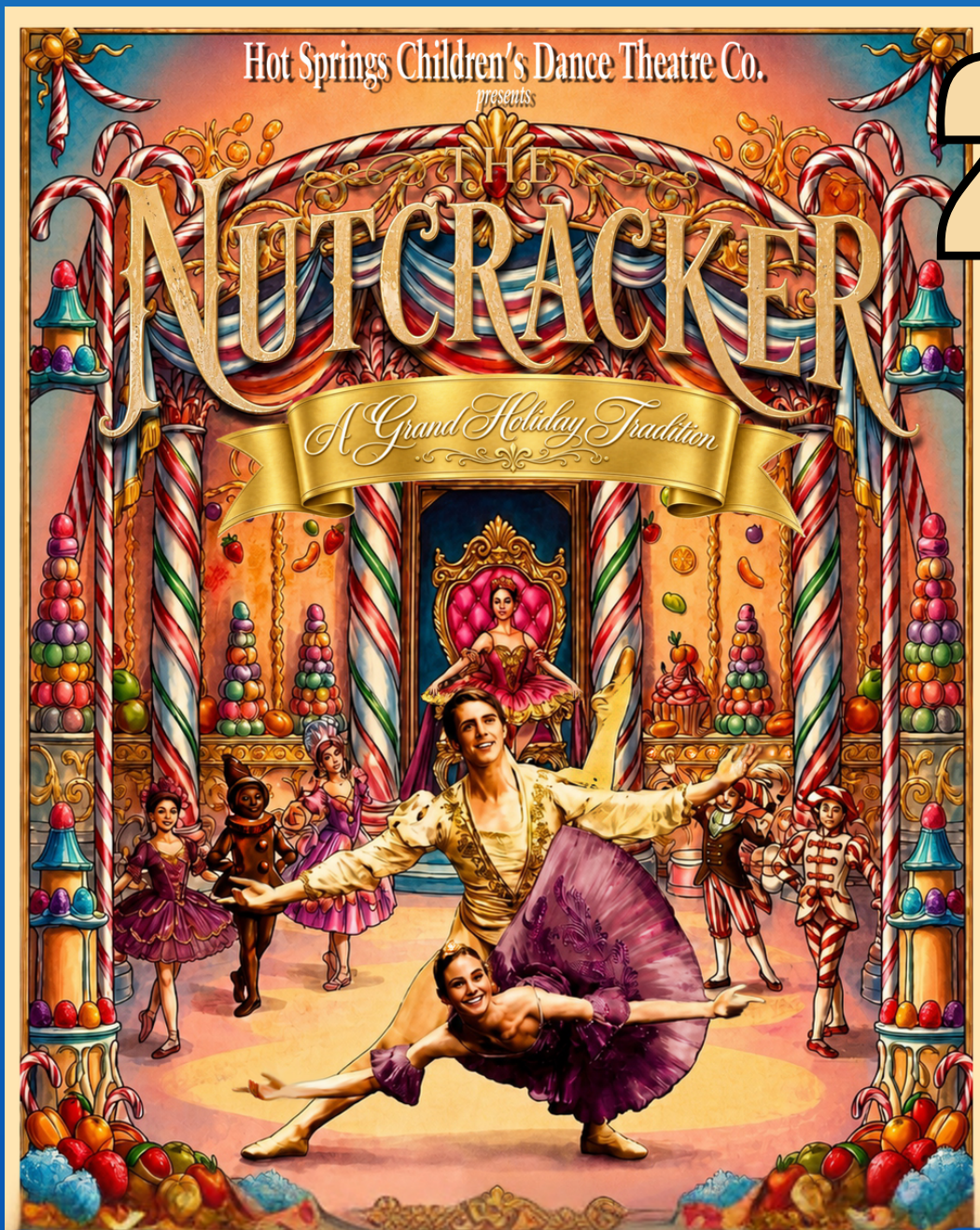


2026



Edmond Cooper
Artistic Director

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Study Guide

Arts & Educational Outreach Program

School Day Performances

Tuesday Dec 1, 2026 10am Malco Historical Theater

Friday Dec 4, 2026 10am Woodlands Auditorium

INTRODUCTION

This study guide was designed to help teachers prepare their classes to see a performance of *The Nutcracker*. This guide includes a synopsis of the story narrated through dance, a brief guide to classical ballet, and class discussions/activities based on the enclosed material. We hope it will be useful and that you and your class will find this performance both entertaining and educational.

What is Ballet?

History

The very first ballets, which were created almost 500 years ago, do not look anything at all like the ballets we see performed by ballet companies today.

The word ‘ballet’ comes from the Italian word *ballare*, which means to dance. The first ballets were court dances (called *balleti* in Italian), which were danced by the men and women of the Italian Court. These ballets were not performed in theaters, but usually in court palaces for the rich and famous.

The steps in these ballets were very simple because the costumes were made with very heavy fabrics and ornaments. Some costumes weighed as much as 150 pounds. Nonetheless the movements were very graceful, emphasizing the head, arms and upper body, while the dancers created very elaborate circles, lines and other shapes known as floor patterns.

The first court ballet that we know of was choreographed in 1489, in honor of the Duke of Milan’s marriage to Isabel of Aragon.

The Nutcracker

The Nutcracker is based on the original story by the German writer and composer **E.T.A Hoffman**.

The original story takes place in **Nuremberg, Germany**, on Christmas Eve, and centers on a little girl named **Clara**. Clara and her brother, **Fritz**, receive many gifts from their parents and from their godfather, **Dr. Drosselmeyer**. One of Dr Drosselmeyer's gifts to them is a **wooden nutcracker**. Clara takes an instant liking to the toy. She and Fritz are taking turns cracking nuts in the Nutcracker's mouth when Fritz accidentally breaks its jaw and teeth. Clara becomes upset and insists on nursing the Nutcracker back to health. That night Clara tenderly puts the Nutcracker to bed and promises to care for him until he has recovered.

Before Clara can get into bed, an army of mice led by the wicked **Mouse Queen** appears. They come out of the walls and up through the floor boards, making a frightful hissing noise as they slowly march toward her. As they advance, the Nutcracker jumps from his bed, calling his army of toys to attention. The Nutcracker and his army fight against the mice, but are no match for them; the mice drive the toys back towards the Christmas tree from whence they came. In a desperate attempt to help, Clara takes off her shoe and throws it at the Mouse Queen, knocking her to the floor. At once, the entire mouse army disappears, the Nutcracker is transformed into a Prince, his former self, and Clara and the Nutcracker Prince travel to the Land of Sweets to meet the Sugar Plum Fairy and her court.

The next morning, Clara awakens to see a young man lost in the snow. The young man asks for directions to the workshop of Dr. Drosselmeyer. He looks very familiar to her.

Was this all-Clara's dream, or did it really happen? That is for you to decide.



The Composer

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, born in 1840, was the son of a mining inspector in Russia. He studied music as a child, attending both the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the Moscow Conservatory. Over the course of his career, he composed numerous works which include six symphonies, four concertos, and three ballets. He performed at the opening concert in Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1891. That same year, Tchaikovsky was commissioned to write the music for *The Nutcracker*. Marius Petipa,

the original choreographer, presented him with the exact scenario that he wanted, including the rhythm, tempo, and number of measures for each dance. When it was first premiered the ballet was not at all successful. However, it is now one of the most acclaimed and beloved of all the classical ballets.



This Photo by

Pre-Performance:

1. Listen to selections of *The Nutcracker Suite* by P.I. Tchaikovsky.
2. Divide children up into small groups and allow them to create their own dances with the different pieces of music.
3. Discuss with your students what is necessary to put together a performance of *The Nutcracker*.
4. Discuss the people involved and what their jobs are to create this huge production.
5. Have the children make a “ticket” for *The Nutcracker*. What is listed on a ticket to a performance (Name of the show, Time, Date, etc.)? How much does the ticket cost?
6. Role-play with selling tickets (sell tickets to different shows at different costs), collecting tickets, and entering the dance theater.
7. Dancing is a dialogue or expression of emotion through movement rather than words. Choose a section of a story that you are reading in class and communicate it through movement or expression rather than words. Ask the students to laugh if the character finds something funny, to frown if the character becomes sad, or to show fearful faces if the character is scared.
8. The corps de ballet consists of dancers who dance together in one group. They must work together to create the beautiful patterns that we see on stage. Students can also work together to create a simple dance. Here would be an example:

Holding hands in one big circle, everyone walks 8 steps to the right and stops. Walk 4 steps into the middle of the circle. Then, walk four steps out of the circle.

Everybody lets go of each other’s hands. Bend to touch the ground and then reach up high into the sky.

Hold hands once again and repeat to the left. Variations of this movement can be used.

Post-Performance:

1. Help students become familiar with vocabulary terms by pointing out terms as you read the story to them.
2. Read a version of The Nutcracker story.
3. Discuss some of the following with your students to help them to prepare their ‘story map’ listing the main characters, the setting, and the events of the story:
 - Where does the story take place
 - When does it take place?
 - Who is the main character of the story?
 - What is she like/how would you describe her?
 - Who are some of the other characters? (Students' focus should be directed to Godfather Drosselmeyer, Nutcracker Prince, Sugar Plum Fairy)
 - What is each like/how would you describe him/her?
 - What do they do in the story?
 - What is Klara's special present?
 - What strange things happen at midnight?
 - What happens to Clara's Nutcracker?
 - How does Clara save the Nutcracker?
 - Where does the Prince take Clara?
 - How do the inhabitants of the Land of Sweets celebrate Clara and the Prince’s visit?
 - How does the story end?

4. Provide a prompt for illustrating or writing a reaction to the story. Some sample prompts include:
 - "My favorite part of the Nutcracker story is . . ."
 - "The scariest part of the Nutcracker story is .."
 - "The saddest part of the Nutcracker story is ."
 - "The happiest part of the Nutcracker story is.."
5. The Sugar Plum's Attendants present several types of candy to Clara when she sits on the throne to watch the divertissements. If the attendants bring 5 peppermints and 4 lollipops, how many pieces of candy have they brought to Clara? What if they brought 3 peppermints, 2 cupcakes, and 7 caramels? If Clara had 10 pieces of candy and she ate 2 pieces of candy, how many pieces of candy would she have left? Substitute different numbers to create more equations.

Standards: Kindergarten, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Sets 26; (Problem Solving: Problem Solving): 23; First Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Addition and Subtraction): 43, 47; (Problem Solving: Word Problems): 43, Second Grade, Mathematics (Problem Solving: Addition and Subtraction): 29; (Problem Solving: Word Problems): 31]

6. Soldiers fought mice in the Battle Scene. If there were 2 rows of 4 mice on one side of the stage, how many mice would there be? If there were 3 rows of 3 soldiers on the other side of the stage, how many soldiers would there be? Are there more mice or more soldiers on stage? How many total dancers on stage?

Standards: Second Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Multiplication Readiness): 39, 40; Third Grade, Mathematics (Whole Number Computation; Estimation; Whole Number Operations: Multiplication and Division): 42, 43, 44]



7. Clara and the Nutcracker Prince travel through The Land of Snow to arrive at The Kingdom of Sweets. No two snowflakes are alike. How is snow made? At what temperature does it form? What time of year does snow form? Describe a snowflake. Make a paper snowflake card using the attached instructions.

Kindergarten, Science (Physical Science: Structure of Matter): 5, 6; First Grade, Science (Earth/ Space Science: Earth Processes: Weather and Climate): 15; Sixth Grade, Science (Physical Science: Structure of Matter): 6]

8. Have the children write about their favorite dance from The Kingdom of Sweets. Describe the movement from that particular dance. Was it slow or quick, intricate or simple? How many dancers were in it? What did the costumes look like and what country/sweet did they represent? Younger children can draw their favorite dance.

Standards: Kindergarten, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 13; Fourth Grade, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 38, 39, 40, 42; Fifth Grade, Language Arts (Written Communication: Writing): 39,40, 41, 42]

9. On a sheet of paper do the following activities: Find the various countries on a map of the world. Map a ship's voyage from Germany (where *The Nutcracker*) to various countries on the map. How long would the voyage have taken in 1892 (when the ballet was originally set)? What were the other ways to transport goods during that time period? How do we transport goods today? Different folk dances came from different countries. Matchup which dance came from which country.
10. Tchaikovsky composed most of the dances for Act II according to the rhythms and styles of the folk dances of different countries from which those Christmas foods came. Discuss why the Spanish dance represented chocolate, the Chinese dance represented tea, and so on.

Kindergarten, Social Studies (Core Social Studies Skills: Information Processing): 23; Fine Arts (Dance: Critical Analysis and Aesthetic Understanding): 20, Second Grade, Fine Arts (Dance: Artistic Skills and Knowledge: creating Performing, Producing): 13; Social Studies (Geography: Map and Globes): 44]

Ballet Language

A whole language describes the different steps in ballet. Because people first began writing down the steps of the dances in France, French is used for the language of ballet.

ADAGIO A slow movement in dance.

ALLEGRO A dance performed to a lively and fast tempo (as opposed to adagio)

BALLERINA Female ballet dancer.

CHOREOGRAPHY Derived from the Greek words *choria* (dance) and *graphes* (writer), movements arranged and planned within a dance.

ELEVATION A term used to indicate the height of the jump attained by the dancer.

DANSEUR A male dancer.

PAS DE DEUX A dance involving two people, usually involving a danseur and a ballerina.

PIROUETTE To whirl or spin on one foot.

PLIE A bending of the knees

POINTE SHOES Satin slippers that have a glue hardened toe and a strongly reinforced sole to support the arch of the foot when the dancer is standing on the tips of the toes.