

The Story

French author Alexander Dumas, well-known for writing The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo, adapted the tale of the Nutcracker to the version with which we are familiar today. Both Marius Pepita and George Ballenchine used the storyline as adapted by Dumas as the basis for their productions. While variations to the details in the story and characters' names are common, most modern productions adhere to the basic outline of the story originally used by Pepita.

The Nutcracker is now the most performed ballet in the United States. The artistic director or choreographer can make changes, subtle or drastic, in order to make the show unique to the performance company. Since The Nutcracker is so widely performed, variations keep the show fresh and interesting from year to year and individuate one production from another. They keep the audience and dancers from getting bored and allow the artistic director to express his or her individuality through the dance. Changes might be made for more practical reasons as well, for example to accommodate the unique skills and make-up of the company.

The Nutcracker as it is performed by Children's Ballet Theatre is choreographed by artistic director Gregory M. George. Mr. George has added some unique elements to the show, without compromising the original story, and makes a concerted effort add new surprises each year. Below is a description of the basic tale of The Nutcracker, with CBT's variations highlighted.

Act One

Prologue

The opening scene in the CBT Nutcracker, a prologue to the story, is an addition. This year's prologue serves as an introduction to the main characters, particularly Uncle Drosselmeyer and the Guardian Angel, another original element. The prologue takes us to Herr Drosselmeyer's toy shop, where he is making the dolls he will bring to the Stahlbaum home. Partially completed dolls are strewn about the room and helpers are busily working in the shop. An exhausted Drosselmeyer studies a toy-maker's manual and struggles to stay awake. He falls asleep, book in hand, and the workshop is visited by a Guardian Angel. When Drosselmeyer awakens, he knows

exactly what needs to be done, and is energized to make it happen. He gives directions to his assistant and the shop is abuzz with activity. The Stahlbaum family arrives, paying Uncle Drosselmeyer a visit. He gives them a tour of the workshop, and the children, especially Clara, are fascinated with one doll in particular: a Nutcracker trimmed as a soldier. The music chosen for this scene is by Russian composer Alexander Glazunov, a contemporary of Tchaikovsky.

The Party

The Stahlbaums are having a Christmas party. Mr. and Mrs. Stahlbaum and the Stahlbaum children, Clara and Fritz, gather in the parlor to welcome their guests, including Uncle Drosselmeyer. Drosselmeyer is a clock and toymaker, and brings excitement with him in the form of life-sized dancing dolls, the hit of the party. All the children open their gifts, Fritz and Clara receive special gifts from Drosselmeyer. Although Fritz is initially quite happy with the gift he receives, he becomes very jealous when Clara is given a magnificent Nutcracker Doll. The doll is admired by all at the party, and Clara is quickly enthralled by it, but Fritz, in his jealous state, grabs the doll from her and promptly breaks it. Drosselmeyer magically produces a handkerchief and uses it to bandage the broken the doll. The party continues late into the night with Clara eventually falling asleep to with her Nutcracker doll in hand.

The Dream

As the clock strikes midnight, Clara awakens to check on her beloved Nutcracker Doll. In the family parlor she sees Drosselmeyer, who seems to be magically controlling the action as the Christmas tree grows to an enormous height and the toys in the room come to life, including Fritz's toy soldiers. Suddenly the room is filled with a group of mice who frighten Clara, and are then joined by a Rat King. The Nutcracker Doll comes to life, and forms an army of toy soldiers to defend Clara from the Rat King.

The Battle

Mice and toy soldiers engage in battle until finally the Rat King and Nutcracker Prince face each other in a duel. The Nutcracker Prince and his army prevail, killing the Rat King and driving the mice, carrying their fallen king, away from the Stahlbaum home. The death of the Rat King is another part of the show Mr. George modifies each year. In previous years the Rat has been caught in a mousetrap, attacked by a cat, and squished by a wedge of cheese. How will he die this year?

The Land of Snow

The Nutcracker Prince then escorts Clara to the Land of Snow where they enter an enchanted forest. Beautiful dancing snowflakes and a Snow Queen and King greet Clara and the Prince. They dance for them prior to sending them on the rest of their journey.

Act Two

Angels / Guardian Angel

Act Two opens with a group of angels who appear in the mist of the forest. The Guardian Angel introduced in the CBT prologue makes a reappearance here, accompanied by four attendants. Taking care to oversee all that happens to Clara, her arrival precedes that of Clara and her Prince. This scene opens with music from *The Nutcracker*, but the Guardian Angels dance is an addition, and although the music is Tchaikovsky's, it is from a different composition.

The Land of Sweets

Next, the Prince and Princess escort Clara to the Land of Sweets, where the Sugar Plum Fairy celebrates their triumph and arrival with dances of the sweets of many lands. They include Spanish (chocolate), Arabian (coffee), Russian (peppermint), Chinese (tea), Danish (mirliton), and the Waltz of the Flowers. CBT adds the Selkirk dance, to represent Scottish shortbread. As a Grand Finale, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier dance a Pas de Deux (dance of two).

Apotheosis

Clara awakens from her dream by the Christmas tree with her beloved Nutcracker, which is now completely repaired. Was it a dream?

Lessons

CREATIVE WRITING:

Listen to a selection of instrumental music. Choose any selection, classical, modern, anything that will grab the interest and imagination of your students. Give students the opportunity to listen to the music carefully. Ask students to imagine, as they listen, what story the music is

telling. Then, have students put the story they've imagined in writing. Depending on grade level, give students the opportunity to critique each other's writing.

SOCIAL STUDIES:

Have students research each of the countries represented in the land of sweets (Spain, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, Denmark, Scotland). Younger students can focus on these countries as they are today, older students might look at maps and resources from the late 1800s, when the show premiered and compare them to current day. At a grade appropriate level, have students study borders, population, traditional foods, folk dances, celebrations, folk tales, and of course the sweets of those countries. This can be a whole class or small group activity, depending on grade level and ability. If small group students can put the information they find together to present to the rest of the class.

MUSIC:

Have older students choose new music to tell the story of The Nutcracker. Assign specific scenes from the ballet to pairs or small groups of students and have them assign a song to that scene which reflects the mood and plot of that part of the story. Allow them to use any music, from any genre except Tchaikovsky's, as long as they can find or perform an instrumental version of their selection. They can also use a combination of songs for one scene.

For younger students, choose a piece of music from The Nutcracker. As you listen with the class point out specific instruments; ask students to identify what, in that scene, the instrument might represent. (Falling snow, drops of sugar, nuts being cracked, swords clashing, or sleep taking over, for example). Have students explore how different sounds can create different moods.

For more ideas visit:

<http://www.nycballet.com/nutcracker/intro/sample-lesson.html>

<http://www.nycballet.com/nutcracker/intro/curriculum.html>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/education/plan_nutcracker_overview.html

<http://www.centralfloridaballet.com/images/stories/lessons/nutcrackercritique.pdf>

<http://www.ipballet.org/pdf/NutcrackerStudyGuide.pdf>

Many of the plans available on these sites can be adapted to fit a variety of grade levels.

