



Instructors Guide for

The Nutcracker



The Story

It's late Christmas evening and Clara and Fritz are playing with their new toys when there is a knock at the door.

Godpapa Drosselmeyer, a strange but kindly old gentleman has arrived. He has brought the children magical gifts including a puppet show. The puppets, Little Drosselmeyer and Mr. Mouse, bring up Drosselmeyer's hat. Inside, there is a Nutcracker. The puppets and the children play with the Nutcracker, but Mr. Mouse gets carried away and nearly breaks it. Clara rescues the Nutcracker and scolds Mr. Mouse for his mischief. Mr. Mouse goes off to sulk and when Godpapa Drosselmeyer prepares to leave, he discovers the puppet is missing!

After "Goodnights" are said all around and the children are off to bed, Mother tidies the room for the night. When all is quiet, Clara slips back in to get her Nutcracker. Suddenly she finds herself confronted by Mr. Mouse himself. In terror she starts to run away when the clock strikes midnight and Clara discovers she has shrunk away and is, herself now no bigger than a toy.

Mr. Mouse, now crowned King, chases Clara who finds herself defended by the Nutcracker who appears leading a troop of wooden soldiers. A fierce battle ensues. With Clara's help, the Nutcracker defeats the mice and their terrible King.

Suddenly, a glistening sleigh flies down through the Christmas tree and takes Clara and her Nutcracker to Sugar Plum Land where wonderful events and magical surprises unfold before them.

The story comes, as it must, to an end, but the memory of her Nutcracker will live with Clara forever!

The Music

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, a Russian composer known for his colorful and romantic music, is the creator of the magical sounds of "The Nutcracker." Born the son of a mine inspector and a half-French mother on May 7, 1840, Tchaikovsky is known to have dabbled in composition from the age of 14. But it was not until 1862 when he enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory that he would devote his life entirely to music. In 1890 he made a trip to the United States. After his return, he lent his melodic gifts to the ballet "The Nutcracker," which surprisingly enjoyed little success during his lifetime. The man who made such an indelible mark on music passed away on November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Production

The Puppet Co. production of "The Nutcracker" was originally commissioned by the Arlington (Virginia) Symphony and premiered in 1988. Since then it has appeared annually at the Puppet Co. Playhouse in Glen Echo Park. There have been more than 1,000 performances and it has been seen by more than 300,000 children, their families and their teachers. The show uses about fifty marionettes, life-size characters in masks, and special kinds of puppets created especially for the production to tell the tale of Clara and her journey to the Sugar Plum Land. "The Nutcracker" is the largest and most elaborate of all of the Puppet Co. repertory productions.

Before You See "The Nutcracker"

Talk to your students about story telling. You can read a story in a book, or tell a story orally, or see a story acted out in play or a television show. However, those kinds of story telling all require the use of words. There are other kinds of story telling that do not use words. Those include dance, ballet, mime, and Movement Theater, in which the story is told through gesture and motion, and no words are spoken. "The Nutcracker" is usually performed as a ballet. The Puppet Co. production is Movement Theater. The story is told through carefully

planned and rehearsed stage movement or “choreography” to the familiar Tchaikovsky music.

Your students may be familiar with “The Nutcracker Suite,” a selection of some of the most popular pieces from the ballet. The suite is only about twenty minutes long; the full ballet is nearly two hours! The Puppet Co. production is about fifty minutes long. You will hear and see all of your favorite music from the suite, as well as some of the less familiar, but no less beautiful music from the full ballet.

Theater Etiquette

A visit to the Puppet Co. Playhouse may be the very first trip to any theatrical performance for some of your students. We want this to be a happy experience for everyone. Before you enter the theater, our House Manager, the person who is responsible for your safety and comfort during the performance, will welcome you, and will inform you about the seating of your group. At some of the performances, one of the performers will come out to introduce the show and remind everyone about theater “manners” using this easy to remember poem:

Please don't eat, and stay down in your seat.
Don't walk about, and don't talk or shout.
Don't take pictures or touch the display fixtures,
And, if the babies bawl, take them down the hall!

Have a great visit to the Puppet Co. Playhouse!