Behind the scenes at 'The Nutcracker'

Story by DWIGHT CASWELL

Front to back: Lily Helligso, Nikia Farrow, in the back of Lily is Julia Jenkins, back right is Cory Rouch, one of the adult cast.

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman was born in 1776 and became a leading light of German Romanticism. A composer of music and a writer of tales, he is perhaps best remembered as a pioneer of the fantasy genre. He influence extended to people as diverse as Sigmund Freud, Charles Dickens, and Alfred Hitchcock.

At the age of 40, Hoffman wrote a little fantasy for children called "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," which was adapted almost 20 years later by Alexandre Dumas, père (author of "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "The Three Musketeers") into "The Nutcracker," upon which Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky based a ballet suite 48 years after that.

It was a flop.

"The Nutcracker" was not regularly performed for the next 70 years.

In the 1940s, the San Francisco Ballet began performing the piece as a Christmas production, with enormous success. By the late 1950s "The Nutcracker" had become a Christmas tradition throughout the United States, so much so that this one ballet generates 40 percent of the total ticket revenues of major American ballet companies.

Little Ballet Theater

This weekend the Little Ballet Theater presents its 41st production of "Nutcracker," and the front rows of the Astoria High School auditorium will be filled with little girls who know nothing of this history, and couldn't possibly connect "flop" and "Nutcracker" if you told them. Instead they will be caught up in the music and the spectacle, dreaming of being snowflakes or fairies or even, dare they dream so high, Clara herself.

"I thought my time was over," says Allyssa Berger, this year's Clara, "Ever since I was little, I wanted to be Clara, I wanted it so bad, and I was surprised when I got it. I thought I was too old." Ally Berger is 16, and has been dancing for 13 years. A high school junior, you might expect that with all that dancing she would be thinking about a career as a dancer, but she has other plans. Every college she is looking at has a dance program or team, but she wants to become a teacher or social worker. She says, "I enjoy helping others. It's always been a really big thing for me."

This weekend, though, she will put on her costume and once again dance "Nutcracker." "It's always helped me get in the spirit of Christmas," Berger says. She learned to dance at Maddox Dance Studio in Warrenton, where the show rehearses, and she says, "the studio is like a second home, and the girls are a second family. It's our special way of celebrating Christmas."

The production

There's more to this celebration than the dancers. Behind the snowflakes and the dancing bear are the costumes, music, lighting, and sets — and a lot of work by unsung heroes.

"That's where the show happens, says Jeanne Maddox Peterson, the dance doyen of Clatsop County, "If nothing backstage is organized, there's nothing to show onstage."

The two most important people backstage are Ann and Jay Brown, who became involved when their daughter danced in "Nutcracker" 25 years ago. That's how long Ann has been stage manager and Jay has been in charge of the sets.

"It's a lot of fun," says Ann, "and it's our volunteer work for the year." During performances she sits off to the side on stage right, from where she runs the curtain and makes sure that everyone on that side of the stage makes their cues and costume changes.

Wearing headphones and a microphone, she's in constant contact with Peterson, who says, "We could not do it without them."

Perhaps the most unique thing about Little Ballet Theater's "Nutcracker" is the orchestra. Simply the fact that the audience will not be listening to a recording, but to live music. Corey Pederson, conductor of the Columbia River Symphony, conducts the 55-piece orchestra and local hotels help to make the music happen by donating free rooms for the 18 out-of-town musicians.

Imagine, too, the logistics involved in moving the production sets from storage to the high school. After the closing curtain, no matter what the weather, the school has to be able to use the auditorium the next day.

Challenges

"It's never a sure thing," Peterson says, "We're fortunate to have a lot of the same people every year, because there's always something new to challenge us. We are always learning."

This year's "something new" was the six "legs" for the high school stage. These are the tall stage drapes used to mask the wings on either side of the stage, and they had deteriorated to the point that they could no longer be used.

Enter the woodshop class at Astoria High School, which is taught by Dan Foss, who also appears in "Nutcracker" as one of the parents. The class constructed new legs out of plastic, 20 feet wide by 15 feet high. "Without those legs," says Peterson, "it would be like performing in a barn."

As Peterson talks about the backstage crew it begins to sound like every soul in the area has or will at some time be involved. "We have to augment the lights at the high school," she says, "and Mick and Rhonda Alderman design, hang and run the lighting." There is one microphone onstage for announcements, and Dan Arnoth is in charge of sound. Johanna Gustafson from Chinook is in charge of the dressing room, with its many volunteers helping the dancers and taking care of the inevitable costume emergencies. Lauren Smalley, a teacher from Knappa, is in charge of the little boys in the cast.

All this so that 75 mice, snow angels, Arabian acrobats, candy canes, mechanical bears and dolls, and a giant nutcracker can join Father Christmas, Clara, and Fritz in a fantasy almost 200 years old, to the delight of modern children everywhere.

Photo by Dwight Caswell
Father Christmas is played by Tim Van De Grift.

Photos by Dwight Caswell
Stage manager Ann Brown with mouse Abigail Mossman, who is holding her candy cane from the fight scene.

Photo by Dwight Caswell
Emelia Cameron (left) and Hope Womack in the party scene.

Photo by Dwight Caswell
Front to back: Scarlet Wermuth, unidentified, Lillian Helligso, Milly Gustafson.

Photo by Dwight Caswell
Isabelle Marincovich as the mechanical doll; Bailee Neahring as the mechanical bear.

Photo by Dwight Caswell
Nutcracker prince: played by Joseph Justice.