

The Nutcracker

Study guide



INTRODUCTION

This study guide was designed to help teachers prepare their classes to see a performance of a winter fairy tale, *The Nutcracker*. This guide includes information about our school, a synopsis of the story narrated through the dance, a brief guide to classical ballet, and class discussions/activities based on the enclosed material. We hope it will be useful and that you and your class will find this performance both entertaining and educational.

What is Ballet?

History

The very first ballets, which were created almost 500 years ago, do not look anything at all like the ballets we see performed by ballet companies today.

The word ‘ballet’ comes from the Italian word *ballare*, which means to dance. The first ballets were court dances (called *balletti* in Italian), which were danced by the men and women of the Italian Court. These ballets were not performed in theaters, but usually in court palaces for the rich and famous.

The steps in these ballets were very simple because the costumes were made with very heavy fabrics and ornaments. Some costumes weighed as much as 150 pounds. But still the movements were very graceful, emphasizing the head, arms and upper body, while the dancers created very elaborate circles, lines and other shapes known as floor patterns.

The first court ballet that we know about was choreographed in 1489, in honor of the Duke of Milan’s marriage to Isabel of Aragon.

Ballet Language

A whole language describes the different steps in ballet. Because people first began writing down the steps of the dances in France, French is used for the language of ballet.

Glossary

ADAGIO	A slow movement in dance.
ALLEGRO	A dance performed to a lively and fast tempo (as opposed to adagio).
BALLERINA	Female ballet dancer.
CHOREOGRAPHER	Derived from the Greek words <i>choria</i> (dance) and <i>graphes</i> (writer), movements arranged and planned within a dance.
ELEVATION	A term used to indicate the height of the jump attained by the dancer.
DANSEUR	Male ballet dancer.
FONDU	“Sinking down,” a plie performed on one leg only.
GRAND BATTEMENT	A high kick that is done to the front, side, and back.
JETE	A leap from one leg to the other that may be performed in all directions.
PAS DE DEUX	A dance involving two people, usually involving a danseur and a ballerina.
PIROUETTE	To whirl or spin on one foot.
PLIE	A bending of the knees with the feet in any one of the five ballet positions. All jumps must begin and end in plie.
POINTE SHOES	Satin slippers that have a glue hardened toe and a strongly reinforced sole to support the arch of the foot when the dancer is standing on the tips of the toes.
RELEVE	A rise onto the ball of the foot or the tips of the toes.
“TURN OUT”	Ballet dancers perform all their movements in a turned out position, which means that the legs are rotated outward from the hip. The “turn out” enables the dancer to perform all movements gracefully.

The Nutcracker

The Original Tale

The Nutcracker is based on the original story by the German writer and composer **E.T.A Hoffman**.

The original story takes place in **Nuremberg, Germany**, on Christmas Eve, and centers on a little girl named **Marie**. Marie and her brother, **Fritz**, receive many gifts from their parents and from their godfather, **Dr. Drosselmeyer**. One of his gifts to them is a **wooden nutcracker**. Marie takes an instant liking to the toy. She and Fritz start taking turns cracking nuts in the Nutcracker's mouth, when Fritz accidentally breaks its jaw and teeth. Marie becomes upset and insists in nursing the Nutcracker back to health. Before going to sleep that night, Marie tenderly puts the Nutcracker to bed and promises to care for him until he is recovered.

Before Marie can get to bed, an army of mice led by the wicked **Mouse King** appears. They come out of the walls and up through the floor boards, making a frightful hissing noise as they slowly march toward her. As they advance, the Nutcracker jumps from his bed, calling his army of toys to attention. The Nutcracker and his army fight the mice, but are no match for them; the mice drive the toys back toward the glass cupboard from which they came. In a desperate attempt to help, Marie takes off her shoe and throws it at the Mouse King, knocking him to the floor. At once, the entire mouse army disappears, and Marie faints.

The next morning, Marie awakens to see her mother and Dr. Drosselmeyer beside her. She asks about the Nutcracker and inquires whether or not all the mice have gone away. Marie describes the battle to her mother and the doctor, but sees that neither one of them believe her story. They attempt to console her and gently tell Marie that she needs to rest, that all the mice have gone away, and the Nutcracker is safe and sound in his glass cupboard.

*Was this all Marie's dream, or did it really happen?
That is for you to decide.*

A Winter Fairy Tale

Based on the Tchaikovsky ballet *The Nutcracker*, *A Winter Fairy Tale* is an original production with new choreography to a timeless story. Choreographed by Edouard Kouchnarev, a new generation Russian choreographer who has danced and choreographed throughout the world, *A Winter Fairy Tale* is especially tailored for kids. This ballet is performed exclusively by School of Russian American ballet students and affiliated company dancers.

Synopsis

As homes light up with warm fires and the streets become covered with blankets of white fluffy snow, a season of fantasy and magic envelopes the children. Kids come out and play in the snow and run home to unwrap their presents during the special holiday season. **Fritz** is having a big birthday party and invites all of his friends. Fritz's parents are very wealthy and each year he has a grand party and receives many presents. This year his godfather, **Dr. Drosselmeyer**, the magician, gives him the beautiful **Nutcracker doll**. But Fritz doesn't care about this doll and immediately breaks it. All the kids go to eat the birthday cake and Fritz leaves the broken Nutcracker doll under the Christmas tree.

In Fritz's home, lived a young girl named Marie, who was an orphan who was never invited to any of Fritz's birthday parties. She had always wanted to participate in the festivities with the other kids, but she spent her holidays scrubbing and cleaning the floors.

She always dreamt about meeting a Prince and marrying him. When she was cleaning she saw the broken Nutcracker doll and she fell in love with him. But Marie was very upset that the Nutcracker doll was broken and her ultimate dream was for the Nutcracker to be fixed. Dr. Drosselmeyer, the *magician*, fixes the Nutcracker doll and he magically comes to life. At that moment, all of the other toys and the Christmas tree come to life and dance for Marie in the **Ball of Toys**. But an **Army of Mice** attack the toys and break up the ball. Marie helps the Nutcracker win the battle against the Mice by throwing a piece of cheese at the **King Mouse**. After they win the battle they arrive in the **Kingdom of Toys and Sweets**, and the toys and candy dance the Spanish, Arabian, Chinese, Russian and French dance. Next Marie and the Nutcracker travel to **The Land of Flowers**, and the Nutcracker turns into a Prince. Marie, who has grown into a beautiful young woman, marries the Nutcracker Prince during the "**Waltz the Flowers.**"

In the end, Marie's dream came true, and she married a Prince, do you believe your dreams can come true?

The Composer

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, born in 1840, was the son of a mining inspector in Russia. He studied music as a child, attending both the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the Moscow Conservatory. Over the course of his career, he composed numerous works, including six symphonies, four concertos, and three ballets. He performed at the opening concert in Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1891. That same year, Tchaikovsky was commissioned to write the music for *The Nutcracker*. Marius Petipa, the original choreographer, presented him with the exact scenario that he wanted, including the rhythm, tempo, and number of measures for each dance. At the premiere the ballet was not at all successful, however now it is the most known and most loved ballet.

Pre-Performance:

1. Listen to selections of *The Nutcracker Suite* by P.I. Tchaikovsky.
2. Divide children up into small groups and allow them to create their own dances with the different pieces of music.
3. Discuss with your students what is necessary to put together a performance of *The Nutcracker*
4. Discuss the people involved and what their jobs are to create this huge production.
5. Have the children make a "ticket" for *The Nutcracker*. What is listed on a ticket to a performance (Name of the show, Time, Date, etc.)? How much does the ticket cost?
6. Role-play with selling tickets (sell tickets to different shows at different costs), collecting tickets, and entering the performance.
7. Dancing is the communication of dialogue or emotion through movement rather than words. Choose a section of a story that you are reading in class and communicate it through movement or expressions rather than words. Ask the students to laugh if the character finds something funny; to frown if the character becomes sad, or to show fearful faces if the character is scared
8. The corps de ballet consists of dancers who dance together in one group on stage. They must work together to create the beautiful patterns that we see on stage. Students can also work together to create a simple dance. Here would be an example:

- a. Holding hands in one big circle, everyone walks 8 steps to the right and stops.
 - b. Walk 4 steps into the middle of the circle. Then, walk four steps out of the circle.
 - c. Everybody lets go of each other's hands. Bend to touch the ground and then reach up high into the sky.
 - d. Hold hands once again and repeat to the left.
- Variations of this movement can be used.

Some people to mention are:

- Choreographer: This person creates the steps of the dances.
- Ballet Master/Mistress: This person catalogues the steps and rehearses the dancers.
- Dancer: This person performs the choreography on stage.
- Stagehand: This person performs a variety of backstage work, including hanging drops, moving sets on and off the stage, monitoring props, etc.
- Costume Mistress: This person designs and assembles the costumes for the dancers.
- Lighting Designer: This person designs the lights that will set the mood of the ballet.
- Sound Technician: This person sets up and operates the equipment for the music.
- Stage Manager: This person directs everyone backstage to do his or her job at the correct time so that the production can run smoothly.

Post-Performance:

- 1) Help students become familiar with vocabulary terms by pointing out terms as you read the story to them.
- 2) Read a version of The Nutcracker story.
- 3) Discuss some of the following with your students to help them to prepare their "story map" listing the main characters, setting, and events of the story:

- Where does the story take place?
- When does it take place?
- Who is the main character of the story?
- What is she like/how would you describe her?
- Who are some of the other characters? (Students' focus should be directed to Godfather Drosselmeier, Nutcracker Prince, Sugar Plum Fairy)
- What is each like/how would you describe him/her?
- What do they do in the story?
- What is Marie's special present?
- What strange things happen at midnight?
- What happens to Marie's Nutcracker?
- How does Marie save the Nutcracker?
- Where does the Prince take Marie?
- How do the inhabitants of the Land of Sweets celebrate their Prince's return?
- How does the story end?

- 4) Provide a prompt for illustrating or writing a reaction to the story. Some sample prompts include:

- "My favorite part of the Nutcracker story is . . ."
- "The scariest part of the Nutcracker story is .."
- "The saddest part of the Nutcracker story is . . ."
- "The happiest part of the Nutcracker story is.."

5) The Sugar Plum's Attendants present several types of candy to Clara when she sits on the throne to watch the divertissements. If the attendants bring 5 peppermints and 4 lollipops, how many pieces of candy have they brought to Clara? What if they brought 3 peppermints, 2 cupcakes, and 7 caramels? If Clara had 10 pieces of candy and she ate 2 pieces of candy, how many pieces of candy would she have left?

Substitute different numbers to create more equations.

Standards: Kindergarten, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Sets 26; (Problem Solving: Problem Solving): 23; First Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Addition and Subtraction): 43, 47; (Problem Solving: Word Problems): 43, Second Grade, Mathematics (Problem Solving: Addition and Subtraction): 29; (Problem Solving: Word Problems): 31]

6) Soldiers fought mice in the Battle Scene. If there were 2 rows of 4 mice on one side of the stage, how many mice would there be? If there were 3 rows of 3 soldiers on the other side of the stage, how many soldiers would there be? Are there more mice or more soldiers on stage? How many total dancers on stage?

Standards: Second Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Multiplication Readiness): 39, 40; Third Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Multiplication and Division): 42, 43, 44]

7) Clara and the Nutcracker Prince travel through The Land of Snow to arrive at The Kingdom of Sweets. No two snowflakes are alike. How is snow made? At what temperature does it form? What time of year does snow form? Describe a snowflake. Make a paper snowflake card using the attached instructions.

Kindergarten, Science (Physical Science: Structure of Matter): 5, 6; First Grade, Science (Earth/ Space Science: Earth Processes: Weather and Climate): 15; Sixth Grade, Science (Physical Science: Structure of Matter): 6]

8) Have the children write about their favorite dance from The Kingdom of Sweets. Describe the movement from that particular dance. Was it slow or quick, intricate or simple? How many dancers were in it? What did the costumes look like and what country/sweet did they represent? Younger children can draw their favorite

dance. **Standards: Kindergarten, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 13; Fourth Grade, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 38, 39, 40, 42; Fifth Grade, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 39,40, 41, 42]**

9) On a sheet of paper do the following activities:

a. Find the various countries on a map of the world. Map a ship's voyage from Germany (where *The Nutcracker*) to various countries on the map. How long would the voyage have taken in 1892 (when the ballet was originally set)? What were the other ways to transport goods during that time period? How do we transport goods today?

b. Different folk dances came from different countries. Match up which dance came from which country.

c. Tchaikovsky composed most of the dances for Act II according to the rhythms and styles of the folk dances of different countries from which those Christmas foods came. Discuss why the Spanish dance represented chocolate; the Chinese dance represented tea, and so on.

Kindergarten, Social Studies (Core Social Studies Skills: Information Processing): 23; Fine Arts (Dance: Critical Analysis and Aesthetic Understanding): 20, Second Grade, Fine Arts (Dance: Artistic Skills and Knowledge: creating Performing, Producing): 13; Social Studies (Geography: Map and Globes): 44]

Great Websites for Nutcracker Activities

Boston Ballet Nutcracker Kid's Page- Crossword puzzle, word search, etc.

<http://www.bostonballet.org/nutcracker/nutcrackerkids/default.aspx>

National Ballet of Canada Nutcracker Study Guide-word searches, mazes, coloring page

http://www.national.ballet.ca/EducationAndOutreach/pdf/Nutcracker_activity_%20book.pdf

Party scene to draw and color. Great for younger children

<http://www.dancealive.org/nutcracker/nutstage.pdf>

San Francisco Ballet-another study guide just brimming with lots of ballet info.

http://www.sfballet.org/_download/pdf/Nutcracker_Study_Guide.pdf





