

GEORGE BALANCHINE'S THE NUTCRACKER

Ballet in Two Acts, Four Scenes, and Prologue

based on E.T.A. Hoffman's tale, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816)

Music: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (*The Nutcracker*, Op. 71, 1891–1892, with an excerpt from *Sleeping Beauty*, Op. 66, 1889)

Choreography: George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust

Original Production Premiere: December 6, 1892; Imperial Ballet, Mariinsky Theater, St. Petersburg; choreography by Lev Ivanov

Balanchine Production Premiere: February 2, 1954; New York City Ballet (City Center of Music and Drama)

“The Nutcracker at our theater is for children young and old. That is, for children and for adults who are children at heart. Because, if an adult is a good person, in his heart he is still a child. In every person the best, the most important part is that which remains from his childhood.” —George Balanchine

When George Balanchine staged *The Nutcracker* for New York City Ballet in 1954, it was the six-year-old company's most ambitious project to date. The choreographer spent more than half of the production's \$40,000 budget on the Christmas tree, infuriating Morton Baum, chair of New York City Center's finance committee, which had put up the money. Baum asked, “George, can't you do it without the tree?” to which Balanchine replied, “The ballet is the tree.”

Balanchine had danced in the Mariinsky Theater's production in St. Petersburg (then called Petrograd) as a child. His roles included soldier, mouse king, little prince, and the lead in the hoop dance, which had been choreographed by its original interpreter, Alexander Shiryayev, for the 1892 premiere. Balanchine remembered the luxurious days before the Russian revolution and held them as an ideal. When Baum asked him to stage *The Nutcracker*, banking on the popularity of “The Nutcracker Suite” in the United States, Balanchine said, “If I do anything, it will be full-length and expensive.”

Those first performances of *The Nutcracker* in 1892 St. Petersburg received mixed reviews. Critics complained the music was “too symphonic” and the ballerina (the Sugar Plum Fairy) wasn't given enough to do. The scenario had been put together by Ivan

Vsevolozhsky, director of the Imperial Theaters and a great Francophile. He used as his source not the E.T.A. Hoffman German original of 1816, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, but Alexandre Dumas' 1844 French adaptation of Hoffman's story, *Histoire d'un casse-noisette* (The Tale of the Nutcracker). Marius Petipa, the esteemed and prolific *maître d'ballet* of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theater, prepared instructions for Tchaikovsky and mapped out the sequence of dances yet withdrew due to illness, possibly before rehearsals began. The task of choreographing at least most of *The Nutcracker* was left to Petipa's assistant, Lev Ivanov, whose work was deemed uneven, from brilliant (the kaleidoscopic Waltz of the Snowflakes) to chaotic (the battle between the gingerbread soldiers and the mice).

Yet, the ballet endured, and the suite of musical numbers subsequently drawn from Tchaikovsky's complete score for performance in the concert hall was immediately popular. The composer was particularly delighted by his use of the celesta, the "heavenly" keyboard instrument newly invented in Paris, for the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy."

As he did with his other stagings of nineteenth-century ballets from the Russian repertory (*Coppélia*, *Harlequinade*), Balanchine followed the ballet's story closely while adding his own contributions. With *The Nutcracker*, he referred back to the original Hoffman tale, adding Herr Drosselmeier's nephew, the keyhole scene, in which Clara and Fritz eagerly anticipate seeing the family Christmas tree, and Clara's wandering bed. He added some music as well, explaining,

When I did *The Nutcracker* in New York, I needed an *entr'acte*. And suddenly I recalled that the violin solo from *Sleeping Beauty* was the theme that is used when the Christmas tree grows in *The Nutcracker*. It's a wonderful melody, with a magnificent upward swelling of sound that leaves you breathless. Tchaikovsky had decided that since no one played the violin solo from *Sleeping Beauty* he might as well use it here, instead of letting it go to waste!

The production was a huge effort, taxing the company's resources. When, on opening night, the costumes were far from finished, Balanchine visited Karinska's workshop with Jerome Robbins and, without saying a word, sat down among the seamstresses, picked

up a needle and thread, and got to work. Robbins, who also choreographed the *Nutcracker* battle scene (an uncredited contribution), joined him.

Balanchine regularly made changes to his *Nutcracker*, including, perhaps surprisingly, the addition of elements from the St. Petersburg original. In 1968, he added a special effect to the *pas de deux* of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier, in which the ballerina steps onto a sliding track on the stage and, supported by her partner, appears to glide across its surface. He also added wands with snowballs for the Snowflakes at the end of the first act, recalling the elaborate costumes of the Mariinsky's dancers.

Although Balanchine's *Nutcracker* established the ballet as a perennial holiday favorite and became the model for many subsequent productions, the ballet had been danced in the United States since 1940, when Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performed Alexandra Fedorova's staging of a one-act *Nutcracker* in New York City. The production subsequently toured the country throughout the '40s and '50s, giving many Americans their first experience of *The Nutcracker*. The first full-length *Nutcracker* in the U.S. was choreographed for San Francisco Ballet by Willam Christensen in 1944, only to be replaced in 1954 with a production by Willam's brother, Lew Christensen.

When New York City Ballet moved to the newly built New York State Theater in 1964, the *Nutcracker* scenery was completely redesigned to take advantage of the larger space. (The technical superiority of the new theater allowed an even more magnificent tree.) That same year, a young Judith Fugate, newly enrolled in the School of American Ballet, danced the role of Clara for the first time. She would continue in the role for four seasons before moving on to other parts, eventually joining New York City Ballet and adding the leading roles of Dewdrop and the Sugar Plum Fairy to her repertory. In 2015, Fugate takes on the role of *répétiteur*, joining with Peter Boal and Garielle Whittle to stage Balanchine's *Nutcracker* for Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Peter Boal was accepted into the School of American Ballet in 1975. He first performed in Balanchine's *Nutcracker* as a Party Boy. Fugate was his first stage mother and held his hand tightly as she pulled the nervous ten-year-old onstage. He moved on to the role of the Little Prince, and then Bed Boy, another uncredited part, this for a

confident teenager who steers Clara's magic bed. Boal joined New York City Ballet and continued to move through the range of *Nutcracker* roles, eventually performing as Cavalier to Fugate's Sugar Plum Fairy. In 2014, Boal returned to New York City Ballet as a guest artist to reprise the role of Herr Drosselmeier for the School of American Ballet's annual *Nutcracker* benefit.

Pacific Northwest Ballet has its own *Nutcracker* history, which now intersects with Balanchine's. In 1975, Pacific Northwest Dance Ballet Company, as PNB was then called, acquired Lew Christensen's *Nutcracker*, performing the work for eight seasons. In 1983, under Artistic Directors Kent Stowell and Francia Russell, the Company presented a new production with choreography by Stowell and scenic and costume designs by famed children's author and illustrator Maurice Sendak. The Stowell and Sendak *Nutcracker* contributed significantly to the Company's identity, holding the stage for thirty-two seasons. In 2015, PNB acquired George Balanchine's iconic production, blending Peter's Boal's personal history—his New England childhood and his thirty-year involvement with the Balanchine *Nutcracker* as both a student and professional dancer—with the future of the Company. New designs by another renowned children's author and illustrator, Ian Falconer, carry the Balanchine staging forward into the twenty-first century, while the staging by Fugate, Boal, and Whittle affirms the heritage of a tradition reaching back to 1892 and the grandeur of the Imperial era.

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