

An Easy Nut to Crack

Eugene Ballet's holiday favorite returns

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story of *The Nutcracker*, (prolonged, sequestered jury duty; desert island; witness protection program), please allow me: It was first performed in chilly St. Petersburg by the Imperial Russian Ballet in 1892. The ballet follows adolescent Clara through one memorable Christmas Eve when her beloved godfather brings her a wooden Nutcracker as a present. As Clara sleeps, the Nutcracker springs to life, kills a giant mouse and takes her on a midnight journey to a marzipan castle. Now that's what I call a first date!

And say what you will about czarist excess. They may have ignored the starving masses, but darn if they didn't make some dance with staying power. For more than 100 years, audiences have been reveling in the nuttiness of this holiday favorite.

But *The Nutcracker* almost wasn't. The librettist Petipa hated the original Hoffmann story, grumbling that it lacked a leading ballerina's role. Enter the Sugar Plum Fairy. Add an indelible Tchaikovsky score. Shake up the theatrical snow-globe with a century of kitchen-sink production assists, which have included live bears, tap dance numbers, sleighs, sleds, rolling beds, inverted filigree

baskets suspended by balloons, and you have a daffy classic on your hands.

Over the years, the dance has been through a multitude of incarnations in London (1934), San Francisco (1944) and New York City, (1954). The latter's choreography by Balanchine is the gold standard, the one we all know, the most copied. Some

choreographers, Nuriyev and Barishnikov among them, have tried to rev the plot up by delving into the dank psychology of it all: Drosselmeyer as a father figure? Hmm, that's not much of a stretch.

Or *The Nutcracker* himself as a Bubblegum Boyfriend? Let's see. He's pleasingly asexual; he can't talk; and he won't have a chance to break Clara's heart before he's turned back into a frozen lump by morning. (Why did so many young girls go to see *Titanic*?) Has anyone ever just said "enough already" to this treacle? Sure, in 1996 Mark Morris turned the whole canon on its ear, setting his hip *The Hard Nut* in the seamy shag-carpeted splendor of late-1960s suburbia.

But despite various guises, *The Nutcracker* is like a holiday dinner: Audiences have expectations. So if we're creating a traditional version today, where is the room for invention?

Artistic Director of the Eugene Ballet Company Toni Pimble defers to the individuality of the performers to keep things fresh. In changing up bits of stage business and keeping things lively, Pimble says her performers add characterization. "The good dancers are theater people, too."

They better be strong performers, because once the holiday season is off and running, EBC has five weeks to cover seven states, 20 venues, and stage 34 performances. And if that's not enough of a reason to stuff a dancer's (or tech crew's) Christmas stocking with extra-strength ibuprofen, then ruminate on the quintessential terror of live theater — many, many kids. In each venue, EBC dancers take on wrangling a bumper crop of local children through their jubilant performances after only one rehearsal. Can you imagine trying to do your job while herding a passel of exuberant moppets?

This breakneck touring and outreach is borne of survival. By developing liaisons among smaller regional theaters, EBC has persisted, while larger companies have folded. Companies like EBC depend on the annual audiences for traditional fare, in order to provide dependable weeks of work for its dancers, and to support and promote more diverse projects throughout the season.

And EBC is managing to stay out of the red by creating educational programming in every place they tour. In towns such as Gillette, Weed and Billings, EBC dancers are in the schools, in glamorous cafeterias and gymnasiums, working with students and providing hands-on contact with the artistry and athleticism of dance.

Grouse as you might, *The Nutcracker* is a delightful tradition, and while you're busily baking gingerbread cookies or making construction paper reindeer, or whipping yourself into a froth of holiday over-spending, why not make seeing some dance a part of the festivities? Here in Eugene, the last performance, Sunday Dec. 19th, will be at a reduced ticket price, underwritten by decidedly un-imperialist local home improvement center, Jerry's, who are graciously pro-grout and apparently also pro-dance. More places should be.

And if, even after this elucidating history lesson, you still feel grumpy about begrudging the time for *The Nutcracker*, at least you can do what many depend on to relieve discomfort: Think dark thoughts to amuse yourself.

Where are those live bears when you need them? **EW**



Clara with her Christmas gift, the Nutcracker.

EUGENE BALLET COMPANY: THE NUTCRACKER

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