

The Nutcracker Ballet

A Holiday Tradition

A Complete Guide to the Nutcracker Ballet

The Nutcracker Ballet has been a festive holiday tradition for many years. Numerous ballet companies around the world stage the famous ballet every year during the month of December. Both children and adults look forward to attending a magical performance of The Nutcracker each holiday season..

Many local ballet communities take part in the tradition by staging their own productions of The Nutcracker. Aspiring ballerinas delight in the opportunity to dance on stage to the music of The Nutcracker Suite. Many young girls dream of one day dancing one of the leading roles.

History of The Nutcracker Ballet

The Nutcracker Ballet was written during the classical period of ballet, a time when many famous ballets were being written and performed. The Nutcracker is based on the book "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" by E.T.A. Hoffman. Russian composer Peter Tchaikovsky wrote the music for the ballet during the early 1890's, near the end of his life. Hoffman's original story was modified quite a bit in order for it to be suitable for children. The very first performance of The Nutcracker took place in Russia in 1892. The San Francisco Ballet performed the first American production of The Nutcracker in 1944.

Setting and Characters

The setting of The Nutcracker is in Western Europe in the 1800's. The story opens on Christmas Eve at the home of Hans Stahlbaum, the town mayor. The wealthy Stahlbaum family is hosting a festive holiday party for family and friends. The Stahlbaum children, Clara and Fritz, are anxiously awaiting the arrival of several invited guests. The home is immaculately decorated for the holidays, complete with a beautifully trimmed Christmas tree. Snow begins to fall as the guests arrive, most bearing gifts.

Party Scene

Arriving late to the party is the Stahlbaum children's mysterious godfather, Herr Drosselmeyer. He delights the party guests with his life-size dancing dolls. He then presents gifts to all the children. Fritz receives a toy train and Clara is presented with a beautiful toy nutcracker. Clara is delighted with the unusual present until Fritz breaks it. Drosselmeyer wipes Clara's tears and repairs the nutcracker, but she remains disappointed. The guests eventually depart, and Clara and Fritz are sent to bed. Clara gets back up to search for her nutcracker, then falls asleep clutching it. Her dream then begins.

Mouse Scene

Clara awakens suddenly, stunned by the events she sees happening in her living room. The Christmas tree has grown to an enormous size and life-size mice are scampering around the room. Fritz's toy soldiers have come to life and are marching toward Clara's nutcracker, which has also grown to life-size. A battle is soon underway between the mice and the soldiers, led by the giant Mouse King. The nutcracker and the Mouse King enter an intense battle. When Clara sees that her nutcracker is about to be defeated, she throws her shoe at him, stunning him long enough for the nutcracker to stab him with his sword.

Snow Scene

After the Mouse King falls, the nutcracker lifts the crown from his head and places it on Clara. She is magically transformed into a beautiful princess, and the nutcracker turns into a handsome prince before her eyes. The prince bows before Clara, taking her hand in his. He leads her to the Land of Snow. The two dance together, surrounded by a flurry of snowflakes.

Land of the Sweets

Clara and her prince arrive by boat at the Land of the Sweets, greeted by the Sugar Plum Fairy. The prince tells Clara that he lives in the Land of the Sweets and rules from the Marzipan Castle. Clara and the prince are entertained by several dance performances including the Spanish Dance, the Arabian Dance, the Chinese Dance, and the Waltz of the Flowers. Clara and her Nutcracker Prince then dance together, in honor of their new friends.

Clara Awakens

On Christmas morning, Clara awakens under the Christmas tree, still holding her beloved nutcracker. She thinks about the mysterious events that happened during the night and wonders if it was all just a dream. She clutches her nutcracker doll and delights in the magic of Christmas.

Interesting Facts

- The 1892 premiere of *The Nutcracker* failed with both the public and critics. Unfortunately, Tchaikovsky never knew what a huge success the ballet became, as he died less than a year later.
- Tschaikovsky was asked to use the celesta, a new instrument, to make the music for the Sugar Plum Fairy sound like the "sprays of a fountain."
- Tschaikovsky based the music for the Arabian Dance on a Georgian lullaby.
- The Sugar Plum Fairy's dance with the Prince is probably the most famous pas de deux (dance for two) in ballet.
- The Nutcracker Ballet has many interpretations, resulting in several different plots and character names.