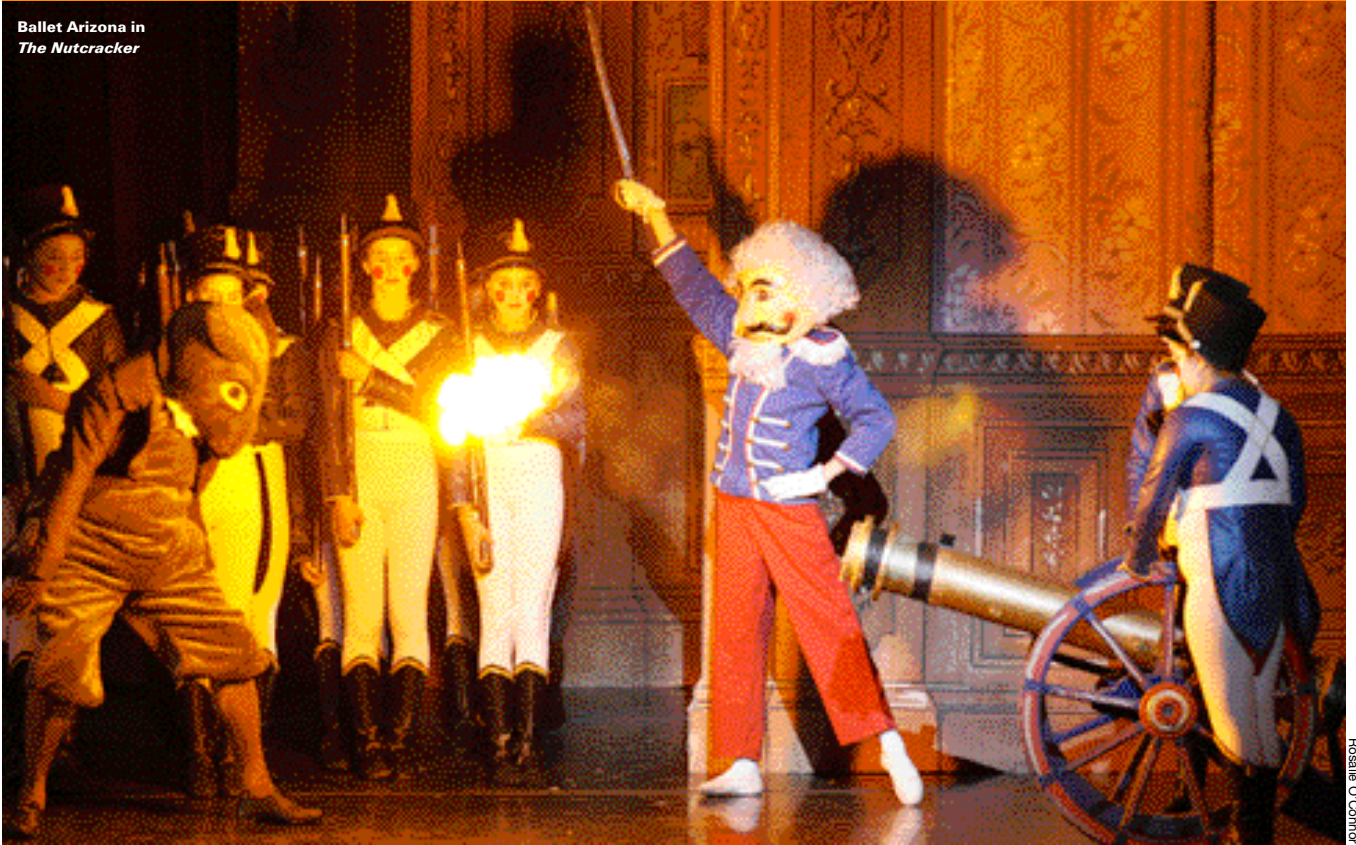


By Jocelyn Anderson

Ballet Arizona in
The Nutcracker



Rosalie O'Connor

Nut Necessary?

114 years after its world première, *The Nutcracker* still matters.

In the U.S., *Nutcracker* frenzy starts early. Companies rehearse, children audition for roles and tickets go on sale as early as summer for the December mainstay. But just how important is *The Nutcracker*?

"It's a necessity, because in America, if you don't have a *Nutcracker*, you don't survive," says Ib Andersen, artistic director of Ballet Arizona, whose new production premieres on December 9.

In fact, since San Francisco Ballet first performed a full-length *Nutcracker* in 1944 (it premiered at St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theatre in 1892), most U.S. companies have followed suit with their own versions. But as competition has grown among holiday shows, so has the challenge to its dominance over all other Christmas fare.

The question of *The Nutcracker's* popularity became serious when the Rockettes took their Christmas Spectacular show on the road—and jeopardized local *Nutcrackers*, most notably at Boston

Ballet. When the Rockettes came to town in 2004, Boston Ballet had to move its production to a smaller venue.

"It was depressing to see the busloads of suburbia flocking into the Rockettes the first year," says Mikko Nissinen, artistic director of Boston Ballet. "I'm sure they did quite well, but *The Nutcracker* has a very loyal audience. It kicks the family into the Christmas spirit."

That still seems to be true. According to John Munger, director of research and information at Dance/USA, last year, there was a 2.3 percent gain in *Nutcracker* audience attendance, a large increase from 2004, when numbers were down 3.6 percent—good news for companies that have come to rely on it for a certain portion of their budgets. At Ballet Arizona and Boston Ballet, *Nutcracker* revenue provides about a quarter of their annual budgets.

Boston has made the best of its

circumstances, scaling down its production to fit into the Boston Opera House (where it runs through December 30). And Nissinen says he feels the ballet is just as relevant as ever: "If you perform it with quality and freshness, there is so much depth in a production that you can watch it many times and it's delightful."

Even for those who work on it, the ballet is an unquestionable constant in their lives. Andersen estimates that he has spent almost seven years of his life on *The Nutcracker*. "In an ideal world, I would not say that this is something I would want," says Andersen. "But it is what it is. You can't really do anything else, because I don't think anything else would work."

"It's a peculiar thing for ballet, but it's so essential in America," he adds. "Without it, I don't think we would have the amount of companies there are now. Then where would ballet be?" ■