

FAQ ON BALLET AND *THE NUTCRACKER*

What is a ballet?

Ballet is a form of theatrical dance that uses formal, set movements and poses, all of which are characterized by elegance and grace. A ballet can tell a story, express a mood, illustrate the music that accompanies it, or portray a movement. A ballet performance can be a full-length story or a series of short works.

What are the main elements of ballet technique?

Ballet technique is based on five positions in which a dancer's legs rotate outward from the hips while the feet also turn outward to form a 180° angle on the floor. This is called turnout. Turnout is not unique to ballet—many Asian dance forms also use turnout. Another important aspect of ballet technique is resistance to gravity, which is why there are so many jumps and spinning turns in ballet (see below for a sampling of ballet terms). The highest jumps are usually performed by male dancers, but female dancers also perform jumps. The idea of resisting gravity also inspired the invention of toe dancing, or dancing “en pointe.” Ballerinas usually perform “en pointe,” but men may also dance en pointe.

How do they dance on their toes?

When dancing “en pointe,” women dancers (ballerinas) wear special ballet slippers. These slippers have a hardened box, which is made of 7 layers of fabric glued together. This “box” goes around the toes to help support and protect the tips of the ballerina's toes. Ribbons help to keep the shoes on the feet. But the ballerina's feet also get support from her ankle and leg muscles. She has trained for years with special exercises to strengthen her legs, ankles, and feet. Student dancers may not wear “toe shoes” until age 10 or 11.

What are the ballerinas' pretty skirts made of?

Those skirts, called “tutus” are made of several layers of a net-like fabric called “tulle” (“tool”). Ballerinas first started wearing them in the 1800s.

How can those guys jump so high?

Like the ballerinas, male dancers (called “danseurs”) train for many years, doing exercises to strengthen their feet and legs. They have to practice their jumps and their landings over and over to make them look so graceful and easy.

How do they change clothes so fast?

The dancers wear a special body tight, this is solid-colored, close-fitting underwear and their costumes fit over this. Someone backstage helps them take off one costume and another person is waiting to help them into their new costume. Sometimes, parts of a costume are worn under another costume that is used first.

What are the “Polichinelles”?

Polichinelle (poe LEE shee nell) is a French word that literally translated means “Punch,” the Punch of the English puppet duo, Punch and Judy. They were the original comedy act, created in the 1700s. These puppets’ loud arguments escalated into fights in which they hit and punched each other. Here, “polichinelles” means buffoons, or comic characters. In the Donetsk version of *The Nutcracker*, the Polichinelles are tiny, active characters who disrupt the more dignified dances of the dolls in the Land of Sweets. Mother Ginger has to gather them up and take them away before they get into trouble.

What is a “grand pas de deux”?

Pas de deux (PAH du duh) is a dance for two people, usually a man and a woman. The **Grand Pas de Deux**, which is in Act II of *The Nutcracker*, is the culminating, or final, pas de deux.

What is a nutcracker?

A nutcracker is a tool used to crack the shells of nuts. In the Middle Ages, these tools were made of wood carved into the shapes of animals, birds, or humans. The figure’s “arms” or “legs” rotated, moving a lever inside the figure that slid the lower “jaw” toward the upper “jaw.” When a nut was placed in the “mouth” of the nutcracker, turning the arms or legs moved the lower jaw, pressing the nut against the upper jaw to crack the shell. These levers and moving parts had to be sturdy so that the nutcracker could crack the shells of nuts and allow people to eat the tasty nuts inside. By the mid-1800s, the merging of a useful tool with a human likeness resulted in a toy with an important purpose at Christmas. At this period, children received stockings filled with fruit and nuts, rather than small toys or candy. A nutcracker was very handy to have around on Christmas morning so that children could enjoy the nuts from their stockings.

The tradition of making the nutcracker into a scowling and somewhat misshapen figure developed in Germany in the mid-1800s, when nutcrackers were formed into figures representing policemen, soldiers, masters of the (night)watch, and even the conqueror Napoleon. These figures became a way for common people to poke fun at the figures of authority in their lives. And they could do so without getting into trouble because it was so indirect.

Who wrote *The Nutcracker*?

The *Nutcracker* story was first told in 1816 by the German author, E.T.A Hoffman. Hoffman’s tale centers on a girl named Clara, her mysterious godfather, Dr. Drosselmeyer, and his Christmas gift to Clara, an enchanted Nutcracker doll. Clara’s love for her cherished Nutcracker brings the doll to life. In 1847, the French writer Alexandre Dumas retold Hoffman’s story. Russian composers Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Lev Ivanov created the ballet, *The Nutcracker*, from Dumas’ version. The ballet was first performed in the Russian city of St. Petersburg in 1892. Since that first performance, there have been many interpretations and stagings. Characters’ names change and plot twists are added, but the single constant element in all of these has been Tchaikovsky’s music.

When was *The Nutcracker* first performed in the U.S.?

The Nutcracker was first performed by the San Francisco Ballet in 1944. A milestone in American *Nutcracker* productions came in 1954, with George Balanchine's production for the New York City Ballet in that year. Many U.S. productions still follow Balanchine's staging and choreography for their own productions.

Is the *Nutcracker Suite* the same as the *Nutcracker* ballet?

No. The *Nutcracker Suite* is a program of seven pieces from the ballet that Tchaikovsky selected for at a concert at the St. Petersburg Musical Society in the spring of 1892, before the opening of his ballet. For this concert, Tchaikovsky chose the Overture, Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy, Russian Dance, (a.k.a. Trepak), Arabian Dance, Chinese Dance, Marzipan Dance (a.k.a. Mirlitons), and Waltz of the Flowers. The audience loved these selections so much that they requested encores for six of the seven pieces (all but the Overture). These six selections, along with the Overture, remain the most well-known and beloved selections from the complete ballet.

How did ballet start?

Ballet originated in the 1400s in formal court dances of French royalty in which all in attendance danced. By the 1500s, ballet steps and movements became more complicated, requiring dancers to have special training. It was during this period that ballet began to be performed for an audience. In 1661, the first ballet school was founded in France. In 1738, the first Russian ballet school was formed.

When did ballet come to the US?

In 1933, George Balanchine formed the American School of Ballet, which became the New York City ballet in 1948. In 1961, ballet in western Europe and America gained one of its greatest stars when Russian dancer Rudolph Nureyev fled the Soviet Union. In that year, the fabled partnership of Nureyev and English ballerina Margot Fonteyn began. Their dancing enchanted audiences in the U.S. and abroad, and helped to widen the appeal of ballet. Ballet's appeal received another boost in 1974 with the defection of another spectacular and skilled Russian dancer, Mikhail Baryshnikov. Ballet made immense gains in popularity after he starred in the 1977 film, *The Turning Point*.

What is the Donetsk Ballet?

The Donetsk Ballet is a ballet company, or group of dancers, that comes from the city of Donetsk, Ukraine. Its official name in Russian translates as "Donetsk State Academic Russian Opera and Ballet Theater." Donetsk is the country's second largest city. Ukraine shares borders with Russia, Belarus, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. (See additional information on Ukraine included in packet).