

## COVER STORY | DANCE



DAVID COOPER

The Goh Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, now in its sixth year, runs from Dec. 18 to 22 at The Centre. The Vancouver production is choreographed by Anna-Marie Holmes.

# A holiday hat trick of Nutcrackers

Three versions of the classic ballet in Vancouver and Seattle offer something a little different

**DEBORAH MEYERS**  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

This holiday season, Vancouver audiences are spoiled by choice: three *Nutcrackers*, two in the city and one a short drive south. Each is different. Each is valuable. The through line is Tchaikovsky's sublime score, which was the only thing that was a hit when the ballet premiered in St. Petersburg in 1892. *Nutcracker* didn't become an institution in North America until 62 years later, when George Balanchine and his New York City Ballet premiered a full-length version in 1954 that is the point of reference for all subsequent productions. *Nutcrackers* now exist along a long continuum of intentions. Some pick up on the dark threads of the E.T.A. Hoffman story on which the ballet is based. Some don't. Each invites participants into an annual ritual where the possibility of transformation hovers at the edges, and that is only partly because many of those involved are children, on stage and in the audience. See one this year, or all three.

## Royal Winnipeg Ballet

Canada's oldest ballet company — it celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2014 — has been bringing the *Nutcracker* to Vancouver for a very long time.

For many years this meant the RWB's non-Christmas *Nutcracker*, which the company acquired in 1972 from choreographer John Neumeier. This is a version of the ballet that Vancouver dance goers came to know and love, in which a girl celebrates her 12th birthday in Act 1, and is whisked away to an imagined 19th century ballet studio in Act 2. The production was in the RWB's repertoire for more than a quarter century, and is still performed annually by the Hamburg Ballet in Germany.

Current Royal Winnipeg Ballet artistic director, Andre Lewis, decided on a new *Nutcracker* for the company in 1999, which is the version that will have its third airing in Vancouver this year. Billed as a prairie *Nutcracker*, it has choreography by Galina Yordanova and Nina Menon, but is most distinguished by its visuals, featuring costumes by Paul Daigle and sets by Brian Perchaluk.

Set in Winnipeg on the eve of the First World War, this is a *Nutcracker* so homegrown that it features Hudson Bay blankets. It has street hockey and a snowball fight, party guests that include Canadian soldiers in uniform, and a battle scene enacted on Parliament Hill in which the protagonists are mice and Mounties.

Here, Clara is played by an adult dancer (who becomes the Sugar Plum Fairy in the second

act), but the gentle demeanour of this *Nutcracker* pitches it at young audiences and their families. A giant, dessert-stealing bear called Filbert is a favourite character, this year joined by 13 new creatures, an adult polar bear and 12 baby polar bears, who appear in the Snow Scene that closes Act I.

There are more than 70 local dancers age seven to 13 in the production, from 19 dance schools around the Lower Mainland. They play party girls and boys, mice, Mounties, polar bears and angels. The *Nutcracker*, says Lewis, "is a perfect vehicle for young dancers. I did *Nutcracker* with a local troupe in Ottawa when I was a student. At almost 60, I'm still at it."

The RWB's Canadiana *Nutcracker* is being presented in Vancouver by Ballet BC (which first presented the production in 2012). Lewis reminds me that this *Nutcracker*, unusually, premiered on the road, in Ottawa. "Then it played in Vancouver," says Lewis, "and only then did it have its Winnipeg debut. So it is exciting for us to be back in Vancouver again."

Kyiv-born Dmitri Dovgoselets is an RWB soloist. He has performed in this production of *The Nutcracker* every year consecutively since 1999, the longest service record of any current company member. This year in Vancouver, he will appear in both the RWB *Nutcracker*, and also in the Goh Ballet's *Nutcracker*, partnering American Ballet Theatre guest artist Paloma Herrera in the lead role of the Cavalier Prince.

A bridge between the two *Nutcrackers* that will play



ANGELA STERLING

Former Pacific Northwest Ballet corps de ballet dancer Andrew Bartee performs as the Nutcracker in the fight scene from the company's Stowell/Sendak *Nutcracker*. The acclaimed production runs until Dec. 28 at Seattle Center's Marion Oliver McCaw Hall.

**Royal Winnipeg Ballet  
Nutcracker**  
Dec. 12 to 14, 7:30 p.m.,  
Dec. 13 and 14, 2 p.m. |  
Queen Elizabeth Theatre  
Tickets and info: \$35 to \$98.50,  
ticketmaster.ca

**Goh Ballet Nutcracker**  
Dec. 18, 19 and 22, 7:30 p.m.,  
Dec. 20, 2 p.m., Dec. 21, 3 p.m. |  
The Centre  
Tickets and info: \$28 to \$83.25,  
gohnutcracker.com

**Pacific Northwest Ballet  
Nutcracker**  
Nov. 28 to Dec. 28, 35 evening  
and matinee performances |  
Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, Seattle  
Tickets and info: \$45 to \$146,  
pnb.org

Vancouver consecutively this season, Dovgoselets' appearance with the Goh production is the Christmas spirit in action. "It's a wonderful opportunity for Dmitri," says Lewis. "And we were more than willing to release him to appear as a guest artist with Goh Ballet. Dmitri worked with Paloma Herrera when Twyla Tharp set her Princess and the Goblin on us in Winnipeg."



YVONNE CHEW

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's version of *The Nutcracker* features young Lower Mainland dancers.

In his dancing days, Lewis was a frequent partner of RWB superstar Evelyn Hart.

"I was given," Lewis says, "so many opportunities by Arnold Spohr to travel the world with Evelyn, that I feel it is incumbent on me to replicate this, and give others the opportunities Arnold gave me."

## Goh Ballet

Hot on the heels of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Nutcracker* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre comes the Goh Ballet *Nutcracker* at The Centre, with choreography by Anna-Marie Holmes. Just six years old, this made in Vancouver production has already established some

traditions of its own, many of them about local partnerships with choirs, gymnastic and ballroom dance clubs, drag queen Symone (Christopher Hunte) as Mother Ginger, and the Vancouver Opera Orchestra under the practised baton of Leslie Dala.

CONTINUED ON C4