

DANCE REVIEW

No 'Nutcracker' in sight

St. Joseph Ballet proves at REDCAT that there's more to young dancers than the overdone Christmas staple.

By LEWIS SEGAL
Times Staff Writer

Iconic choreographers from Isadora Duncan to George Balanchine relied on children to show how fresh and natural dancing can be — how the pleasures of watching human movement don't have to depend on displays of technique or personal glamour.

Now in its 22nd year, Santa Ana's St. Joseph Ballet kept its eye on the prize through its needlessly brief two-part program Thursday at REDCAT in Walt Disney Concert Hall. Fielding a group of young alumni in "A Seed" and 26 dancers ranging in age from 11 to 18 in "Presence," the company earned respect for its sense of discipline but much deeper admiration for allowing the spirit of childhood to speak.

Indeed, Mark Haim's 2004 "Presence" began with taped statements about favorite things (plus a few pet peeves) by 16

speakers — most of them children in the cast. It also incorporated portions of a J.S. Bach Magnificat and one by C.P.E. Bach, plus three pieces by Alan Terricclano, often enlisting members of the Orange County Women's Chorus.

The switches in accompaniment mirrored shifts in choreographic emphasis, from children's games (including playful and often inventive gymnastic linkups) to such solemn episodes as a sequence in which Edgar Arreola served as a kind of Christ figure, blessing and being blessed.

Text and movement tightly fused in a duet that found Sonja Rosiles and Christian Alcantara becoming an abstract complement to spoken remembrances of a brother-sister relationship. However, lots of "Presence" simply released the children into joyous, barefoot running passages to one Bach or the other: playground Baroque.

Twelve-year-old Alcantara ended the piece by circling the stage in ever-faster, wider orbits, reaching for the sky. The same dynamic surge toward something great just out of reach also closed "A Seed," a 1990 ensemble piece choreographed by Beth Burns, St. Joseph Ballet's founder and artistic director.

Set to a percussive score by Gino Zenobia, it involved intricately coordinated rhythmic kick-stepping and arm-pumping, sometimes in double circles but never succumbed to grim, military efficiency. A brief duet for Flor de Liz Norris and Mauricio Alconedo punctuated the group actions and also helped sustain the piece's warmth.

After last month's glut of prancing "Nutcracker" kiddies, it's nice to know that some young dancers in our midst are having their skills and perceptions shaped by contemporary work — the dance of their time — and that the adults who teach them haven't forgotten the thrill of a young body discovering its life force by running through space as if all that energy and headlong rush toward the future would never end.

St. Joseph Ballet

Where: REDCAT, Walt Disney Concert Hall, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: 8:30 p.m. today

Price: \$24

Contact: (213) 237-2800 or
www.redcat.org