

The Nutcracker

MARCHES ON

As part of a long-standing holiday tradition, the 107 year-old ballet opens in Eugene on Dec. 17



Dance

By Sara Jarrett
Oregon Daily Emerald

The "Nutcracker," probably the most well-known ballet, has grown into an American holiday tradition. Its constant evolution since the first 1892 performance in St. Petersburg Russia's Maryinsky Theatre, makes every production a unique gift to the world of dance.

The Eugene Ballet presents its yearly contribution Dec. 17-19 with five performances at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts. The tale, derived from E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, provides great entertainment for children with its wizards and toys that come to life.

The original idea behind the ballet, however, was to entertain the adults of the tsar's court. The final adaptation of Hoffmann's story left room for the folk dancing, character roles and pure ballet dancing seen on stage today that appeal to children and adults alike.

The first act depicts a Christmas Eve party. Guests flutter around a fantastically-lit tree.

Presents pour from beneath its branches. And Clara becomes enamored with a Nutcracker doll she accepts from a wicked old man, Drosselmeyer, who befriends her.

When the guests leave, Clara falls asleep and has a nightmare about a battle between mice and soldiers. When the soldiers win, led of course by her Nutcracker, she drifts off into a winter wonder-

land. Here she watches the dance of the snowflakes, the Ginger Clown, the Russian acrobats and the Sugar Plum Fairy. International sweets also come to life.

To this day, "Nutcracker" is performed around the globe with increasing popularity and its choreography is not crystallized. The classical story told through movement and song has so many variations that Toni Pimble, artistic director of the Eugene Ballet Company, has no reservations about changing it to suit her tastes.

"Because there's been so many different versions of it, I think it's just fine," she said. "The story is basically the same, we just add our own little touches."

The Eugene Ballet had been doing the same "Nutcracker" for years

before Pimble decided to choreograph a completely different variation.

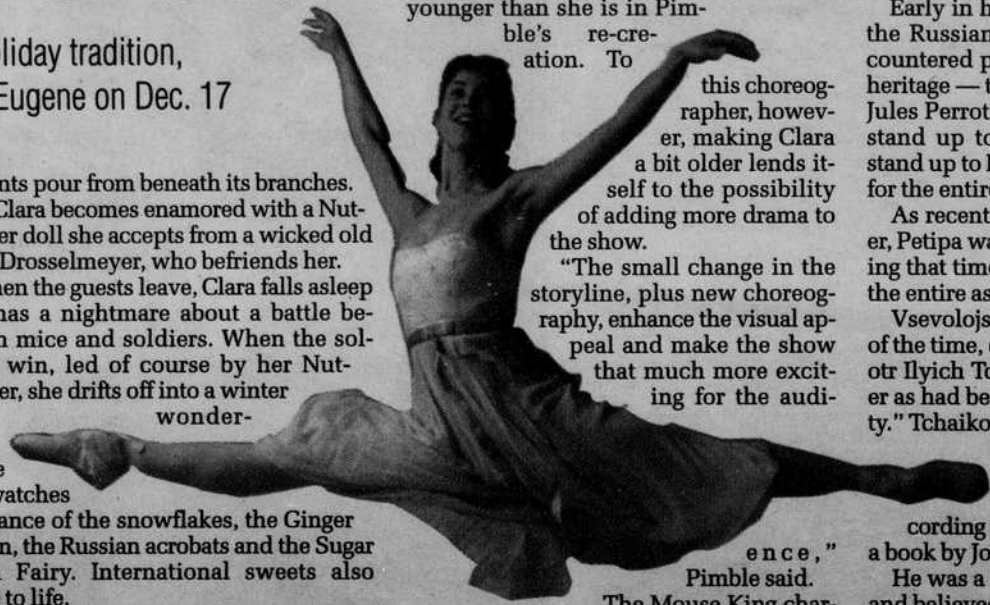
For two years now, this new rendition has been pleasing audiences throughout the Pacific Northwest. This season, the Eugene Ballet Company will present "Nutcracker" in 24 towns throughout five states and Canada.

"It includes romance with Clara and Drosselmeyer's nephew Hans, who is also the Nutcracker in full life," Pimble said.

In most editions of the story, Clara is younger than she is in Pimble's re-creation. To

this choreographer, however, making Clara a bit older lends itself to the possibility of adding more drama to the show.

"The small change in the storyline, plus new choreography, enhance the visual appeal and make the show that much more exciting for the audi-



ence," Pimble said.

The Mouse King character who challenges the Nutcracker to a duel during the dream scene, has taken on a major transformation in Pimble's hands.

"He's a pirate mouse," she said, "with an Errol Flynn flair ... He definitely has a mouse snout."

During what dance enthusiasts call the age of Petipa, Marius Petipa (1818-1910) is credited with choreographing about 60 classical ballets, "Nutcracker" being one of his most famous. His other well-known works include "The Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella" and "Swan Lake."

The term classical means that his works were devised according to formal stan-

dards, with an emphasis on technical virtuosity. This style is different from the ballets previously seen during the Romantic era when dancers and dance makers explored more freedom in their range of emotional depth. Petipa strove to reinvent the grand style of dance seen in the courts of Louis XIV in the late 1600s.

Though Petipa is the one with all the glory, most of the credit for "Nutcracker" and some of his other pieces should go to his assistant ballet master, Lev Ivanov.

Early in his career, while dancing with the Russian Imperial Ballet, Ivanov encountered prejudices against his Russian heritage — the company was mastered by Jules Perrot, a Frenchman. Ivanov didn't stand up to Perrot then, and he didn't stand up to Petipa when Petipa took credit for the entire "Nutcracker".

As recent evidence has shown, however, Petipa was too sick to choreograph during that time and was forced to hand over the entire assignment to Ivanov.

Vsevolozhsky, the Russian theater official of the time, decided to bring composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Petipa together as had been done with "Sleeping Beauty." Tchaikovsky did not think very highly of the job, however. In his diary he wrote, "The subject pleases me very little," according to "Dancing Through History," a book by Joan Cass.

He was a dedicated musician, however, and believed that it was his artistic duty to create even though he lacked inspiration.

The expertise and talents of Conceptual Designer Don Carson, who has held a variety of positions with Walt Disney Imagineering since 1989, Costume Designer Amy Panganiban and Lighting Designer Lloyd Sobel have been gathered for the Eugene show. In addition, four of the five Eugene performances will feature the Eugene Opera Orchestra.

"The Nutcracker" plays at the Hult Center at 8 p.m. Dec. 17 and 18, at 2:30 p.m. Dec. 18 and 19, and at 7 p.m. Dec. 19. Tickets range from \$17 to \$60 and are available at the Hult Center, 682-5000.

Even with revisions, "The Nutcracker" features familiar characters such as Clara (above) and the Mouse King.



The Nutcracker. Photos courtesy, Kent Peterson