

NUTCRACKER

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suddenly hit me that I'd actually have to go to all these shows and sit through eight or more hours of "Nutcracker." Was I crazy? What had I agreed to? Maybe my great idea wasn't so great after all.

Though I cover arts and entertainment, I generally don't cover classical music or ballet; I've only seen "The Nutcracker" once in my life, as an adult, at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples. Attending "The Nutcracker" just wasn't a Stetson family tradition when I was growing up.

There are countless versions of "The Nutcracker." George Balanchine's interpretation isn't the only game in town. "The Nutcracker Suite" can be found in "Fantasia" (the 1940 animated Walt Disney film, not the singer.) There's the classic Tom and Jerry version, the Princess Tutu anime version. There's a Barbie doll version, and even a Care Bears version, believe it or not. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn wrote a "Nutcracker Suite" for the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and there's also "The Swinging Nutcracker."

And if you've seen the musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie" on stage, "The Nutcracker Suite" is played during a scene in a speakeasy -- "The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." It's jazzy, boozy and enormously clever.

I have no great love for "The Nutcracker." And yet, attending a production is an annual tradition for thousands of people. And last week, the New York City Ballet just celebrated its 2,000th performance.

Then on Sunday, Nov. 18, I saw a story on the front cover of the Arts & Leisure section of "The New York Times." Written by Alastair MacAulay, it was called "So Many Nutcrackers, So Little Time."

"Oh no," I thought. "Is this my story, already written?"

I read the first sentence, a quote from Richard Buckle, the British critic: "Well, we are one more Nutcracker nearer to death."

"Oh great," I thought. And just stopped reading.

But I did go on to see four different versions of "The Nutcracker" this season. And believe me, four was more than enough.

(But there was a production up in Clearwater in early December I wish I'd seen: "The Chocolate Nutcracker," which included African, classical, and gospel music, hip-hop and jazz. I bet it would've been worth the trip.)

With each performance, Tchaikovsky's score crawled into my head like an ear worm. But it could've been worse. It could've been "Muskrat Love."

As for me, I'll always remember this as the season I overdosed on "The Nutcracker." Maybe my bingeing this year makes up for my lack of attendance throughout childhood.

Here's what I saw:

>> Nov. 24, 8 p.m. "George Balanchine's The Nutcracker"

Miami City Ballet and the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra
The Philharmonic Center for the Arts, Naples

It's a tradition -- every Thanksgiving weekend, the Miami City Ballet performs "George Balanchine's The Nutcracker" at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts, accompanied by the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra.

For some, it's a signal that the holiday season's officially begun. In fact, I felt Christmas-y just looking at the garlands hung on the balcony walls. Little boys wore long pants and their hair had recently been combed, little girls dressed in taffeta and black velvet, with bows at the back.

This is a traditional "Nutcracker," classic and majestic. I just sat back and let its

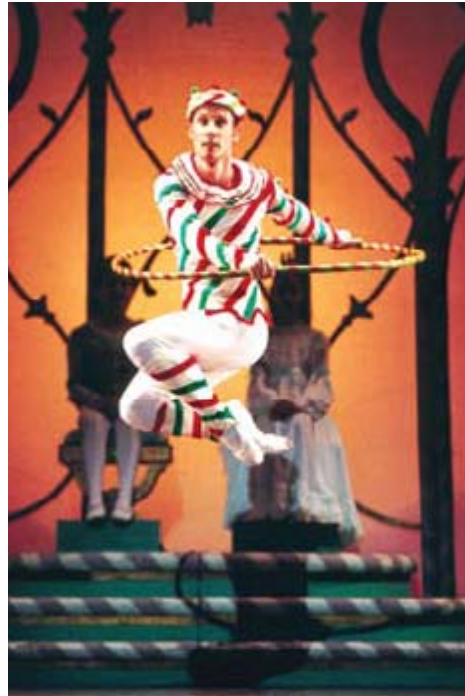
beauty wash over me.

As one person said to me, "Well, you're going to be starting out with the best."

And it was true. I was just hoping it wasn't all downhill from here.

I was stunned by the beauty of the sugar plum fairies and the snowflakes, twirling and swirling. But the growing tree didn't astound me as much as it did the first time I saw "The Nutcracker."

I remember thinking then that Herr Drosselmeier was creepy, almost like a child molester. He returns to the house unannounced and stands over the little girl's sleeping body, then manipulates her



into falling in love with his nephew? Kinda strange. If I had kids, I'd keep them away from Drosselmeier.

I don't remember this happening last time I saw the production, but this Drosselmeier crouched on top of the grandfather clock like a gargoyle, though with his cape he also looked like a vampire.

And I couldn't help rooting for the mice, though I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to. The Nutcracker/Prince just struck me as being a little haughty. The mice were cute, each with an oversized button on their costumes, and giant safety pins. I couldn't help wishing they'd win, instead of the humans.

There also seems something odd about how the two children spend the entire second act just sitting and watching everyone else dance. Then everyone bows down to them at the end. Maybe it's because it's a child's dream, and children are naturally egocentric. But it seems to me that the children should be bowing to the dancers instead, for their artistry, for their talent.

Seeing a traditional production of "The Nutcracker" first, before any other version, was like hearing a jazz combo play. First, they play the melody straight, then they improvise. I wasn't sure what the future "improvisations" would be like.

>> Dec 1, 1 p.m.

An Original Broadway Palm Children's Theatre Production of "The Nutcracker"
Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre,
Fort Myers

I was led to believe this was a children's version of the ballet, but I must have misunderstood. Because it wasn't. I was also warned to expect lots of yelling and dancing and audience participation. ("I want to see how they do that," my friend Paula said.) But that didn't happen either.

I was startled when the curtains opened and the people started talking to each other -- in very stilted dialogue.

"Where's the dancing?" I wondered. "Where's the ballet?"

The show lumbered along, with its horrible dialogue. I was sure the kids, with all their sophistication, would be insulted, but when I looked around, they seemed to be enjoying it.

Finally, I broke one of my cardinal theater-going rules and leaned over to whis-

per to my friend Paula, who was staring at the stage as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

"This is weird," I whispered.

"And then some," she whispered back.

On-stage, Fritz, the son, was being a total brat. But his father was an over-the-top disciplinarian, a tyrant. The play was highly moralistic, as if the playwright was wagging his finger at the audience.

At one point, one of the actors sang. I use the term loosely. Suffice it to say that some of the notes were beyond reach, though that didn't stop the actor from groping for them. It was like sitting in church listening to someone sing "O Holy Night" when they couldn't hit the high notes.

"This is freakin' weird," I whispered.

"It's beyond weird," Paula responded.

Things got better when Marie fell asleep and the dolls came to life. But the best thing was that Jayar Garcia, the actor playing Fritz, was now the Mouse King: a streetwise Mouse King with a hip-hop attitude and two bumbling sidekicks, Joe and Schmo. When Jennie Hollander-Carosiello, a local favorite, came back on stage in dual roles as the Snow Princess and the Sugar Plum Fairy (complete with cotton-candy pink hair), things livened up.

The kids went crazy when the Mouse King, Schmo and Joe started dancing hip-hop. (Was that spinning noise I heard Mr. Balanchine, in his grave? If so, I'm sure the spins were perfectly executed.)

When the show was over, the actors took questions from the audience, then went out into the lobby to sign autographs for the kids.

Paula and I admired the lobby decorations -- Christmas trees hanging upside down from the ceiling, and hot pink, blue and lime-green skinny trees. If only the show had been as colorful and creative.



>> Dec. 8, 4 p.m. Gulfshore Ballet and BIG Arts present "The Nutcracker" Schein Hall, BIG Arts, Sanibel

The afternoon performance of Gulfshore Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker" wasn't sold out, yet the parking lot was full. I had to park in a lot across the street and wound up closer to Periwinkle Drive than BIG Arts.

There was a feeling of community, as I walked to the hall along with parents coming to see their kids, grandparents cradling after-show bouquets in their arms like babies.

The excitement of the dancers about to perform was barely contained; younger girls dressed as angels flitted about, older girls in white tutus, dressed as snowflakes, walked by. It had the atmosphere of a high school performance, and sitting in the rafters at Schein Hall added to the feeling.

I read a note in the program requesting no one use video cameras or flash photography, as it would distract the dancers. Good! That meant no parents jockeying for a better position, blocking others' view of the stage. The program then went on to add that "professional quality DVDs of the performances would be available in the lobby for \$25." And the cynic in me started adding up how much that would rake in, taking into account there were approximately 70 performers...times parents, then add in grandparents and aunts and uncles wanting a copy.

I also began wondering whether "The Nutcracker" would still be as popular a

ballet if it didn't provide so many opportunities for children every year. How many of these people would still go to this ballet if they didn't have a child or grandchild, niece or nephew performing in it?

Yet when the show began -- excerpts from the classic ballet, not the entire show -- my cynicism melted. I didn't know a soul performing, so was surprised when I found myself tearing up while watching the little pre-school girls skip across the stage or walk on tip-toe, hands above their heads, in imitation of ballerinas. It was a definite Hallmark moment.

The stage seemed too small for the older dancers; I kept worrying someone was going to dance into a wall. And they had to cluster on the sides of the stage as it didn't appear to have wings.

Peter Walker performed the role of the Soldier Doll, to much applause. A former Gulfshore Ballet student, he now attends the School of American Ballet in Lincoln Center in New York City, which was founded by Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein. His very presence at the ballet seemed to say: See, I made it, you can make it too.

Two people from the New York City Ballet danced the Pas de Deux: principal dancer Jared Angle and soloist Sara Mearns. (Mearns also danced the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy.)

After the show, parents gathered around their children, handing them bouquets, taking photos.

>> Dec. 18, 2 a.m. Mark Morris' "The Hard Nut" Ovation TV

If you need an antidote to the deadly seriousness of tradition, "The Hard Nut," choreographed by Mark Morris, is it. I accidentally caught it mid-performance on Ovation TV, that wonderful arts cable station, then later watched it again in its totality.

Ovation TV ran "The Hard Nut" a number of times this month as part of their "Battle of the Nutcrackers." The station was calling it "The Ultimate Holiday Face-Off," an all-out smack-down. Their commercials were gloriously silly, with two nutcrackers facing each other, butting heads and exploding, just like the opening of Monday Night Football.

The station was showing four Nutcrackers: "Bolshoi Ballet: The Nutcracker," "George Balanchine The Nutcracker," "The Hard Nut (Mark Morris Dance Company)" and "Matthew Bourne's Nutcracker!" Two traditional versions, two modern. Viewers were urged to vote for their favorite online, with the winner replayed on Christmas Eve.

"The Hard Nut" was great fun to watch, even though I'd already overdosed on three Nutcrackers this month. The music's still Tchaikovsky, but the ballet's set in the '60s, with miniskirts, bellbottoms, wide lapels and long hair. It's campy, it's creative. You don't know what to expect next.

Even the generally staid opening party scene is hilarious, with guests getting drunk, flirting with each other and chasing the drink cart. The sassy maid's played by a man (Kraig Patterson), as is Mrs. Stahlbaum (Peter Wing Healey), who also dances lead in "Waltz of the Flowers." Even the snowflakes and flowers have male dancers interspersed among the women.

The costuming (by Martin Pakledinaz) is witty. (For example, the toy soldiers who fight the rats are macho GI Joe dolls, with round, green helmets and tattooed muscles to rival Popeye's.) And the set design by Adrienne Lobel are black-and-white cartoon-like sets, based on the work of Charles Burns.

Despite all the "Nutcrackers" I saw this year, I plan to start a new holiday tradition: watch the Mark Morris Dance Company's "Hard Nut" every December. And I plan on buying a couple extra copies to give as early Christmas gifts to friends next year. After all, nothing says Christmas like a bunch of men dancing in tutus.

But for the next 11 months, I hope I never see another Nutcracker. ■