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## ‘Ellington/Strayhorn Nutcracker’ an extraordinary, superbly jazzed take on a holiday classic

It’s “The Nutcracker” to a totally different beat, and thoroughly entertaining.  
By Steven Oxman - For the Sun-Times | Dec 22, 2023, 1:06pm CST



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Alicia Mae Holloway dances the role of Lena in “Sugar Hill: The Ellington/Strayhorn Nutcracker.” | Michelle Reid

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As chestnuts roast over an open fire, in spirit at least, can there be too many

“Nutcrackers”?

Not if they’re as good as this under-radar entry, the jazz-happy “Sugar Hill: The Ellington/Strayhorn Nutcracker,” an original and invigorating dance-theater piece, with music you’ve heard but likely not like this, receiving its world premiere at the Auditorium Theater. It’s “The Nutcracker” to a totally different beat, and thoroughly entertaining.

An excellent 17-member onstage orchestra, under the music supervision of Larry Blank and John Clayton and conducted by pianist Harold O’Neal, does justice to Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s 1960 jazz take on Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker Suite,” which helps you hear the familiar anew. Filled with some of their standards as well, such as the Strayhorn-written “Take the A-Train” that became an Ellington signature, this evening would be worthwhile based on the music alone.

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But it is most definitely not alone.

'Sugar Hill: The  
Ellington/Strayhorn  
Nutcracker'



**When:** Through Dec. 30

**Where:** Auditorium Theater, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Dr.

**Tickets:** \$40-\$100

**Info:** [sugarhillnutcracker.com](http://sugarhillnutcracker.com)

**Running time:** 1 hour and 55 minutes, with one intermission

The music plays inspiration to choreography that boasts a dance vocabulary as polyglot as they come, executed by a skillful ensemble from all over, both in terms of geography and style. It's the work of several choreographers, under the direction and choreographic supervision of Joshua Bergasse, who won an Emmy for his work on NBC's "Smash" and brings a story-telling cohesion that comes from his Broadway experience.

There's plenty of refined ballet from the leads Alicia Mae Holloway (Dance Theater of Harlem), who plays Lena, a rebellious child of a wealthy Black family in 1930s Manhattan, and Jinhao Zhang (of Munich's Bayerisches Staatsballett), who alternates the role of the trumpet-toting nutcracker with Josue Gomez. But you also get jazz dancing, a touch of tap — in musical conversation with the drummer no less — a little Lindy Hop, and an array of other styles.

There's a lot to love. My personal favorite is the Act I jazz-funk number set to "Feet on the Beat" and choreographed by John Boogz. Four men introduce the always-curious Lena, who has snuck away from her family's glam Christmas party, to a stylish Harlem dreamworld. They're wearing colorful trench coats carrying suitcases, and Boogz blends all sorts of hip-hop dance techniques (popping, breakdancing, gliding and more) with jazz moves into something that's just plain infectiously fun.

Also in Act I, I was highly intrigued by the dance of the mice, who interrupt Lena’s enjoyment of a jazz club. The mice wear sizable pads on their stomachs and thighs and boast long tails — the costumes are supervised by David Kaley — which distort the body weight just enough to make you experience familiar dance moves differently. Set to “Tonk” and choreographed by Bergasse and Jade Hale-Christofi, there’s a lot of cleverness here, including swinging tails that add both drama and humor.

In Act II, we’re introduced to the show’s variation on the Sugar Plum Fairy, a cat named Sugar Rum Cherry (Larissa Gerszke), and if to that point the Tchaikovsky inspiration felt a bit in the background, here is where we get Ellington and Strayhorn in direct conversation with the original music. The slinky bluesiness

combined with the rich, familiar melodies clearly inspired Bergasse's choreography here, which is reminiscent of "Cats" but, seriously, what's wrong with that?

A number of other dancing animals, rather than dancing sweets, follow — a bird (Tatiana Nunez), a rabbit (Nikolas Danilovech-Eugene Gaifullin), dogs (led by Scott Weber) — all amusing and impressive.

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Sugar Rum Cherry's diva mom cheetah is portrayed by Brenda Braxton in "Sugar Hill: The Ellington/Strayhorn Nutcracker." | Michelle Reid

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And for toppers we are introduced to Sugar Rum Cherry's diva mom cheetah (Brenda Braxton), and to her sister Sugar-Lu (Nayara Lopes), an instant love-interest for our human Nutcracker.

This show, conceived and with a libretto by Jessica Swan, has clearly been on quite an adventure to this opening, including postponements of scheduled dates in Pittsburgh and at New York’s City Center last year and New York again this year.

That may explain the lack of buzz surrounding “Sugar Hill” as it opens, but even if there is room for improvement, this has to be considered a hugely successful production artistically, clearly driven by passionate belief in it from its producers and creators.

The one dimension that’s clearly underfunded is the set — Joshua Zangen’s design brings elegance to plainness with the help of Christopher Annas-Lee’s lighting, but it would be great to see that boosted in the future.

A future that is extremely easy to root for. This show makes a great case for Ellington and Strayhorn’s music as a gloriously rich muse for dancing, just as those composers found inspiration from Tchaikovsky’s music.

Like jazz itself, this show is just so darn American, infusing “The Nutcracker” with a boundless joy and optimism, all embodied in its extraordinary rhythm.

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