

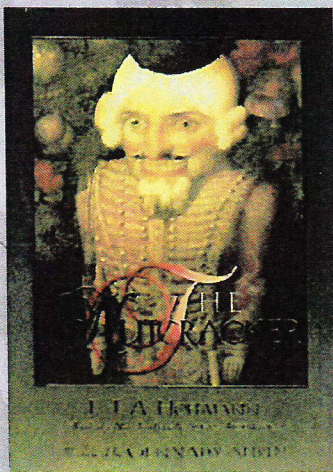
A chestnut evolves

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's NUTCRACKER

Amy Hegarty | For The New Mexican



FANTASY ICE LAND



The two-act ballet *The Nutcracker* is based on a story called "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). Set at a family party on Christmas Eve, *The Nutcracker* tells the tale of a young girl named Clara who receives a wooden nutcracker doll as a gift from her mysterious godfather, a talented toy maker. Clara's brother, Fritz, breaks the toy, and a devastated Clara places the wounded nutcracker in a doll's bed, where she tends to him. Eventually the party guests leave and everyone goes to bed.

Clara sneaks out to check on her doll, and at the stroke of midnight, the family's Christmas tree seems to grow to dizzying heights as Clara (perhaps) shrinks. An army of toy soldiers, led by the now-animated Nutcracker, and an army of mice, led by the Mouse King, engage in battle. Clara saves the wounded Nutcracker when she hits the Mouse King with her slipper; the Nutcracker kills the Mouse King and is transformed into a handsome prince. The prince takes Clara first to a beautiful pine forest, where snowflakes dance around them, and then to the Land of Sweets, where they meet the Sugar Plum Fairy, who rewards them for their bravery with a series of celebratory dances. Clara and the prince then leave together to continue their journey.

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—JEAN-PHILIPPE MALATY

Despite its underwhelming premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1892, *The Nutcracker*, based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann and set to a score by Tchaikovsky, has become one of the most popular ballets in modern history, firmly taking root in mainstream American culture after New York City Ballet debuted George Balanchine's staging of the work in 1954. For dance companies that present the piece each year as part of an annual holiday tradition, suiting up for another performance could feel more like a chore than a celebration. This isn't the case, however, for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, which presents the work at the Lensic Performing Arts Center on Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 11 and 12. "*The Nutcracker* is an interesting production for us because we're not a classical ballet company," said executive director Jean-Philippe Malaty. "Since we're contemporary, this is a big switch in terms of style and mindset. We find it exciting and look forward to it because it's so different from our usual repertoire."

For Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, which was founded in 1996, the usual repertoire often includes new works (more than 20 so far) commissioned from today's leading choreographers, such as Jorma Elo, Dominique Dumais, and Moses Pendleton. Given this tendency toward innovation, it was unlikely that something as conventional as *The Nutcracker* would be presented in a strictly traditional manner. "Overall, our production is very cinematic; there's a lot happening on the stage at one time, so it feels almost like a movie," Malaty said. "We also wanted our *Nutcracker* to be more of a spectacle than usual. In Act Two, when Clara and the Prince arrive in the Land of Sweets, we have a carousel onstage as well as trapeze artists and other circus performers."

The ballet that's known for scenes called "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" and "Waltz of the Flowers" is, of course, famously popular with young ballet-goers — something that was a consideration for Malaty and his colleagues during the creative process. "Because *The Nutcracker* appeals so strongly to children, we had to make it entertaining and fast-paced," Malaty said. "Also, we made cuts to the music, so the production is slightly shorter than usual." While children figure prominently in the *Nutcracker* audience, they also fill a number of roles in the ballet's cast. Alluding to the fact that Aspen Santa Fe Ballet has schools in both of its home cities, Malaty said, "*The Nutcracker* gives us the opportunity to



put professional dancers and students together. This is a great experience because it inspires a lot of kids to keep up with their dance study, and it ignites big dreams of becoming a dancer; it really turns them on to the magic of performing onstage.”

This year there are 36 professional dancers and 70 children in each cast, with three rotating casts of children. The choreography was created 15 years ago by Malaty and Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s artistic director, Tom Mossbrucker. “Both Tom and I had been involved with so many *Nutcracker* productions in the past that we were able to put something together. This is the only work in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s repertoire that features our own choreography,” Malaty said. “We tried to be very authentic with the featured dancers. In Act Two, we have a dancer from China performing a Chinese ribbon dance and a dancer from Russia doing a traditional Russian folk dance, for example. It’s exciting because there’s a lot of diversity in this production.” Also, Malaty said, with another nod to the children in the audience, “We’ve used a lot of humor throughout the production to counter the scary elements of the story.”

Using its own choreography gives the company a particular advantage when presenting *The Nutcracker* each year. “We have the liberty to make tweaks or changes as necessary in order to keep both the audience and the dancers interested,” Malaty said. “The production, therefore, is always morphing slightly, always evolving.”

Keeping the audience interested won’t likely be a problem, with the company honoring a late-19th-century classic while employing a 21st-century sensibility. “We wanted our *Nutcracker* to have a strong identity and not be just another standard production, so we gave it some unique twists,” Malaty said. “Hopefully, when the audience sees it, they will be able to say, yes, that’s the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet.” ◀

details

- ▼ Aspen Santa Fe Ballet presents *The Nutcracker*
- ▼ 2 & 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11; 1 & 5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12
- ▼ Lencis Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▼ \$20-\$62; 988-1234, www.ticketssantafe.org;
for more information, see www.aspensantafeballet.com

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