

The Nutcracker

by Jennifer Fisher

Created in 1892, during a golden age of classical ballet in Russia, *The Nutcracker* might have remained one of Tchaikovsky's lesser-known ballets if not for its virtual immigration to the United States. The first Russian critics found plenty to dislike, though they did praise parts of the choreography by Lev Ivanov, when the ballet was presented at the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg. The plot was thought too child-centered and implausible, given that it centers on an ordinary Christmas gift that leads to a journey through glittering fantasy lands; and there were thought to be too many decorative special effects. In the United States, however, these very qualities appealed to an aspirational, democratic nation that was still culturally young. After the first evening-length American production at the San Francisco Ballet (1944, by [Willam Christensen](#)) and then the influential New York City Ballet version (1954, by [George Balanchine](#)), the annual *Nutcracker* phenomenon took off across North America, providing a training ground for generations of dancers, choreographers and audiences. It also gave new life to a neglected ballet. Along the way, *The Nutcracker* earned a kind of honorary American citizenship.

Some American *Nutcrackers* keep the original German setting of the 1917 E.T.A. Hoffmann short story from which the libretto was liberally adapted (by Marius Petipa, who wrote the directions to Tchaikovsky before handing over the choreography to Ivanov). Other New World choreographers decided that a Christmas celebration and fantasy could take place in whatever town produced it, so that the first act party-goers might be doing a highland fling or salsa, reflecting traditions of many American immigrants. Weaving connections with communities across the country, *Nutcracker* has proved so financially successful that ticket sales often bankroll an entire ballet season. But cash rewards are not the only reason for *Nutcracker* love—the landmark Balanchine version proved that a money-making ballet featuring fun for

children could also be classically rigorous and rapturously beautiful.

Although [Anna Pavlova](#) had toured the U.S. in the early 20th century with a ballet called “Snowflakes,” using *Nutcracker* music, two very different abbreviated 1940 versions laid more significant groundwork for the annual *Nutcracker* phenomenon. The [Ballet Russe](#) de Monte Carlo criss-crossed the country with a popular one-act *Nutcracker* suite (selections from the ballet arranged by Alexandra Federova) in their repertoire. Starting the same year, American audiences could also see the Disney film *Fantasia*, with a whole section of animated flowers and falling leaves swirling to *Nutcracker* selections. For audiences unfamiliar with classical ballet, the popular Ballet Russe and Disney's animated version of dancers provided an unthreatening introduction to the aesthetics of the art form. As early as 1966, dance critic Jack Anderson noted the special popularity of *The Nutcracker*, calling it “a Christmas tradition” and then chronicling the number of versions that arrived as a result of increased funding for dance in the 1970s. Because of its deep meaning and annual appearance in the many communities it has become attached to, the annual *Nutcracker* can also be seen as one of ballet's most enduring rituals.

Amid the myriad adaptations, two major traditions have had perhaps the largest influence on the annual *Nutcracker* in North America. Approximations of the original Russian production survive because of a partial notation score, brought to the West by Imperial Ballet régisseur Nicholai Sergeyev and staged at the Royal Ballet (recorded in 1985). This explains why the Sugar Plum Fairy's pas de deux often looks similar from version to version. Because of the centrality of New York City and Balanchine, parts of his version (which departs widely from the Ivanov choreography he performed as a child in Russia), have shown up elsewhere. The tradition of “borrowing”

liberally from established versions is one that thrives in the vast realm of the annual *Nutcracker*, almost the way sacred teachings are repeated and evolve over time.

Whether produced by a suburban dance school, a fledgling regional ballet, or a thriving professional company, the annual *Nutcracker* continues to offer a combination of factors that have value far beyond its ticket-selling prowess: it provides roles for dancers of all abilities to grow into; it offers a secular celebratory performance during the Christmas season; and it draws dance companies, volunteers and diverse communities together to celebrate values they can agree on. Themes that have emerged most strongly in American *Nutcrackers* are the joy of childhood, the value of true friendship, the triumph of an underdog, and the longing for utopian realms where everyone gets along and speaks the same language. Usually, this language is ballet, but there have also been jazz, tap, and hip hop *Nutcrackers*; *Nutcrackers* on ice; and versions that incorporate everything from hula to belly dance to flamenco. While the second act “national dances” have sometimes reflected injurious stereotypes of Chinese or Middle-Eastern people in the past, they have also been the site of increased sensitivity, as when the traditional dragon dance influences “Tea,” and the Arabian “Coffee” variation becomes more abstract and dignified instead of reflecting Orientalized fantasies.

For women in particular, who operate in a ballet world where positions of power are often held by men, *Nutcracker* land has provided a space for achievement. Female roles are traditionally the most visible and challenging, from the girls who dance the leading role of Clara (sometimes called Marie, as in the original Hoffmann story), to the adult dancers cast as the Snow Queen and Sugar Plum Fairy, to the female choreographers and artistic directors of small companies who get experience being in charge. For young male dancers who may be discouraged from getting on the ballet stage, *The Nutcracker* also provides a valuable entry

point. As well, the annual *Nutcracker* was one of the first arenas where “color-blind casting” became familiar in the ballet world, possibly because it is clearly a fantasy in which audiences can easily imagine a diverse world coming together for one purpose.

Although the commercial success and yearly availability of *The Nutcracker* sometimes inspires a phenomenon called “Nut-bashing,” or leads people to take the ballet for granted, there are even more people who support its many virtues when they stop to consider the phenomenon seriously. It has become such an institution that there are even many satirical versions, foremost among them [Mark Morris’s *Hard Nut*](#), which sets the ballet in a campy 1960s rec room. But while Morris is irreverent, he does not completely get lost in satire. Instead, he goes even deeper into *The Nutcracker’s* original credentials by incorporating parts of Hoffmann’s short story that the ballet libretto ignored, such as the tale of the hard nut.

Balanchine was perhaps the first to recognize that an immigrant ballet could have multiple personalities, that *The Nutcracker’s* coming-of-age theme and its fantasies were serious subjects, and that a diverse country like the United States could use a Christmas ritual that did not occur in church. For countless ballet students, *The Nutcracker* is still the gateway to a career; for audiences it offers a seasonal communal celebration of child-like pleasures and optimism; for ballet, it provides continuity and the opportunity to see itself as both an arena where new versions of artistic production constantly evolve, and one where a classical form can connect to wider and wider audiences. Arguably the most popular and frequently performed ballet in the world, *The Nutcracker* is still associated with a German setting and its Russian birth, but it is in North America that its adoption and adaptation resulted in such a high profile, allowing the annual *Nutcracker* to become one of ballet’s most powerful and meaningful traditions.

A former snowflake and flower with the Louisville Ballet, **Jennifer Fisher** is an associate professor at the University of California, Irvine. Her *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (Yale, 2003) won the Special Citation of the SDHS Bueno Prize. She co-edited, with Anthony Shay, *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (Oxford, 2009). Contributor of dance writing to many newspapers and scholarly publications, she is the founding editor of *Dance Major Journal*, which features writing from dance majors, alumni, and guest dance professionals.