

THE NUTCRACKER (1964)

Choreography:	Fernand Nault
Music:	Piotr Illitch Tchaïkovski
Set:	Peter Horne
Costumes:	François Barbeau
Lighting:	Nicholas Cernovitch

Prologue

In front of Councillor von Stahlbaum's house

Act I

It is Christmas Eve and Councillor von Stahlbaum is giving a party for his children, Clara and Fritz, and their friends. Among the guests is Clara's godfather, Doctor Drosselmeyer, who is said to have magical powers. He gives Clara a nutcracker as a present. Clara also receives a pair of magic shoes from her grandparents. Jealous, Fritz breaks his sister's nutcracker, which is hastily repaired by Doctor Drosselmeyer. Everybody dances around the Christmas tree and the nutcracker, and the evening ends on a happy note.

When the party is over and everyone has gone to sleep Clara goes downstairs to the living room and falls asleep with the nutcracker. Mice and rats invade the room and engage in a battle against tin soldiers. Suddenly, Clara is overpowered by the rodents, and the Nutcracker, brought to life by Doctor Drosselmeyer, comes to her rescue. The Nutcracker is almost killed by the King of the Rats in the ensuing duel but Clara ends the battle when she throws her magic shoe at the King of the Rats and hits him on the head. As a reward for Clara's courage, Doctor Drosselmeyer transforms the Nutcracker into a handsome Prince who takes Clara to the Land of Snow. There, she dances with the Snowflakes, and the Prince takes her to visit the Kingdom of Sweets.

Act II

Clara and the Prince are greeted by the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. The Prince tells everyone how Clara saved his life. A big party is held in her honour during which she is presented with the most wonderful sweets and is entertained by delightful characters, ending with a beautiful pas de deux. After dancing for her, the Sugar Plum Fairy reminds Clara that she must return. A golden-winged swan appears and takes Clara home.

THE NUTCRACKER

A brief history

Tchaïkovsky, a composer with a keen sense for dance, wrote three famous ballets: *Swan Lake*, a fiasco when first presented in Moscow (1877), *The Sleeping Beauty*, a triumph (1890), and *The Nutcracker*, which received mixed reviews on its premiere at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, in December 1892.

After the success of *The Sleeping Beauty*, Vsevolozsky, director of the Imperial Theatres, decided to add another full-length ballet to the Maryinsky repertoire, to be a collaboration between Tchaïkovsky and Marius Petipa. Petipa based his libretto for *The Nutcracker* on Alexandre Dumas' French version of a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann. Tchaïkovsky wrote parts of the work in the United States, where he had been invited to conduct at the opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891. After returning home, he had an assortment of drums, trumpets and children's toys brought in from abroad. In the *Variations of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, he also introduced the celesta, a new instrument at the time. Another interesting note is that the music on its own, performed as a symphonic suite in March 1892, was a greater success than the ballet.

When Petipa fell ill, he was replaced by his assistant, Lev Ivanov, who created wonderfully inventive characters and scenes for this ballet. The dances in the first-act party, the behaviour of the real children, the portrayal of the wind-up dolls, the battle scene between the tin soldiers and the rats, the marvellous idea of the snowflakes, and the classic beauty of the pas de deux are some of the elements that continue to make *The Nutcracker* one of the undisputed masterpieces of dance. This success certainly owes much, as well, to Tchaïkovsky's brilliant music, which perfectly captures the world of dreams of Clara, the young heroine of the ballet.

Revived countless times, *The Nutcracker* is now in the repertoire of numerous companies. In Russia, Vainoven's version (Kirov, 1934) replaced earlier ones by Gorsky (1917) and Lopukhov (1929), and was followed by Grigorovitch's (Bolshoi, 1966). The appeal of *The Nutcracker* has been just as strong in Western Europe. Versions include those by Sergeyev for the Vic-Wells Ballet at Sadler's Wells in London (1934), with Alicia Markova as Britain's first Sugar Plum Fairy, by Boris Romanov for the Ballets de Monte Carlo (1936), by Rudolf Nureyev, presented at the Royal Opera House (1968) and then at La Scala (1969), with Nureyev himself in the roles of Drosselmeyer and the Prince, and finally, by John Neumeier for the Frankfurt Ballet (1971). *The Nutcracker* was presented first at the Paris Opéra-Comique in a shortened version by Jean-Jacques Etchevery (1947), and then in a choreography by Michel Rayne (1965). Roland Petit staged a whimsical, modern version with the Ballets de Marseille in 1976. The first U.S. performance of the ballet was given by the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1940. More recently, Balanchine produced a new and highly successful version (1954), while Mikhail Baryshnikov staged his *Nutcracker* at the American Ballet Theatre (1976).

FERNAND NAULT TALKS ABOUT THE NUTCRACKER

“ In 1963, I was Artistic Director of the Louisville Ballet in Kentucky. This was something I did in my spare time since I was also working at the American Ballet Theatre in New York. At the time, the Louisville Ballet presented two programmes every year, one in the fall and the other in the spring. I had suggested to the company's management that we stage *The Nutcracker* the following season, which meant that we had a year to come up with the necessary funding. This also gave me enough time to seriously think over my approach and to familiarize myself with the musical score. Several weeks later, however, the chairman of the board called me in New York to announce that the Arts Council had awarded a grant for the project, and that we had to produce *The Nutcracker* before the end of the year. I suddenly had only six weeks to stage the ballet. I had no choice - it had to be done.

We quickly organized auditions for hundreds of children from dance studios all over Kentucky. My days started at ten in the morning and ended around ten in the evening. After rehearsals, I would stop by the costume workshop and then work on the models, sets, and accessories with the set designer. Day after day, I created on the spur of the moment.

The Nutcracker has marked a number of “ firsts ” in my life. My first stage appearance was, in fact, in *The Nutcracker* at the Monument National. It was also the first classical ballet I produced, as well as my first creation for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

My greatest satisfaction year after year comes from watching the children grow into different roles. At an early age, they may play a Mouse and later on, one of the Children at the party. The boys then have to wait a few years before they can join the Rats. In the meantime, the girls are transformed into Cotton Candy Angels. They later graduate to dancing in the Oriental Suite, the Waltz of the Flowers, and the Snow Scene. At this stage, some of them become members of the company. From there they may move on to dance the Spanish, Oriental, or Chinese dance, play one of the Dewdrops, or dance the solo in the Waltz of the Flowers.

I think the success of *The Nutcracker* is the result of a combination of things: the charm of the children, a feeling of nostalgia for a more peaceful time, the innocence of young Clara, and finally the classical dance marvellously interpreted to the famous Tchaikovsky score. The second act glows with the diversity of the dances as the lighting bathes each segment in its own particular colour. The fusion of realism and fantasy creates for both children and adults alike, a world of pleasure that has been ever expanding for the last 100 years. ”

— Fernand Nault