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Superfans go nuts for The Nutcracker

Vancouverites who make the ballet an annual tradition remember how they got hooked and dish on which versions they adore

by Andrea Warner on December 7th, 2016 at 1:31 PM



The Goh Ballet's Snow King and Queen (Vladimir Pereira and Janica Grenier).

LOUIS LI

For some people, it's putting up the tree, hearing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" out in public, or the first bite of chocolate from the Advent calendar. But for others, it's not officially Christmas until the Rat King makes an appearance.

Welcome to the wonderful world of *Nutcracker* fandom, where hearts race at the trill of flutes, the flourish of strings, and the flurry of flexed toes and elegantly arched arms as Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky's music soars, swells, and marches in the beloved seasonal ballet.

Karine Fawcett remembers attending *The Nutcracker* as a child growing up in Paris with her mother. She now lives in Vancouver, and this year will mark her fifth time seeing the Goh Ballet's production.

"I have a boy and a girl and they love it so much," the Salvatore Ferragamo manager says, in a telephone interview. "This year I didn't speak about it to my children because we've been many times, and they were like, 'So when are we going to *The Nutcracker* this year?' I said, 'You still want to do it?' I mean, they're getting older, right? And they were like, 'Yes, absolutely!' It's a beautiful, beautiful show."

Fawcett says that attending the ballet every year with her own mother was a special treat, and she's happy to replicate that for the next generation of her family.

"I asked my daughter why she loved it so much, and what she answered was really close to how I felt when I was young," Fawcett says. "It's the atmosphere and also the dressing-up part of it. It's not like going to a movie theatre with your jeans and your popcorn. I find that the Goh *Nutcracker* is beautiful in this matter. The experience is just a magical night."

Magical is the word that comes up the most often in the *Straight's* interviews with *Nutcracker* superfans, and it's one that Ballet BC's Racheal Prince uses, too, to describe the show's appeal. Prince, who is a professional dancer and choreographer, estimates that she's been in and seen *The Nutcracker* "hundreds" of times since first performing in it at 13—and she still loves it. Those of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Alberta Ballet are among her favourite productions.

"The Royal Winnipeg's in particular, with their Canadian theme—they did a really good job making it a little bit different but sticking to the original *Nutcracker*," Prince says in a separate interview.

For the last several years, Ballet BC has presented the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Prince is also choreographing a new piece as part of the Arts Umbrella Dance Company's *Mixed Nuts: Tradition With a Twist*, a modern retelling of *The Nutcracker*.

"I have 16 girls basically being candy-cane marzipans," she says with a laugh. "I explained to them on the first day the magic of 16 people making a picture. I told them if one person isn't committed, what that can do to the piece, so I said, 'It's only done together.' That alone is magical. Every single person has to be equally committed."

Compared with Prince, Stéphane Mouttet is a relative newbie to the *Nutcracker* world—this year marks his third time attending the Goh production. But he, too, attributes its appeal to the "magic".

"I love the music and the fact that the VSO is involved in it as well," says the Trump International Hotel concierge. "What I love the most is the little kids dancing on-stage. I find them so cute! They're not scared of anything, and they just stand on-stage like they've always done it, and they work so hard to learn their role, and I just find that magical."

Bianca Bujan, founder of the parenting blog BitsofBee.com, might be the biggest *Nutcracker* fan in the city.

"I've been going [to Ballet BC's production] for the last 35 years," Bujan tells the *Straight* over the phone. And in recent years, she's actually seen *The Nutcracker* three times a year. "My daughter's been performing in it since she was three or four at her own dance school, so I see their version every year. I now go to the Goh Ballet version as well."

Bujan remembers the first time she saw *The Nutcracker*—it also began as a mother-daughter outing and became a yearly tradition—and she, too, calls the experience "magical".

"I was doing ballet at the time and I was obsessed with princesses and ballerinas, and seeing the dancers on-stage was just magical for me," Bujan says. "I remember I sat in the very back of the balcony at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre the first few times I went, and I had those special binoculars and I watched the whole ballet and I sat still at three. I had a petticoat on and I was all dressed up in my princess dress and I remember watching carefully through those binoculars, trying to see every step so far away."

Bujan waited until her own daughter was five years old for her first *Nutcracker*, and she's hoping to bring her younger daughter in a few years. Because she attends so many versions of the show, she'll be able to give each child her own mother-daughter experience. For Bujan, that is its own kind of magic.

"My daughter and I have our tradition of picking out our outfits, and we go for dinner for our *Nutcracker* date, and then it feels like Christmas has truly started for us."

Ballet BC's presentation of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Nutcracker* runs until Sunday (December 11) at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

Goh Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker* runs from next Thursday (December 15) to December 20 at the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts.

Arts Umbrella Dance Company's *Mixed Nuts: Tradition With a Twist* runs from December 16 to 18 at the Vancouver Playhouse.

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