

Nutcracker

A Holiday Musical

**Book, Lyrics and Music by
Marc Robin & Curt Dale Clark**

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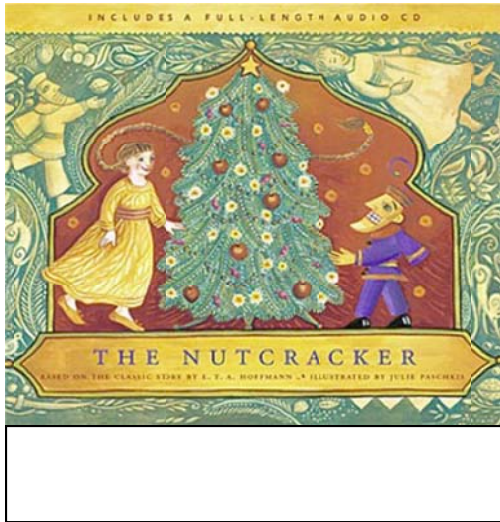


This STUDY GUIDE has been written for you, the teacher, and your students. It is intended to provide suggestions for discussion and activity ideas for use both before and after the play. By necessity, its contents cover a wide range of grade levels. Please feel free to select the material most appropriate for your class.

Background

E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales, beginning with *Ritter Gluck* in 1809, mark the pivotal shift between classicism and romanticism in literature. His three fairy-tales, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, *The Mysterious Child*, and *Master Flea*, are structured around a confrontation between good and evil, and the gap between humanity's ideal vision of life and its daily existence. They present a better world, a world of beauty opened to children and to those of us still capable of tapping into our own childlike temperament.

Of all of Hoffmann's works, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, written in 1816, is perhaps the most familiar. However, its familiarity is due to our knowledge of the Tchaikovsky ballet, not the actual tale itself. As Jack Anderson's book *The Nutcracker Ballet* makes clear, there is a huge difference between the ballet and the novella upon which it's based.



The ballet's scenario is a hybrid concoction by Tchaikovsky's collaborators, Ivan Alexandrovitch Vsevolozhsky, director of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theater, and the choreographer, Marius Petipa. Rather than returning to Hoffmann's tale, the two writers based their scenario on Alexandre Dumas' popular French version of the story, *The Nutcracker of Nuremberg*. The balletic version, so familiar to audiences today, not only smooths out the difficult, confusing aspects of Hoffmann's plot, it also removes the mysterious dreamlike qualities that make it something of a masterpiece.



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Tchaikovsky, unhappy with the scenario he was given to work with, proceeded to compose a score that in overtone is much closer to Hoffmann than Dumas. As Maurice Sendak writes in his Introduction to Ralph Manheim's translation of "Nutcracker," "Tchaikovsky's music, bristling with implied action, has a subtext alive with wild child cries and belly noises. It is rare and genuine and does justice to the private world of children."

The Fulton adaptation is a hybrid of its own, but makes clear the battle between the mice and the Nutcracker is ultimately resolved in victory through the determined faith of an innocent young girl. By coming to the aid of another, the heroine learns the power of loyalty, courage, and love. At its center is a coming-of-age story about the power of giving and of growing up. What could be

more appropriate for this time of year?

Suggested Activities & Discussion Ideas

1. Discuss the concept of theatre.
 - a. Find out how many of your students (particularly those in the lower grades) have seen a play. Have your class discuss the ways in which theatre is similar to and different from movies, television, and even other live events such as concerts, circuses, games of sports, and, of course, ballet.
 - b. Explore the roles of director, playwright, composer, actor, designers (of set, costume, and lighting), etc, in the creation of a play.

2. When a work of literature is converted into a performance piece, the process is called ‘dramatic adaptation.’ And *Nutcracker* is a tale best known as a ballet. As discussed previously, the creators of the ballet took great liberties with the story, as does the Fulton version.
 - a. As you compared theatre to other performance media, compare it to print. What are the differences between a story you read and one that you see on stage? Why do adapters necessarily abridge, condense, eliminate, and even invent? What can be gained in a performed version; what is sometimes lost?
 - b. Local libraries have certain translations of Hoffmann’s *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. Perhaps you can get hold of one of these. (The Ralph Manheim and Anthea Bell versions are particularly good for children.) If time allows, read one to your class before seeing the production. Ask your students how they might handle the staging of certain aspects of the story. They can then compare their ideas to those used by the Fulton. You might also borrow one of a library’s video copies of the Nutcracker ballet. Have your students watch it and later compare this with the Fulton’s dramatic rendering of the story. Finally, have your class read (or read to your class) the Dumas version of the story. After seeing the production, your students can decide what content was influenced by which source – or by none at all!
3. Lewis Carroll once described fairy tales as “love-gifts.” Ask your class why this is such an apt description of *Nutcracker*. In his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim contends that such fairy tales enable a child to “discover his identity and calling.” Have your students recall fairy tales that may have functioned this way for them. Have any of the tales they once heard or read helped them to deal with different situations? After seeing *Nutcracker*, ask your class what lesson might be learned.
4. Like all great fairy tales, Hoffmann’s story depends a great deal upon the way in which it operates in each reader’s individual imagination. Ask your class what was done theatrically (in terms of set, costuming, and lighting design) to help enhance the viewer’s imagination? What images do they remember the best? Why?
5. “The Story of the Hard Nut,” a part of Hoffman’s original novella explains the history of the battle between the mice and the Nutcracker. That is excluded both in the Tchaikovsky ballet and the Fulton adaptation. Students might enjoy devising their own story explaining how the Nutcracker came to be, and the causes of his conflict with the Mouse King. This can be done orally or as a creative writing assignment, preferably before the Hoffman tale is read.
6. Before turning to writing, E.T.A. Hoffmann was a failed composer, and music remained the paramount artistic presence in his life. As he penned his novella *The Nutcracker and the Mouse*



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King, he wrote of hearing “its music” in his head. From the start, playwrights Marc Robin and Curt Clark Dale considered a musicalization of their adaptation, finding it only appropriate to tell the story partly with song, thereby honoring Hoffmann’s original auditory inspiration. Some of your students might enjoy trying their hand at songwriting. In teams, or as individuals, have them write a rhyming lyric for a “Nutcracker” or Christmas song or for a segment of a story they might be reading in class.

7. *Nutcracker* takes place long ago and far away. Accordingly, we have decked the Fulton’s halls with boughs of holly and other trimmings befitting a European Christmas of the past. As suggested by the play, Christmas is and has been celebrated differently all around the globe.

- a. Explore with your class some Christmas traditions of other times and places. Find out, for example, why the Christmas Tree familiar to us all was once called “the new German toy.”
- b. You might even study some holiday lore associated specifically with Pennsylvania, such as Belsnickel – a “dark” servant of St. Nicholas, brought to our area with the first German settlers – or the Moravian Christmas Eve service.
- c. It might also be of interest to compare and contrast Christmas with Chanukah, another joyous gift-giving holiday that falls at the same time of year. Kwanzaa might also be examined. Find the similarities and differences in all three winter holiday traditions.
- d. Finally, ask your students why *Nutcracker* is such an appropriate holiday story.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS
From the Fulton Theatre!