

FOOTNOTES

NOVEMBER 2004

VictoriaDanceSeries.com

BY FASTRAC



CRACKING THE NUT THE HISTORY OF THE NUTCRACKER

By Stephen White

Adam Wahlberg in *The Nutcracker*. Photo by Clay Stang.

“For dancers there is rather little in it, for art absolutely nothing, and for the artistic fate of our ballet, one more step downward,” was how the first review of the premiere performance of *The Nutcracker* in December, 1892, read — not a very auspicious reception for a work that would become one of the most enduring holiday classics with one of the most recognizable scores in the western world.

When Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky first composed the music for *Nutcracker* in 1891, he already had two other ballets to his credit. He composed the first, *Swan Lake*, in 1875, premiering it in 1876. The second, *The Sleeping Beauty*, premiered in 1888. With *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky completed his triple crown and cemented his reputation as the greatest composer of classical ballet, although it would be some time after his death that his work achieved this status.

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The Victoria Dance Series is a non-profit organization dedicated to dance presentation and education. Our mission is to enhance the appreciation of dance in the Capital Region by presenting and developing professional dance and engaging the community in outreach programs.

The Victoria Dance Series is governed by a Board of Directors that includes:

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Footnotes is prepared by Executive Producer Stephen White. Anne Moon volunteers to read the text.

If you would like to help us save on postage and printing by receiving your newsletter via ecologically friendly email (confidentiality ensured) please let us know!

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The story for *The Nutcracker* comes from a morbid tale penned by E. T. A. Hoffman, published in 1816. Although intended for children, it was actually a grisly story full of evil spells, meant as a comment on the ills of society. In 1844, the French writer, Alexandre Dumas, père published a much sweeter version, entitled *Histoire d'un casse noisette*. It was this story that Ivan Alexandrovitch Vsevolozsky, Director of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg, brought to Tchaikovsky and choreographer Marius Petipa as a commission. This trio had teamed successfully on *The Sleeping Beauty*, so Vsevolozsky decided they should try their hand at an entirely new work.

Marius Petipa is, of course, the father of classical ballet. A Frenchman who worked as the chief choreographer in the Imperial Russian Ballet, Petipa is credited with perfecting the full-length story ballet as a form.

Neither Petipa nor Tchaikovsky liked the story. Petipa's dislike was centred on what he perceived as a lack of opportunity in the narrative for a large corps de ballet spectacle piece. Tchaikovsky was not enamoured by the plot, and when Petipa introduced the character of a Sugarplum Fairy and decided to diminish the roles of Clara (originally named Marie) and Drosselmeyer, he grew concerned that the plot had been even further compromised. But Vsevolozsky persisted, inducing Tchaikovsky to continue work on *The Nutcracker* by offering him a second commission for a one-act opera.

The first draft of the music was completed by July, 1891, and the orchestration begun in January 1892. When he reviewed the completed work some three months later, Tchaikovsky deemed it "all ugliness." His one-act opera, *Iolanthe*, premiered on December 17, 1892, which was also the opening night for *The Nutcracker*. In subsequent years, Tchaikovsky wrote, "Strange that when I was composing the ballet I kept thinking it wasn't very good, but (I thought to myself) I would show them (the Imperial Theatres) what I can do when I began the opera. And now it seems that the ballet is good and the opera not so good."

In the ensuing century, *The Nutcracker* became a seasonal staple for ballet companies around the world. The first production outside Russia was performed in 1934 at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, England. The first full-length *Nutcracker* in North America took place in December 1934 performed by the San Francisco Ballet. Balanchine's opulent and detailed version premiered in 1954 and in 1964 Celia Franca's version for the National Ballet of Canada premiered in Canada at the same time as Les Grands Ballets Canadiens opened Fernand Nault's *Nutcracker*. **FN**



READING THE NUTCRACKER

Hear the story of *The Nutcracker* before the Show!

Royal Theatre, West Lobby

7:20 pm before each evening performance

1:20 pm before the matinee (Nov. 27)

Most of you are familiar with our popular Pre-Show Chats in the lobby prior to each evening performance. Usually these feature an informal discussion about the evening's program with a member of the visiting dance company. But we decided to do something entirely different this time around. We have hired Victoria's popular raconteur, Jim Leard, to tell *The Nutcracker* story before each show.

Jim is a local actor, director, writer and storyteller. Artistic Director of Victoria's The Story Theatre Company, his work is seen



across Canada and the United States. At present he has two touring companies on the road with demand increasing for his school shows. One of those shows, the acclaimed *Hey Bully, Bully!* is touring New York and New Jersey and will be visiting Arizona and California in the spring. Well known to Victoria audiences for his character work in such local productions as *The 5 White Guys* and his

newly formed *Jester's Corner*, Jim, is also in demand for Story Theatre's Storytelling in the Schools program.

The First Nutcrackers

The history of wooden nutcrackers is tough to pin down precisely. Stories about enchanted nutcrackers appear in some ancient folk tales of Bohemia and Poland but it seems that the carved object originated in the Saxony region of Germany about 250 years ago. At that time the coalmines were becoming depleted and so the local miners turned to other ways to make a living. Carving household objects out of wood became the regional specialty. There are records of wooden nutcrackers in 1650 in Berchtesgaden and 1735 in Sonneberg, but it is not known if either was in the form of a figure. The first noted nutcracker in the form we know today was the c.1750 product of Erzgebirge, Germany. Originally nutcrackers were fashioned after authoritarian figures such as soldiers, policemen and church leaders but later the cast of characters came to include such villagers as bakers and hunters. Legend holds that a wealthy farmer sponsored a contest for the best product to crack open his crop of nuts. The winner of the contest, a puppeteer, was awarded a workshop for future generations to continue producing these nutcrackers. It has been said that the seasonal popularity of nutcrackers is based on the fact that gilded nuts were a popular tree decoration and that something equally decorative was needed to open the nuts to enjoy

their contents. The success of Tchaikovsky's ballet cannot be discounted as a reason for the popularity of nutcrackers. To this day, the most collectible nutcrackers originate in Germany. The production of them for export was a major industry under Communist rule.

From notes compiled by Gerard Charles, BalletMet Columbus

Alberta Ballet's Choreographer, Mikko Nissinen

Mikko Nissinen is recognized internationally as an accomplished dancer, teacher and Artistic Director. He assumed the position of Artistic Director of Boston Ballet in September 2001.

Nissinen was born in Helsinki, Finland, in 1962. He began dance training at 11 at the Finnish National Ballet School. At 15, he launched his dance career and immediately began soloist roles. In 1978, he won first prize at The National Ballet Competition in Kuopio, Finland. The next year he joined the Kirov Ballet School to continue his studies. Nissinen went on to dance with the Dutch National Ballet, Basel Ballet and San Francisco Ballet, where he held the position of Principal Dancer for 10 years.



In 1996 Nissinen retired from San Francisco Ballet and in 1998 was appointed Artistic Director of Alberta Ballet. Under Nissinen's leadership, Alberta Ballet embraced a more neo-classical approach to its repertoire, while continuing to cultivate contemporary works. During his tenure, Nissinen increased the company's performance schedule, touring and global visibility. It was while he was Artistic Director that he choreographed the version of *The Nutcracker* we'll see in Victoria.

Nissinen continues to teach ballet technique at numerous schools and summer intensives. His knowledge and interest in dance history have also made him a popular presenter at conferences.

Alberta Ballet Primer

Now in its 38th season, Alberta Ballet is currently under the artistic direction of Jean Grande-Maitre and comprises 25 classically trained professional dancers who hail from Australia, Canada, Colombia, England, France, Japan, Spain, Ukraine, and the United States.

The seeds for what would become Alberta Ballet were planted in Edmonton in the early 1950s by Dr. Ruth Carse. In 1966, the company officially took the name Alberta Ballet and in 1990 completed a successful merger with Calgary City Ballet. The new organization relocated its operations to

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THE SHY MAN WITH THE BIG SCORE

Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky

“He is melancholic almost to the point of madness. He is a beautiful and good person, but an unhappy person. I did not think the latter when I met him in his time, but so it is: either one has others or oneself to fight.” — Edvard Grieg

Born: May 7, 1840 (Votkinsk – east of Moscow)

Died: 1893 (St. Petersburg) of cholera

Father: Russian, Superintendent of State Mines

Mother: French

Tchaikovsky was the second of five sons and one daughter. As a youngster he was devoted to his mother, Alexandra, who herself was a nervous epileptic. In his early teens, he had to be pulled away from holding the carriage wheels to prevent his mother's leaving to do the household shopping.

He began his piano training at five and within a year was a better player than his teacher. His father, however, had different aspirations for his son. Pyotr was encouraged to study law. The family moved from Votkinsk first to Moscow and soon after to St. Petersburg. Here the young adult Tchaikovsky was enrolled in the School of Jurisprudence and after graduation, worked for four years as a civil servant in the Ministry of Justice.

Through it all he had maintained his interest in music by taking lessons and attending the opera with increasing frequency. He was particularly devoted to the music of Mozart and in his later life attributed his desire to become a composer to this admiration.

In his mid-twenties, Tchaikovsky quit his work in the Ministry to begin full time studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. It was

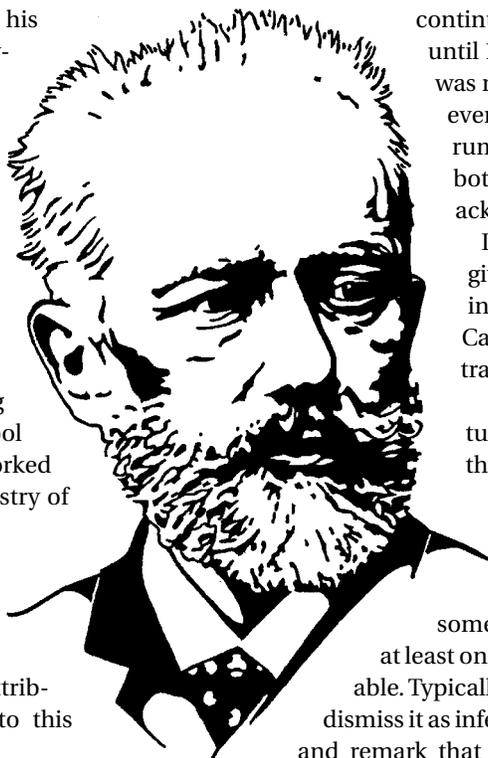
here that he began to study under the noted teacher Anton Rubenstein who was the first to recognize his inherent talent, despite Rubenstein's concern that it was masked by a very amateur execution. In 1864 Tchaikovsky composed his first orchestral score, *The Storm*, which infuriated Rubenstein because of its “colour and drama.” Yet, in less than a year, the young musician was offered a position as Professor of Harmony at the Moscow Conservatory.

Over the ensuing years, Tchaikovsky composed a variety of concerti, symphonies and some operas in addition to his three famous ballet scores. In 1877 he was able to resign from his teaching post when a noblewoman, Nadezha Filaretovna von Meck, provided him with an annual gift of 6,000 rubles to concentrate solely on composition. Von Meck's annuity came with one condition, the two of them were to never meet, or if they did by

accident, they were not to speak to each other. She continued providing Tchaikovsky with the annuity until 1890 when for some reason their relationship was ruptured. Over those 13 years, they did, however maintain a steady correspondence. They are rumoured to have met on two occasions, but both maintained their agreement and did not acknowledge each other.

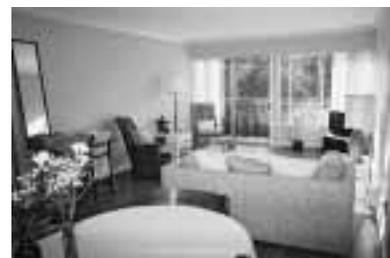
In 1891, Tchaikovsky traveled to America to give a concert of his works as part of the opening ceremonies at the newly completed Carnegie Hall in New York. In 1893 he contracted cholera and died.

Tchaikovsky was married briefly (for three tumultuous months), but there is speculation that in fact, he was homosexual and that the repression of his sexual identity precipitated his lifelong bouts of melancholy and depression. Whatever the root cause, he has been characterized as a shy, somewhat neurotic man, who attempted suicide at least once. His opinion of his own music was changeable. Typically, when he finished work on a piece he would dismiss it as inferior work, only to return to it a few years later and remark that it wasn't as bad as he had first imagined. Regardless of his own opinion, his work, including *The Nutcracker*, has endured and grown in popularity since his death. **FN**



A Victoria Condo has been home to Dance Series artists while they work in Victoria. The comfortable and welcoming, one bedroom suite overlooks Beacon Hill Park and is steps from the downtown Inner Harbour, Dallas Road waterfront, and Cook Street Village. Consider A Victoria Condo for your out-of-town friends and family. Find pictures and details at www3.telus.net/victoriacondo or phone 381-5581.

The Victoria Dance series is grateful to have the support of “A Victoria Condo”



Local Content

Part of the fun and excitement each year is provided by the kids who audition and train locally to perform *The Nutcracker*.

More than forty youngsters from nine different studios in the region are currently taking weekly class with Gina Sinclair-Davis. And this is a very special year for one of them.

Paige Sealey was selected by Alberta Ballet to dance the role of Clara. Currently studying ballet with Maureen Eastick at Pacific Dance Centre, Paige has been going to see *The Nutcracker* every year since the age of 3, the same year she started dancing. This is Paige's fourth year in *The Nutcracker*. She first danced the role of a cookie, then a party goer for two years and now Clara. Paige's first ballet solo was at the age of 5 and now at 13 she has received many dance awards along with various scholarships and bursaries. Her most recent accomplishment is her acceptance into the National Ballet of Canada's summer school program in Toronto next July.

In addition to her classes at Pacific Dance Centre, Paige is in Company at Victoria Dance Connection where she trains in jazz, lyrical jazz, tap, modern and hip-hop. She is also a member of the Oak Bay High Dance Troupe. With classes and rehearsals seven days a week, Paige just never stops dancing. She is thrilled to have the opportunity to perform the role of Clara with the Victoria Symphony. For Paige, this "dream come true" is yet another step closer to her ultimate goal – to be a professional ballerina.



Brought To You By:

The Victoria Dance Series is gratified that two local businesses have joined together to sponsor the performance evenings of *The Nutcracker* this season. They are Gossamer Costume Design and Construction and Pacific Dance Centre.

Gossamer

Gossamer

"It sometimes feels like I have come full circle," Wendy Vernon replies when asked about the establishment of her small home-based business, Gossamer. "I started in the costume construction business straight out of high school, working for The Belfry Theatre here in Victoria. It was a crash course in costume construction, turning out one sometimes two period costumes per day – it prepared me well for this business.

"I have always loved constructing costumes based on 18th century design and the challenge now is to make these cost effective and still retain the integrity of the period look and construction. Maureen Eastick of Pacific Dance Centre and I have collaborated for several years now and we work well as a team. She has a terrific colour sense and her ideas are magical. It is always a pleasure to make pretty things that light up the eyes of the young dancers who wear them.

"It is a pleasure to sponsor Victoria Dance Series, and especially *The Nutcracker*. It's important to encourage and support the young dancers of Victoria and the special opportunity that this show provides for them to dance with some of the country's leading professionals. And of course it is also important to connect with Victoria's growing dance audience, which this Series has cultivated over the past eight years.

Gossamer (Specializing in classical ballet costumes) (250) 652-3580 Wendy Vernon

Pacific Dance Centre



For over 25 years, the work of Maureen Eastick ARAD, Artistic Director of Pacific Dance Centre, has been an important part of the cultural fabric of Victoria. One of B.C.'s premiere ballet instructors, Maureen's skill as a teacher, adjudicator and choreographer has long been acknowledged by her peers, her associates, and her students. In addition, she is a valued teacher with the intensive ballet program at the Banff Centre.

Each year, graduates from her studio in Cadboro Bay, are accepted into professional schools in Canada and abroad. This year, 11 PDC students are dancing in *The Nutcracker* including Paige Sealey as Clara.

Maureen developed an exceptional eye for color and detail while studying for her BFA in Theatre Design at UVic. Her spectacular recitals evidence this training. She collaborates with Wendy Vernon, one of Victoria's most experienced and talented costumers. A full production of a narrative ballet will be presented by PFDC at the Royal Theatre, June 18 & 19, 2005.

Pacific Dance Centre 2580 Maynard St., Victoria (250) 477-6114. **PN**



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DANCE SEEN



Stephen White. Photo by Stuart Copeland

I am barely back from Portland where I had the privilege of watching two performances of the Oregon Ballet Theatre (OBT) and dropping a lot of money at a few Outlet Malls where I picked up some desperately needed clothes. Tell me, what could be better? Ballet, shopping, fine dining and beautiful Portland.

There's a renaissance happening at OBT and the man at the forefront of the phenomenon is Artistic Director Christopher Stowell. It turns out Stowell is the son of the legendary Artistic Directors of Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) – Kent Stowell and Franca Russell. Stowell and Russell built PNB into one of America's most celebrated ballet companies and this season they will be stepping down to enjoy an active retirement, so it is fitting that their son has taken up the challenge and is leading another West Coast ballet company. The younger Stowell danced for many years at the San Francisco Ballet.

We saw a mixed program that included a Balanchine work (Concerto Barocco) which, truth be told, was a touch ragged, followed by a very strong pas de deux choreographed by Stowell Sr. entitled Orpheus Portrait. This second work, danced by Victoria favourite Paul de Strooper, was very powerful. The piece was

defined by strong dancing, poignant emotional content and a great use of the stage. But the piece de resistance was performed in the second half of the evening. Christopher has re-worked the third act of Swan Lake after Marius Petipa's original choreography. This act showcased the company's significant abilities – especially the work of Prima Yuka Iino in the role of Odile. Miss Iino is the definition of grace and technique. She was radiant – reminiscent of a young Evelyn Hart.

Latin Lovers

If you're like me, you love the passionate and provocative tango. When it's danced well, it is a wonderfully engaging thing of beauty – the intricacy of the footwork and the wonderful tension between stillness and movement.

Who knew that my neighbours were hooked on tango? Well, I did, actually. Brent and I usually trade hellos in the brisk chill of the morning as we roll out our garbage cans for pick-up, or sometimes we'll find each other on the same bus heading into town and we get caught up on the latest news. Recently, he and his wife asked me to cat sit while they took off for their latest tango adventure. When they returned home, I listened wide-eyed to the story of the three or four days they had spent in Portland at a very large (750 attendees) Tango Ball that included workshops during the day and dances at night – some of them stretching 'til dawn. Brent tells me that interest in tango is growing by leaps and bounds –



We are proud to support the passion, athleticism and the beauty of the Victoria Dance Series, and we thank all of you for the privilege of your business over the years.

Danny Sitnam
President & CEO
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and, of course, as evidence of this last statement, he sent me the following information about a local event that he and Hedy are involved with.

Libertango Ball
Saturday, November 20
Edelweiss Club, 108 Niagara Street
9 pm - 1 am

San Francisco's Nuevo Tango stars Homer and Cristina and the Tango Paradiso ensemble (led by Douglas Schmidt on bandoneon) will perform and offer workshops at the tango event of the year, the Libertango Ball, Saturday, Nov. 20 at the Edelweiss Club, 108 Niagara Street in Victoria's James Bay (9 pm - 1 am). The Ball is sponsored by Tango Vita (Victoria's Tango club), beginners' lesson at 8 pm. In addition to Homer and Cristina's performance (world leaders in the new tango), Bernard Henin's Cuban-style Salsa Moderna will showcase their work. The event includes snacks and a cash bar.

For more information, visit www.tangovita.com, or phone 250 370-2380.

The Web is Stronger

Speaking of websites, I hope you will visit our completely refreshed site soon: www.VictoriaDanceSeries.com. We have added tons of new features including the Library, where you can

access bios and photos of 20th century dance pioneers, among many other things. I always wanted our site to have content and I am very pleased that we are on the road to meeting that goal.

We are also making a strong effort to feature dance events taking place all over Vancouver Island - so let us know if you have an event, or check out the listings. We look forward to hearing what you think of our new site.

Finally, even with Nutcracker staring us in the face we are also making plans for a unique program that will take place in Victoria in January 2004. Vancouver's provocative dance company, battery opera will be in town for three weeks completing a creative residency at Stages Dance where they will revisit a work from their repertoire entitled Cyclops. While they are here, they will offer free classes in the morning and then turn their attention to building their work in the afternoons. But here's what's very cool for the Victoria Dance Series, for battery opera and for the community. On the final Friday (Jan. 21), seven dance presenters (folks like me) from across Canada (Montreal, Regina, Calgary, Whitehorse, Nanaimo, Vancouver and I) will watch a studio showing of the work accomplished to date and afterwards, at my house, we'll have dinner and talk about how we might put together a tour for 2006. We have also invited Suddenly Dance Theatre and Constance Cooke Dance to showcase work they want to tour.

Because I won't have a chance, before it's upon us, I wish you and yours a great holiday season. Hold your loved ones close. **FN**
 Stephen White



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ONLY A FEW SPOTS LEFT!

Big Apple Dance Tour

At press time we only had a few spots left for our May 19 – 24 New York Dance Tour. The trip includes return flights from Victoria, 5 nights accommodation in Times Square, breakfasts each day, tickets to the opening night of American Ballet Theatre's spring season, a performance by the New York City Ballet, a tour of Harlem and of Radio City Music Hall and a whole lot more. And it's all available for under \$2,000 (double occupancy). If you want to learn more, phone Bill at Blaney's Travel, Cadboro Bay Village between 9 am and noon (477-3550) or email bill@blaneystravel.com or check out www.VictoriaDanceSeries.com

> continued from page 3 the historic Nat Christie Centre in Calgary while maintaining an administrative office in Edmonton. Alberta Ballet performs across Canada, and has toured internationally to the United States, Europe, China and Africa. The company invites leading conductors, choreographers and other guest artists to take part in their seasons. It also presents an annual season of performances in both Calgary and Edmonton.

In 1991, Alberta Ballet established the School of Alberta Ballet located in downtown Calgary with an enrolment of more than 500 students. **FN**

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