‘Night at the Nutcracker’ tickles the funny bone

{ THROUGH DEC. 30 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Crocker Theater on the campus of Cabrillo College, Aptos. www.cabrilostage.com } 

By JOANNE ENGELHARDT
features@sanctacruzsentinel.com

What do you call a musical farce that is, by turn, zany, nonsensical, hilarious, raunchy, touching, over-the-top and, occasionally, not all that funny?

That would be the West Coast premiere of Cabrillo Stage’s holiday offering, “A Night at the Nutcracker,” which could easily have been called “A Night at the Nut-house.” Any play that uses three Marx brothers (Harpo, Chico and Groucho) as main characters is bound to be full of mayhem, verbal and physical zingers and a little bit naughty.

Ten years ago, prolific playwrights Billy Van Zandt and Jane Milmore (“Drop Dead,” “Love, Sex and the IRS”) decided a mash-up of the Marx Brothers comedies like “A Night at the Opera” with the traditional Tchaikovsky ballet “The Nutcracker” was exactly what was needed to spice up the Christmas season. It was a clever, if chancy, decision, and for the most part they pulled it off.

In this production, it is the prodigious talents of the three zanies Felix T. Filibuster (an engaging, elastic Nicholas Ceglio doing a spot-on imitation of the inimitable Groucho), Pepponi (charismatic Max Bennett-Parker playing Chico) and Pinchie (cuddly, devlish Matt Dunn as the mischievous mute brother Harpo). As in Marx Brothers comedies, the trio creates chaos and shenanigans — and then saves the day.

Director Andrew Ceglio uses a confident hand to direct his brother and the remaining 11 cast members — juggling comedy with pathos, making sure most of the sight gags are noticed by the audience and finding ways to emphasize every cast member’s strengths. While there were a few off-key warbles by two women, it could be chalked up to opening-night jitters.

Fortunately, musical director Jon Nordgren and his 17-piece orchestra made it seem infinitely more interesting and appealing than the first — and it garners the most laughs. It’s always fun to watch men putting on tutus and prancing around the stage. The two authentic ballerinas, Kirsten Livings-ton and Kara Jonsson, play the dual roles of maid and dancers and add a touch of class.

The best voices in “Nutcracker” belong to the two lovebirds, Eddie and Eddie (a demure Ariel Buck and ballet-challenged David Jackson). Their voices blend perfectly in “Christmas is You.” While both are handsome leads, it’s a mystery why Buck was costumed so blandly. Otherwise, costume designer Crush flawlessly matches outfits to each character’s personality.

Scenic designer Skip Epperson’s set is a visual marvel. Picture the living room of a wealthy dowager (an impervious Lizz Hodgin as Constance Stafford). Stage center is an impressive stairway which divides midway to the top. There’s also an equally impressive (as in tall) Christmas tree.

Two other actors deserve mention: Eleanor Hunter throws her considerable physical talents into the role of man-hungry Iona, and Kevin Johnson seems calmy at ease playing the self-centered ballet star Nikolai Rasputin. (He’s also a favorite with the younger crowd who squealed when he performed his warm-up ballet movements.)

Overall, “Night at the Nutcracker” is somewhat like cotton candy that disappears as quickly as you eat it. But those Marx Brothers sure can tickle your funny bone! “Night” continues through Dec. 30, starting at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays at Cabrillo Crocker Theater. For more information and tickets call (831) 479-6154, or go to www.cabrilostage.com.

‘THROUGH THE LABYRINTH’

Local poet Ron Lampi leads guided astrological meditation

{ SATURDAY 7 p.m.; $5-$7; Unity Temple, 407 Broadway, Santa Cruz; ral@sasquatch.com }

By BONNIE HORGOS
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Expecting the world doesn’t end Friday, it may feel therapeutic to recollect the following day with an hour or two of reflection.

Local poet Ron Lampi will lead “Through The Laby-rinth: A Guided Astrological Meditation” this Saturday at the Unity Temple. Lampi will lead the celebration of the Mayan calendar’s completion and Winter solstice with Felton-based musician Christopher Cohn accompanying him on keyboard.

“I thought that it would be a good solstice event, given that there’s so much emphasis on the end of the Mayan calendar and everything that goes with that,” said Lampi, a Felton resident.

The good news? The end of this era signals the beginning of a fresh start, Lampi said.

“We’re ready for a shift; it’s time to move,” Lampi said.

Lampi has led guided astrological meditations for the past 12 years. He relates labyrinths’ circuitous layout with life’s twists and turns, assigning different planets to phases: the Sun, birth; Moon, early childhood; Mercury, education; Venus, romance, art and beauty.

After these explorations comes the darkness, where navigation gets tricky.

“There’s this period dark-ness, and that would coincide with the winter solstice,” Lampi said. “We’re lost, but in the distance, a light appears.”

Lampi refers to this discovery of hope — the guided meditation’s ultimate goal — as the fountain of light, where rejuvenation occurs.

“We reach this renewal, then the meditation is over and we pretty much return to the world,” Lampi said.
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Fortunately, musical director Jon Nordgren and his 17-piece orchestra made up for any melodic miscues. Though the score by Ed Alton is mostly forgettable, the solid orchestra wrung everything they could out of “Three Cheers for Filibuster,” Christmas is You” and, in Act 2, all the wondrous “Nutcracker” melodies. Including the orchestra in the plot in a couple of places is also a nice touch.

The musical’s second act seems infinitely more interesting and appealing than the first — and it garners the most laughs. It’s always fun to watch men putting on tuxus and prancing around the stage. The two authentic ballerinas, Kirsten Livings-ton and Kara Jonsson, play the dual roles of maids and dancers and add a touch of class.

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Follow Sentinel reporter Bonnie Horgos on Twitter Twitter.com/bhorgos