

Nutcracker Kids: Behind the Scenes at Pacific Northwest Ballet's Famous Production - ParentMap

Thursday, October 30 2014, 1:20 PM

[PARENTING TOOLS](#)

Nutcracker Kids: Behind the Scenes at Pacific Northwest Ballet's Famous Production

By Gemma Alexander

Editor's note: Also see accompanying [Nutcracker Kids slideshow](#). And on December 2, enter our Big Gift giveaway to [win 4 tickets to Pacific Northwest Ballet's Nutcracker](#)!

It is two weeks before opening night of the 30th anniversary of the most famous production of **Pacific Northwest Ballet's repertoire**. More than 50 people have been in the rehearsal room for almost two hours without a break, but no one looks bored or tired. Dancers line the walls, stretch against freestanding metal barres, and whisper in clusters, but they all keep an eye on the dance floor where two Ballet Masters occasionally call out directions. At the sound of two sharp claps, the pianist and dancers stop.

Founding Artistic Director Kent Stowell, who **choreographed the famous ballet**, approaches three dancers. He is coaching them on facial expressions, which must be unique to distinguish their characters for the audience. "Someone has to be the nasty one," he says.

These dancers are ten years old, and they are preparing for the party scene in Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Every year, **about 215 students fill 90 children's roles in the beloved Christmas classic**. Ranging in age from 8 to 18, each child commits to nearly ten hours per week of rehearsal in addition to their regular dance classes from mid-October to Thanksgiving. Most of them will appear in 17 performances between Thanksgiving weekend and New Year's Day, and must be available to fill in for the opposite cast in case of illness.



The party scene of Pacific Northwest Ballet's 'Nutcracker.' Photo © Angela Sterling

But for 14-year-old Camille Marrs, who is performing as a Chinese Dancer this year, sacrificing time to hang out with friends and family over the holidays is an easy choice. "It is so much fun. **There is nothing else like the feeling when you go on stage.**"

Every September, about 300 students from the Pacific Northwest Ballet School, one of the top professional ballet training programs in the country, audition for a role in *Nutcracker*. More children audition for fewer roles at the beginning levels, so it is not uncommon to try for two or three years before gaining a role. The young dancers' physical measurements will determine which roles they can be considered for – **they must fit into existing costumes**. After that, the Ballet Masters and Artistic Director Peter Boal look for musicality in their movement and evaluate their technique. The Artistic Director makes the final casting decisions, even for the smallest roles.

Part of an artistic community

Student Cast and Parent Volunteer Coordinator Lauren Kirchner says *Nutcracker* is more than an opportunity for students to expand their dancing experience. "For many of them, it is the first time they are responsible for themselves. They check themselves in, return their costumes to wardrobe, and keep track of their own schedule. **They become part of a community. They work with professionals and meet students from the other branches.**"

Dancer Abigail Kostolansky began auditioning for *Nutcracker* as a Level 1 student. Now, at the age of 15, she is dancing as a Fighting Mouse in her sixth *Nutcracker*. She says that when she entered high school and transferred from the Bellevue branch of the PNB School to the Seattle branch, she felt as if she already belonged because she knew so many people from the production.

Once cast, the students are assigned groups, largely based on carpooling options; these groups will eventually become the A and B casts, who will each perform half of the performances. Rehearsals are scheduled by scene and role, a process that requires a specialized computer program to ensure no performer gets scheduled to be in two places at once, and every group gets enough rehearsal time. Ballet Master Otto Neubert says that after 23 years preparing children for *Nutcracker*, he can usually tell after the first rehearsal whether a group will need extra rehearsals in order to be ready for opening night.



Ballet Master Otto Neubert has been preparing PNB School students for 'Nutcracker' for 23 years. Photo © Angela Sterling, 2007

Dabrowski says that what the students lack in professionalism, they make up in enthusiasm. "There is a **whole other light, a sense of wonder from the children** because it's all new for them." Neubert agrees, "I couldn't imagine December without *Nutcracker*. Each year you wonder how you will get through 34 performances, and then you see the kids' excitement when they first get their backstage passes and it's energizing."



Ballet Master Anne Dabrowski rehearses PNB School students. Photo © Angela Sterling, 2007

Kostolansky admits it is a challenge to fit in rehearsals on top of her schoolwork and about 15 hours of dance classes every week, especially when dress rehearsals or matinees require her to miss school. "There are some late nights," she says. But she adds that her teachers at school and at PNB are very supportive, and she is driven to make it work.

Kostolansky and Marrs both dream of a career in dance. Marrs appreciates the introduction to professional life that *Nutcracker* offers. "**You see the principals warming up backstage and it inspires you.** It's special because that's something you can't see unless you're in the performance." Kostolansky says performing in *Nutcracker* is a valuable experience in and of itself. "Walking up the stairs backstage you feel how excited people are to be going on stage. You think 'This is a major production, and I'm part of the magic of it.'"

"One of the great experiences of my life"

With its elaborate sets and literally hundreds of performers, *Nutcracker* is a major production in every sense of the term. Kirchner says it takes about 60 parent volunteers over the month-long run of performances to help her get all of the student dancers into costumes and makeup, get them where they need to be (the backstage area isn't big enough to hold everyone at once), and keep them occupied when they are not onstage during performances. The volunteers set up projects in the rehearsal room at McCaw Hall. During performances the kids knit hats for cancer patients at Children's Hospital until they are called downstairs for their turn onstage.

Most of the young performers in *Nutcracker* will not grow up to be dancers, but the experience will never leave them. Stowell fondly remembers getting a flat tire and calling AAA. The man who responded to the call said, "Oh! You're Kent Stowell. You were my director when I was in *The Nutcracker*. **That was one of the great experiences in my life.**"

Dabrowski says she often hears that from adults who danced as children. She adds, "Ballet is hard and regimented. The rewards come slowly by the standards of society today. Being in *Nutcracker* is a reward they have had to work for, and they are thrilled to be a part of it. I don't know of any kid who has been in *Nutcracker* and didn't love it."

If you go ...

When: *Nutcracker* runs from **Nov 30-Dec. 29**. Show times for this year's 34 performances are listed online. Arrive early to allow time for parking, pre-ordering intermission snacks, participating in pre-show activities, and collecting booster seats. Nutcracker performances run approximately two hours, including one intermission.

Where: Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer Street, on the north edge of Seattle Center. Booster seats can be borrowed at no cost, and binoculars can be rented for \$5. Snacks are expensive at McCaw Hall. You can bring your own, but be sure to keep them sealed and well-stowed during the performance. No food is allowed in the auditorium.

Tickets: Tickets range from \$25 to \$135. Every family member must have a ticket, but the price is discounted for children 12 and under. There are no bad seats at McCaw Hall – do not hesitate to buy the cheapest seats available. Tickets can be purchased online.

Parking: The Mercer Garage is connected to McCaw Hall by a sky bridge. Rates vary from \$5-\$15 depending on events at Seattle Center. Other pay lots in the neighborhood have similar pricing. Street parking is limited to 4 hours, and hard to come by. Consider taking the bus – look online to plan your route.

Recommended age: The best age for a first full-length *Nutcracker* will depend on the child. A good rule of thumb is to whether he/she can sit quietly through a two-hour movie. A filmed version of PNB's *Nutcracker* is available on Netflix and from other outlets. Parents can preview the production for any scenes that might be frightening for their kids. Find a list of [shorter Nutcrackers in this guide](#).

Preparing kids: Reading and talking to kids about the ballet before you go will help them make the most out of the it and help younger viewers feel brave during the more intense scenes, like the battle against the Mouse King. Prepare by reading E.T.A. Hoffman's original story, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, or the Maurice Sendak-illustrated version of the book called simply *Nutcracker*. A scene-by-scene description of the dance and other resources for families can be found on PNB's website.

Special activities

Classical KING FM and Music Center Northwest will also host an instrument petting zoo at matinees Dec. 1, 14, 15 and 21.

Family Matinee Nutcracker Suite: Available by preorder for \$20/person for every matinee except December 7 (although several performances are already sold out). During intermission, the "Nutcracker Suite" on the fourth floor will include the Trophy Cupcakes Sprinkle Station; marshmallows and toppings at the Hot Cocoa Station; a photo booth; a holiday appetizer buffet; and for the grownups, champagne and coffee.

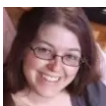
Nutcracker brunch: The Nutcracker Brunch on Dec. 7 costs \$70 adult/\$50 child. From 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., kids can meet the dance's characters and enjoy crafts and prizes. Brunch will be served, and there will be a mini-performance of *Nutcracker*.

Nutty Nutcracker: The Christmas Eve matinee allows dancers and stage crew to get a little creative. Expect some scene changes, improvisation, and surprise features.

See also

[Sendak, Stowell and the history of PNB's unique *Nutcracker*](#)

[Cracking the *Nutcracker* code: Guide to local performances](#)



About the author: Gemma Alexander has been to PNB's *Nutcracker* almost every year since 1993. She blogs at gemmadealexander.wordpress.com.

December 2, 2013

