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Nutcracker Inc.

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Families seeking seasonal entertainment in Orlando, Fla., this month have at least five competing productions of "The Nutcracker" to choose from. There's a multicultural version, "The Chocolate Nutcracker," in which a young girl travels from Harlem to Egypt, Brazil and West Africa on an enchanted journey. The Central Florida Ballet delivers aerial acrobatics and mini-explosions, while the Orlando Ballet and Russian Ballet of Orlando offer more traditional versions. And the Orlando Repertory Theatre is performing "A Nutty Nutcracker Christmas," a rock musical that takes place inside a videogame. The Sugarplum Fairy wears a pink wig—reminiscent of rap star Nicki Minaj—and the digitized Tchaikovsky score includes Pac-Man sound effects. The show features seven minutes of ballet, and it's nearly sold out.

"Nutcracker" season has arrived, and for arts organizations struggling with cash-strapped budgets and dwindling contributions, the Nutcracker Economy is more critical than ever. Just as this season is indispensable for retailers trying to move into the black, the family-friendly ballet set to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's famous score has always been a crucial moneymaker for dance companies, in many cases representing half a company's annual ticket revenues. "Nutcracker" runs frequently last at least twice as long as those of other ballets, stretching out through the holiday season, and pull in far broader audiences.



Angela Sterling

In a crowded holiday landscape strained by the financial downturn, ballet companies are under intense pressure to lure bigger crowds, extend their runs

and justify higher ticket prices. In some cases, they're trying more ambitious marketing campaigns and pulling in corporate sponsors to offset budget shortfalls. Other companies are launching bigger, flashier and sometimes more provocative twists on the classic in an attempt to create buzz. There's a burlesque version in Seattle, a sports-themed twist in Salt Lake City (a Brigham Young University-University of Utah football game replaces the toy-soldier war) and a puppet adaptation in Glen Echo, Md. A dog version in the Chicago suburbs last year was an instant sell-out.

The Nashville Ballet just hired illusionist Drew Thomas, who has performed magic shows at theme parks, to add special effects to its ballet such as a levitating table and a nutcracker that materializes from an empty wooden box. "I wanted to take it to another level," says artistic director and CEO Paul Vasterling.



Producers, however, must walk a delicate line in freshening up the holiday standard. Ticket sales may spike in the short term for a novelty version, but a key element of success for a "Nutcracker" lies in its being able to draw audiences back again year after year. At the San Francisco Ballet, ticket sales "shot through the roof" in 2004 when the company launched a new "Nutcracker" set during the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco and brimming with local landmarks, says executive director Glenn McCoy. But ticket sales have since leveled off.

To renew interest, the company recently launched Web videos with dancers underscoring the ballet's local roots. "What our marketing team has said they want to try to do is make San Francisco Ballet's 'Nutcracker' as identified with San Francisco as the Rockettes are to New York," Mr. McCoy says.

"The Nutcracker" originated in Russia, making its debut in St. Petersburg in 1892 with choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. It's based on "Nutcracker and Mouse King," an 1816 story by German author E. T. A. Hoffmann. It's still performed in Europe, though sometimes in summertime and not always with the same holiday fervor as its U.S. counterpart.

The full-length production made its American debut at the San Francisco Ballet in 1944. A decade later, George Balanchine, who danced the Nutcracker as a 15-

year-old in Russia, created his vaunted production for the New York City Ballet. The ballet hit the big time after the Balanchine version was televised in 1957.

In the story, whose details vary among productions, young Marie Stahlbaum receives a nutcracker on Christmas Eve from her mysterious godfather with an eye patch, Herr Drosselmeier. Clutching the toy as she sleeps, she sits up to find giant mice, a toy soldier battle and a snowy realm. In the Land of the Sweets, dancers perform as foreign delicacies: Spanish hot chocolate, Chinese tea, Arabian coffee. One of the ballet's most physically grueling passages: the dance of the Sugarplum Fairy. "We always talk about how we don't get enough credit for it—it just looks so easy but you're dying by the end," says Kathleen Breen Combes, who plays the role for the Boston Ballet.

The two-year-old Festival Ballet Albuquerque is unveiling its first "Nutcracker" this year, a New Mexico version that turns the Stahlbaum family into the Pachecos and adds Cochiti Pueblo dancers and a Native American storyteller. Dancers are dressed as sheep and their herders, rather than candy.

So far, the company has raised \$40,000 of the \$105,000 it will need to pay for the venture, says Patricia Dickinson Wells, the ballet's artistic director. Nutcrackers, she says, pay off over time: "It's your bread and butter."

Many companies are finding themselves at a difficult crossroads: Ticket sales for their traditional "Nutcracker" productions are flat or sagging, but the costs of creating new versions can be overwhelming. New York Theatre Ballet, which for 26 years had run the same Nutcracker for children, is launching a new production this year. The aging sets of its longtime production had become dangerous to dancers, the costumes were disintegrating and out-of-town bookings were scarce, says Diana Byer, the company's artistic director and founder.

"Frankly, we're struggling to pay for this," Ms. Byer says. "I think this is the worst funding climate that I can remember." The new concept, with Art Nouveau sets and a reworked storyline highlighting a romance between a teen Marie and Drosselmeier's nephew, probably won't pay for itself until the end of next year, Ms. Byer says. But cutting the holiday show altogether was not an option. "If we didn't do 'Nutcracker,' our costumers would have less work, our stage manager would have less work—it trickles down," she says.

The Cincinnati Ballet took some unusual steps to raise the more than \$2 million it needed for a new, ambitious "Nutcracker" production this year. When the Snow Queen arrives at the end of Act I, the tiara the dancer wears will be readily recognizable to local audiences: It's based on an architectural landmark, the distinctive arch that sits atop the downtown skyscraper where the Great American Insurance Group is headquartered. The insurance company received the subtle bit of advertising, along with other benefits, in exchange for a \$150,000 gift.

Faced with losses of more than \$50,000 in government grants, the ballet has aggressively pursued local corporate sponsors. "The way things were getting sliced and diced, it really felt like we had to do something bold," says Victoria Morgan, the ballet's artistic director and CEO, adding that she hopes the new production will draw bigger crowds and increase ticket revenues by nearly \$200,000. Most tickets will cost \$10 more than for last year's decade-old version.

The new Cincinnati production, the most expensive in the company's history, includes modern touches like characters dressed as poodles and a kooky grandma with pop-and-lock moves partly inspired by the TV show "So You Think You Can Dance." Ms. Morgan had to lobby roughly 60 companies, nearly twice as many as in the past, to fund this "Nutcracker." She is already hearing from venues in Detroit and Anchorage, Alaska, about possibly touring the production there next year.

Other companies are working to expand their "Nutcracker" revenues. The American Ballet Theatre, which says it has lost \$575,000 in government funds in recent years, has nearly doubled its "Nutcracker" run this year to 29 performances in Washington, D.C., and Brooklyn, N.Y. The Washington Ballet, which in 2009 saw its annual city funding of \$1 million completely eliminated, has lined up nearly 175 promotional partners this year to help with advertising and ticket giveaways—20% more than last year. At the Pacific Northwest Ballet, a Seattle company that says it has lost a fifth of its government funds in recent years, the marketing team is pushing harder to sell the ballet as a "date night" activity, including charging extra for access to a separate lounge with cocktails at intermission.

Some revered "Nutcracker" productions say they're under pressure to compete with newer, edgier versions. The Balanchine "Nutcracker" has an exclusive pedigree—only seven ballet companies are licensed to perform it world-wide, and it must be executed precisely as the famed choreographer wanted it. Still, the Oregon Ballet Theatre is set to retire its Balanchine "Nutcracker" in the near future. It plans to create a new interpretation set at the cusp of the Industrial Revolution.

This year marks the final season for the Boston Ballet's longstanding "Nutcracker," whose sets and costumes are now 16 years old. "It's time for an upgraded version," says Ms. Combes of the Boston Ballet, which will unveil its new take on the classic next year.

Even the mighty New York City Ballet, whose 57-year-old production of "George Balanchine's The Nutcracker" is often held up as the ballet's gold standard, is experimenting with a way to stretch its "Nutcracker" dollars and reach a wider demographic.

This year, for the first time, the ballet will be transmitted in high definition to movie theaters nationwide and abroad. The ballet, which runs for 47 performances (about 40 more than the company's other ballets) and generates nearly \$11 million in ticket sales, or 43% of its annual ticket revenues, is the company's highest-grossing production. To defray the broadcast costs, the ballet is teaming up with Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, which is producing a television broadcast of "The Nutcracker" on PBS this year. The venture represents a gamble for the ballet company, which is operating at a deficit with a plan to balance its budget by 2015. The ballet's executive director, Katherine Brown, says she's encouraged by the numbers so far, with the ballet set for more than 550 movie screens in the U.S. "That's a really strong number," she says.

This year, some Nutcrackers have succumbed to the weak economy. "The Hard Nut," an alternative take on the ballet by the Brooklyn-based Mark Morris Dance Group featuring groovy 1960s dance moves and a remote-controlled rat, canceled performances in Berkeley, Calif., and Seattle when the dance group and its hosting venues ran into budget concerns, says Nancy Umanoff, the company's executive director. "There are people disappointed, no question about it," she says, adding that the ballet is scheduled to resume in Berkeley next year.

Some niche Nutcrackers are simply hard to sustain: a dog version of the ballet in the Chicago suburbs sold all its 1,950 tickets in less than four hours last year. Despite its popularity, the show, starring a Sheltie as the Sugarplum Fairy, went on hiatus this holiday. With rehearsals spanning most of last year, the small volunteer staff was drained. A dog or two got stressed out, too, especially when a sound system screeched feedback during a performance. "One golden retriever just totally shut down," says Becky Jankowski, who created the show using therapy dogs in the PAWSitive Therapy Troupe. But Ms. Jankowski says she and the dogs are ready for another spin: The ballet is set to return next year.