

stuck into pointe shoes, would kill me! Having to stand up after sitting down for an hour and having to dance is hard. Clara taught me how to act onstage, and 'Big Clara' taught me to express emotions, such as love."

—Caitlin Valentine, corps de ballet dancer, Orlando Ballet

"Because *Nutcracker* is done annually, I find myself really working hard to bring something new to the same roles every year. I look at it as a challenge to better myself."

—Joan Boada, principal dancer, San Francisco Ballet

"I wouldn't change anything about *The Nutcracker*, because it leaves plenty of room for people to do their own thing. You can play around with it. It's magic! When I was dancing for the New York City Ballet, we used to travel to so many different regions, often doing guest roles, many at smaller companies. I danced in San Francisco, Chicago, Oklahoma, Amarillo, everywhere. There are so many different *Nutcrackers*! We used to say, 'Have wand, will travel.'" —Violette Verdy, former principal, New York City Ballet

"When I was younger, I was one of the little clowns that runs out from under that big skirt. There were boy clowns and girl clowns, and I was the first girl at the National Ballet School to be a boy. I was proud that I was a girl who was strong enough to do a boy's role! Now I love the Sugar Plum Fairy. Nothing says ballerina like that tutu!" —Martine Lamy, principal, National Ballet of Canada

"This is my fifth year doing *The Nutcracker*. I've been a mouse, a party boy and Fritz. Fritz is my favorite, because he gets to be a bad boy. My favorite part is when he almost tries to beat up the Prince. He gets to act like he's about to punch him, but then the father comes and stops him. I wish I could've punched him! Fritz's costume is a green sweater and pants—it's not exactly easy to dance in. It's hot, and one year it was too small." —McInnis George, 10, student, Central Pennsylvania Ballet

...t clear, lasting memory is altering the roles of Fritz and Prince at the end. When I was younger, I always loved Fritz—he was a more interesting character and I was a pudgy little boy, so it suited me better and I knew it. As I got older, I enjoyed the Prince's mime in the second act, because I could use what I learned in ballet class to make it interesting. Now I feel it's more important for this role to look charming and sweet—that's what I look for when casting. Without *The Nutcracker*, I probably wouldn't have continued my studies—I didn't like ballet class!"

Christopher Stowell, artistic director, Oregon Ballet Theatre



The Un-cracka



Paul Kolnik

Why are Americans so nuts about *The Nutcracker*?

By Jocelyn Anderson

Since San Francisco Ballet first performed William Christensen's version of *The Nutcracker* in 1944—

exactly 60 years ago—the ballet has become something of a phenomenon among American audiences, reaching heights it never could have expected back home in Russia. Even to this day, the ballet, which faced a disappointing reception after its premiere at the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg in 1892, draws a wider-than-usual audience. It's the first ballet most Americans see, and many continue to go year after year. So how did a ballet that never received much acclaim early on come to be the most popular (and most moneymaking) ballet of all time in the United States?

"I can only suspect that it came along at a time when people were looking for some kind of Christmas entertainment and there wasn't a whole lot of competition," says Gerard Charles, artistic director of BalletMet Columbus, which will present his brand-new version of *The Nutcracker* this season. "It's very much a part of that holiday tradition. 'What are you doing for Christmas?' 'We're going to have the tree and a big feast, and we're going to see *The Nutcracker*.'"

Jennifer Fisher, author of 2003's *Nutcracker Nation*, an analysis of all things *Nutcracker*, argues that a combination of factors led to the ballet's popularity. "It's also secular, which is important because not everyone is religious in this country," she says. "And in the '50s, when people were going to church less

ble Nut



standards to be higher and to have it be honest and mean something and move people." For *The Hard Nut*, he stayed true to the music and the original E.T.A. Hoffmann story, and came up with a darker version of *The Nutcracker*, one that is serious and fun at the same time.

Actually, it's that dichotomy that many see as the reason for the ballet's remarkable success in the U.S. and its virtual failure in Russia. "My great campaign about the Russian *Nutcrackers* is that they don't really understand it," Fisher says. "They keep trying to make it serious and it already is serious. It's a serious business for the children who do it. [But] it's also fun. The two things aren't mutually exclusive."

As competition with *The Nutcracker* has increased, most productions have held their ground, though some have become more lavish and high tech to stand up to big-money productions. In New York City alone, audiences can choose between NYCB's *Nutcracker*, the Rockettes' *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, myriad Broadway shows and even the circus. But most audiences around the country continue to buy tickets to *The Nutcracker* in droves. They want to see good triumph over evil, dreams coming true, and displays of old-fashioned family values, community and celebration. For others, it's an opportunity to see their children onstage or remember when they performed as a soldier or a partygoer.

"I don't think you have to put down other Christmas entertainment to argue the worth of *The Nutcracker*," Fisher says. "*The Nutcracker* will strike a chord with anyone who is susceptible to the moving body.... For those people who ask a great deal of dance—that it be a serious artform as well as entertaining and fun—it can speak to the soul about many different things. And you can keep seeing it and see different things in it."

and less, they found another way of celebrating Christmas—with ballet."

George Balanchine gave *The Nutcracker* a boost in 1954, when he created his production for New York City Ballet. The company was featured in magazines, and in 1958, the production was broadcast on CBS's "Playhouse 90." All of a sudden, other companies were taking his lead and adding it to their December programs.

Now ballet companies rely on it. Revenue from *The Nutcracker* often funds the rest of the year's work. "We could still run for a year, but we would have to do less adventurous work; we wouldn't be able to commission new work; we'd probably have a lesser quality of dancer," says Charles. "The financial security of *The Nutcracker* is such that it can help the rest of the year happen." Because of this, most companies cannot afford to take it from the lineup.

Its pervasiveness and repetitiveness has led others to give it new spins, setting it in different places or giving it new themes. Mark Morris offered his take when he choreographed *The Hard Nut* in 1991.

"Most *Nutcrackers* are just damn boring, the first half anyway," Morris says. "Kids aren't interested in that. Adults are nostalgic, like, 'Wouldn't it be nice if my children behaved like Mr. Balanchine's do?' In fact, most kids are just bored. They don't want to go. And then Act II is kind of fun and interesting or not, depending. Just because it's a tradition doesn't mean it's good."

So Morris created a new ballet, set in the '60s, where G.I. Joe soldiers battle the rats and men in drag dance the "Waltz of the Flowers." And his, he resolved, would not be boring. "I am pro-*Nutcracker*, don't get me wrong," Morris says. "I want

Mark Morris Dance Group's *The Hard Nut*

