

'Nutcracker' a tradition made new: Our top 4 productions



[Laura Molzahn](#)

"The Nutcracker" a holiday tradition, but traditions work best when they're made new.

Tradition is a strange animal. Though we might think that hewing strictly to the old ways will maintain our traditions, truthfully it's innovation that keeps them alive, at least in any viable form. "The Nutcracker" has been twisted, sometimes almost beyond recognition, since its 1892 debut, perhaps in response to its unholy 70-year-old popularity in this country, tied to San Francisco Ballet's widely heralded 1944 staging.

Especially now, as the Joffrey takes the Auditorium stage Friday for the final run of Robert Joffrey's 1987 "Nutcracker" (next season brings Christopher Wheeldon's brand-new staging), tradition is on everyone's minds. But then, "Nutcracker" traditions are always crucial to ballet companies and schools. That much was clear when I spoke with directors from the Joffrey, Hyde Park School of Dance, Ruth Page Civic Ballet and Salt Creek Ballet.

JOFFREY BALLET

Ashley Wheater, a Joffrey dancer from 1984-1989 and now its artistic director, performed in the Iowa world debut of [Joffrey's "Nutcracker"](#) — and he'll perform in its final show, Dec. 27, as Mayor Stahlbaum.

"It was a strange time," Wheater recalls of the premiere. Joffrey was so ill — he died three months after — he never made it to Iowa City for the rehearsal process or the premiere. Other choreographers created most of the dancing, but according to Sasha Anawalt's 1996 history of the company, Joffrey had been thinking about his "Nutcracker" for nearly 15 years. Wheater says he always wondered "what the ballet would have been like if he'd been with us on the daily-daily, because there are so many things about his 'Nutcracker' that are absolutely about his warmth and charm.



Holiday concerts are everywhere in Chicago area

"What is really Robert Joffrey is the party scene," Wheater adds. "He loved Christmas and had big parties at his house, filled with friends and family. His party scene has all that chaotic charm." Joffrey packed his first scene, set in a replica of an 1860s New York townhouse, with reproductions of 19th-century American toys from his own vast

collection. Of course an American setting was no surprise from a company known for its fresh, democratic approach to ballet.

Joffrey's obsession with period toys also created what Wheeler calls one of the "great disappointments" of this "Nutcracker": the Christmas tree. "It's not a real Christmas tree," he says. "It's a woodcut, a flat — at that time, kids had a lot of toys that were painted wood. I just remember when we first saw the tree, we were like, 'Really?!' But it was completely in keeping with the idea."

Joffrey's puppet Mother Ginger has worked out well, though. Designed by the Muppets' Kermit Love, it's been operated for 28 years by just one person, Frank Kane. "He has performed Mother Ginger every single year since we premiered it," says Wheeler. "Every single year."



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Twenty-year Joffrey dancer Suzanne Lopez is directing the "Nutcracker" children this season — first time for her, last for the Joffrey staging. Though she danced its Sugar Plum Fairy often, she was never in its children's cast; she did perform in other "Nutcracker" productions, however, as a child. Her favorite role was Clara, though she also greatly enjoyed being a naughty Party Boy.

"As a child dancer," Lopez says, "your whole year revolves around 'The Nutcracker.' I can tell you what role I did every single year, from the age of 7 on. It's a huge deal."

What's different about the Joffrey staging, Lopez says, is that "the scale is so much bigger than what I experienced (as a child)." As ballet mistress, she says, "We want the kids to have fun, but it is a professional production. We have high expectations for

them, both on- and offstage. Every performance should be like the first time you've ever done it and the last time you'll ever do it. You need to get better and better."

*Dec. 4-27 at Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway; \$32-\$136
at ticketmaster.com*

HYDE PARK SCHOOL OF DANCE

"Nutcracker" traditions vary widely when it comes to whether kids or adults perform its child principals. Though the Joffrey's Clara is always a company dancer, most smaller productions use youngsters — but bring in professionals for the challenging second-act pas de deux. Others make every effort to use students in those roles too.

That's the approach artistic director August Tye takes with the [Hyde Park School of Dance](http://HydeParkSchoolofDance.org), founded in 1993. "But, of course, we don't always have enough male dancers," she says. This year she's excited to feature two "gorgeous guys," the same age as her students, from Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts).

The HPSD "Nutcracker" has a tradition of diversity, family-friendliness and community participation. The show is 90 minutes without intermission and narrated ("it's a poem one of our dads wrote," says Tye). Almost all its 175 dancers come from the school — local dignitaries, decked out in wig and skirt, play Mother Ginger — and range from the littlest ballerinas to grandparent age. Parents designed and engineered the sets, take the production shots, and "tailor each costume to fit each dancer every year, moving the hooks and eyes, hemming, steaming and ironing," says Tye. "They all have ownership in the show."

*Dec. 11-13 at Mandel Hall, 1131 E. 57th St.; \$10-\$20 at 773-493-8498
or hydeparkdance.org*

RUTH PAGE CIVIC BALLET

Like HPSD, the [Ruth Page Civic Ballet](http://RuthPageCivicBallet.org) — a training company founded by Page dancers Larry and Dolores Lipinski Long in 1998 — would like to give its students as much onstage experience as possible. But that will necessitate a shift in tradition, defined by Dolores Long as the production's professionalism. Running at the Arie Crown from

1965 till 1997, Ruth Page's "Nutcracker" brought in international guest artists from Erik Bruhn to Patricia McBride, Violette Verdy to Ashley Wheater.

Such distinguished guests have not characterized recent "Nutcrackers." But a new exchange between the Ruth Page School and co-director Victor Alexander's native Cuba, where state-funded schools provide comprehensive arts training, might be a breath of fresh air for Ruth Page students.

With this year's "Nutcracker," Alexander says, the school hopes to "encourage our students that you don't need to be 27 or the principal of a company to do those (second-act) roles. It's all in the education and the commitment and the passion you have for this career that you love." The inspiration? Teenage guest artists from Havana's Escuela Nacional de Ballet will perform the Sugar Plum pas de deux. And ever since the Ruth Page students visited Cuba in October, where they took classes from 8 a.m. till 6 p.m., "they have changed tremendously," Alexander says. "Now they can see they have (the) possibility to become a real dancer. It can be a career."

Dec. 5-6 at Northeastern Illinois University, 3701 W. Bryn Mawr Ave.; \$20-\$25 at ruthpage.org. Dec. 13 at Ravinia Festival, 200 Ravinia Park Road, Highland Park; \$10 at ruthpage.org

SALT CREEK BALLET

Unlike his fellow directors, Sergey Kozadayev, head of [Salt Creek Ballet](#) since 1998, believes that "Nutcracker" traditions aren't open to change. "All 'Nutcrackers' look the same," he says, "because the libretto." In his mind, the tradition that distinguishes Salt Creek's "Nutcracker" is its high quality, derived from his and his wife's training at Russia's Vaganova academy.

Still, he's excited about a few recent innovations in the Salt Creek staging. Student Stefanee Montesantos, rather than a professional guest, will dance the Sugar Plum Fairy at Governors State. And as of last year, the production boasts all new costumes and sets, including "a Christmas tree growing through the roof — flying up from the stage and really going for like two, three minutes," says Kozadayev. "It's spectacular."

Dec. 5 at Governors State University, 1 University Parkway, University Park; \$23-\$43 at 708-235-2222 or centertickets.net. Dec. 12-13 at North Shore Center for the

*Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie; \$20-\$42 at 847-673-6300
or northshorecenter.org*

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