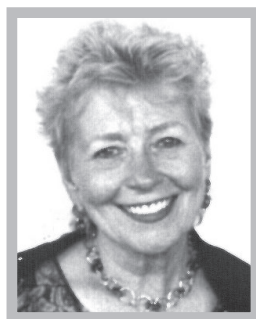


ARTS ALL
AROUND

A!

by Barbara-lyn Morris

Chasing *The Nutcracker*

In our family, it is time to decide who will see *The Nutcracker* and where. We refer to the annual tradition as "chasing *The Nutcracker*." The perennial holiday classic is, for us, most often a mother-daughter(s) outing that sometimes includes friends and extended family.

We have seen many regional productions, heavy with Victorian costumes, great sets, and creative theatrical effects, but light on dance technique and burdened with recorded music. We have usually known some of the cast and, therefore, enjoyed the occasions immensely and felt good about supporting our local artists and friends. We have also indulged ourselves with big-city productions that feature dancing at the highest level, live music, and just enough special effects.

Whatever the degree of professionalism and creativity in a production, *The Nutcracker* is framed by the familiar melodies of Russian composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). The storyline is based on a book, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816), by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). French author Alexander Dumas (1802-1870) revised the German work and inspired the famous Russian choreographer Marius Petipa (1822-1910) to commission Tchaikovsky to compose music for a lavish holiday ballet. The first production was presented in 1892 by the Kirov Ballet in Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia.

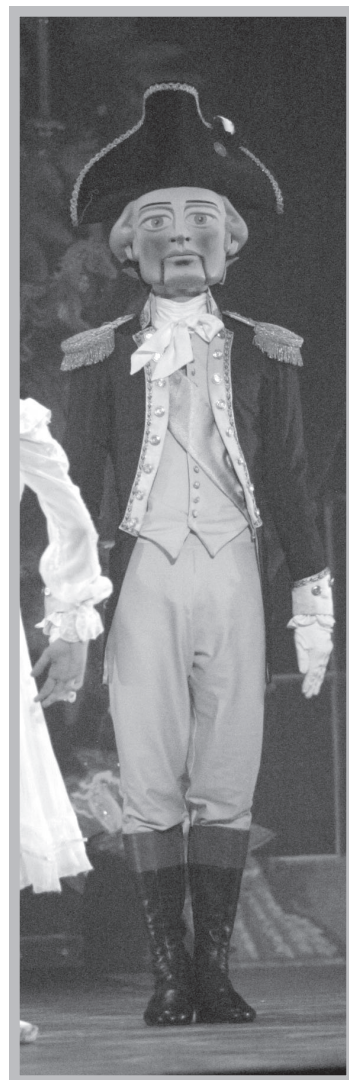
The first American production was performed by the San Francisco Ballet, Christmas Eve, 1944. Since then, *The Nutcracker* has become an integral part of the holiday season in small towns and big cities. For most ballet companies, *The Nutcracker* has become the "cash cow." For many young viewers and their families, it serves as an introduction to the world of ballet and orchestral music.

Every production takes the audience to a Yuletide party, where the gift of a magical nutcracker doll to the party hosts' daughter leads to the dream world of the young girl (Clara) and her prince charming. In the young girl's dream, her beloved nutcracker becomes a mighty leader in a fight against an army of mice led by a big mouse — the mouse king.

The nutcracker becomes a prince charming who takes his princess, by a variety of imaginative conveyances (horse-drawn sleigh, magic carpet, hot air balloon, giant snowbird), on a magical journey, first to a snowy land and then to a candyland. There the Sugarplum Fairy orchestrates a victory celebration over the defeated mice by

presenting a variety of international dance themes — Spanish, Arabian, Russian, French, and Chinese. The grand finale is set in a garden paradise with the most spectacular conclusion possible. Ideally, it is a Pas de Deux (a duet with promenades, lifts, turns, and jumps), if dancers of that highly technical level are available.

Ballet companies often engage audiences by portraying certain characters in surprising ways. For example, "Uncle" Drosselmeyer, a party guest who brings the nutcracker as a gift, may be portrayed as a kindly old gentleman or a mysterious youthful magician with many tricks up his sleeves or in his hat; sometimes, he is more like a sinister sorcerer. He might also be portrayed as a puppeteer or a toymaker.



The dance troupe may be a large professional company that incorporates its dance school into the production, or the dancers may be amateur students enhanced by one or more guest professionals. The latter productions tend to emphasize character, set, and humor.

A favorite humorous character is Mother Ginger, a grandmother-like figure generally presented as a giant of a woman who hides children, between a half dozen and 20, under her huge hoop skirt. In the most serious productions, Mother Ginger may be omitted, or there might be an alternative to the larger-than-life grandma. A technical effect that may steal the show at the end of Act I is the size and wonder of the Christmas tree that grows right before Clara's eyes.

Dancers representing different nationalities dominate Act II and provide showcase opportunities for the variety of talent among the available dancers. Sometimes in these dance sequences, gymnastics outshine traditional ballet.

Because companies large and small invest so much capital in set and costumes, they tend to present the same production for several years. Therefore, unless we are attracted by friends performing in a particular production, we like to move around, generally alternating between local/regional presentations and those in larger venues. This year is an exception to our move-around rule because we are returning to Washington, DC for the second year to see the



In a politically inspired Washington, DC production, the Nutcracker, left, is portrayed as a young George Washington and the Mouse King, above, is none other than George III.

Photos by Carol Pratt.

Washington Ballet's innovative and original production combined with professional ballet and live orchestral music.

Set in a Georgetown Victorian home, the Washington production is an on-the-Potomac, inside-the-beltway fairy tale. Party guests include West Point cadets and historical celebrities, such as Frederick Douglass. The nutcracker is none other than a young George Washington, and the Mouse King is — guess who? — George III, resplendent in his royal gold attire and crown.

The fight scene is set in the Revolutionary War era with British Redcoat mice in combat against Continental militiamen. In lieu of Mother Ginger, a magnificent 19th century merry-go-round with horses and clowns steals the show. The journey by Clara and her prince is undertaken by steamship through frontier America, where they encounter fighting, animated mushrooms, and a variety of animals.

This clever production of Americana has an attitude and verve that elevate it far above gimmickry and the mundane. The ballet company, under the direction of Septime Webre, is fast-paced, highly athletic in style, and clearly energized by the novel setting. The concluding Grand Pas de Deux is breathtaking. The 32-piece orchestra, led by Scott Speck, plays with inspiration for this all-American version of a Russian holiday masterpiece.

See it, if you possibly can, between Dec. 1-24 at 3515 Wisconsin Avenue, NW (www.washingtonballet.org, 202-362-3606 ext. 119).

If you are unable to see *The Nutcracker* in our nation's capital, consider one of the fine regional productions listed below. Any production of *The Nutcracker* will add an early dose of holiday magic to your life.

Regional Productions

• **Bristol — Bristol Ballet** with **Highlands Ballet** at Paramount Center for the Arts, Dec. 16-18. 423-968-1395

• **Johnson City — Moscow Ballet** at Freedom Hall Civic Center, Dec. 2. 423-461-4884; **City Youth Ballet** at Veterans Administration Memorial Theatre, Dec. 9-10. 423-282-6577

• **Greenville — Kingsport Ballet School and Company** at the Niswonger Performing Arts Center, Dec. 1-3. 423-638-1679 www.greenvillennpac.com

• **Knoxville — Appalachian Ballet Company** with the Knoxville Symphony at Civic Auditorium, Dec. 3-4. 865-982-8463

• **Roanoke — Southwest Virginia Ballet Company** at Roanoke Civic Center, Dec. 10-11. 540-853-5483 www.jeffcenter.org

• **Asheville — Asheville Ballet Guild, Inc.** at Diana Wortham Theatre, Dec. 7-11. 828-257-4530 www.ashevilleballet.com

• **Nashville — Nashville Ballet** at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, Dec. 9-11 and 16-18. 615-255-2787 www.nashvilleballet.com

• **Winston-Salem: North Carolina School of the Arts** at the Stevens Center, Dec. 3-4, 8-11. 336-721-1945

A!