer versions along the way. His dance version, "Nut/cracked," is a non-narrative, gender-liberated Christmas pageant that celebrates the music with singing, tap dancing, ballet, pointe work and levity.

First performed in Genoa's opera house, Parker has assembled a cast of 21 for his two-week run at Dance Theater Workshop. Guest stars include Mary Cochran, acclaimed soloist with Paul Taylor Dance Company for many years, former Nikolais Dance Theater soloist Sara Hook, Janet Charleston who performed for many years with Lucinda Childs and Douglas Dunn, Marta Miller

DAVID PARKER AND THE BANG GROUP

"Nut/cracked"
Dance Theater Workshop
219 W. 19th St.
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\$20; 212-924-0077

of Marta Renzi and Gina Gibney Dance renown, as well as dancers Kate Digby, Elizabeth Johnson, Amber Sloan and Emily Tschiffley. Parker has also enlisted 11 students from Ellen Robbins' DTW class, including Zack Winokur, a stand-out Parker calls "the spiritual equivalent of the dewdrop fairy."

"Nut/cracked" is "post-modern in the broader sense," Parker said, adding that it incorporates "currents of dance in the downtown world."

It is a clever, whimsical, sultry and sometimes silly suite of dances rife with the kind of musical hoofing and slapping that is the staple of the choreographer's body of work. Parker and Kazin are like a dancing gay Vaudevillian team, often mischievous. In one sequence, a pair of toe shoes taps around the stage, illuminated by a single flashlight. After a game of catch-up with the spot, the light source reveals Parker's face, grinning widely; in another Parker chews up a single noodle from a red Chinese food carton on pointe. Juxtaposed with the classical score, it's a rich pastiche that implodes Disney, Tchaikovsky, ballet, China and gender all at once. The dancing, as a whole, is neither still nor upright, the movement a blend of ballet and strutting, slinking, stomping, reaching, long lunging, leaning, angular syncopated jabbing and, oh yes, booty shaking. The indelible mark of "Saturday Night Fever" is also plain, and fits perfectly. Interlocking duets on pointe recall older work, but it is re-mastered here.

Finally, Parker and Kazin suck each other's thumbs, their lifts taking on more suggestive couplings. It's so corny it remains asexual, oddly enough. A Handi-wipe dance that precedes this helps to quell any queasiness about germs, which also sanitizes the sucking. The finale, like the rest of this fresh and filling Panettone, skillfully brings out the distinguished, delicious flavors of Mr. Parker and his talented associates, professional and amateur. Two thumbs up.