

dance INTERNATIONAL

Sugar Plum Fairy Versus COVID-19: 10 Nutcrackers for 2020

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By Robin J. Miller

For decades, ballet companies, especially in North America, have depended on *The Nutcracker* for their bread-and-butter, knowing it would draw vast crowds every Christmas and make it possible to present other, often more challenging fare the rest of the year.

Thanks to pandemic restrictions, many companies cancelled their 2020 *Nutcrackers* months ago. But several had hoped to run their productions live more or less as usual – until last-minute lockdowns led to forced cancellations virtually around the globe. There are still a couple, however, bravely planning to go ahead live (this may change), and still more who have gone digital, shooting new film versions or resurrecting older recordings and making them available to watch at home, on the big screen in movie theatres or even projected onto a landmark building.

All this, it seems, not primarily to generate revenue – the digital performances are low-cost or free – but simply to bring a little light and happiness to the many who are yearning for a visit to the Land of the Sweets.

CANADA

Beyond the stage: Goh Ballet



Tyler Carver in Goh Ballet's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: David Cooper

Goh Ballet's classic *Nutcracker* made a leap in 2018 from The Centre in Vancouver to the much larger Queen Elizabeth Theatre for its annual run. This year, the company has made yet another leap – to a new film version where, instead of Clara rescuing the Nutcracker Prince from the evil Mouse King, we have Alex, a 20-year-old struggling dancer who is spending a cold, pandemic-ridden winter separated from his family and racked with doubt about himself, his talent and his future ... until he meets Clara.

With a script by Kate Orsini, whose credits include *Nashville* and *NCIS*, and shot by filmmaker Lukas Dong, *The Nutcracker: Beyond the Stage* premieres on the [Goh Ballet Nutcracker website](#) December 18 and runs to January 2. Watch for a cameo by company director Chan Hon Goh as the Sugar Plum Fairy, in her first performance since retiring as principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada a decade ago.

In the cinema: National Ballet of Canada



The National Ballet of Canada's Sonia Rodriguez in James Kudelka's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: Bruce Zinger
This is the first year since 1955 that the National Ballet of Canada has not offered its audiences a live *Nutcracker*. But all is not lost! If you have not yet seen the Toronto-based company's current version — packed with former artistic director James Kudelka's best choreography, with stunning sets and costumes by Tony-winner Santo Loquasto — now's your chance.

The company is making a live-capture of its *Nutcracker* available in two ways: home streaming through the [Cineplex Store](#) beginning December 4, or on the big screen in select Cineplex theatres later in

December.

Recorded in 2008 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, the film features principal dancer Sonia Rodriguez as the Sugar Plum Fairy, emerging from a fabulous Fabergé egg.

With a dash of Ukraine: *Shumka's Nutcracker*

High-octane and adventurous, *Shumka's Nutcracker* brought down the house last year at Victoria's Royal Theatre. This year, Dance Victoria is presenting it again as part of a digital package wreathed in fun extras, including *Nutcracker* Story Time with actor Jim Leard for kids, and a *Nutcracker* signature cocktail demonstration for adults.



Shumka's Nutcracker | Photo: Gregg Ingram

“Shumka” means whirlwind in Ukrainian, and you certainly feel that in this production by Edmonton’s Ukrainian Shumka Dancers: the folk dance segments are infused with speed and athleticism. But elegance is there, too, brought by principal artists from the Kyiv Ballet of the National Opera of Ukraine, and so is innovation: an old Ukrainian song called Shchedryk, which an English composer later turned into Carol of the Bells, is a lovely addition to Tchaikovsky’s score. Being Ukrainian himself, Tchaikovsky probably wouldn’t mind.

Shumka’s Nutcracker, filmed in 2017, is available December 10-13 at DanceVictoria.com.

UNITED STATES

Shondaland on Netflix: *Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*



Kalyn Flowers and Ryan Phuong in *Dance Dreams: Hot Chocolate Nutcracker* | Photo: Courtesy of Netflix © 2020

Two years ago, Shonda Rhimes, the highest paid showrunner on television, ditched ABC – home of her hit shows *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Scandal* – for Netflix, where she is in the midst of developing 12 new Shondaland projects. The first to hit

screens everywhere: a documentary called *Dance Dreams: Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*, available from November 27.

The film blends the story of Debbie Allen’s storied 50-year career as an actor, dancer, director, choreographer, producer and founder of the Debbie Allen Dance Academy in South Los Angeles, with scenes demonstrating exactly how hard it is to prepare young performers for a large dance production: Allen’s own *Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*. Danced to an original score that spans Cuban, classical, Indian, R&B, hip hop and pop, *Hot Chocolate* is a joyful, high-energy melange of styles that may just change your mind about what a *Nutcracker* should be. Take a look at the Netflix [trailer](#).

Out of the ashes: Joffrey Ballet



Joffrey Ballet's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: Cheryl Mann, courtesy of Art on theMART

Christopher Wheeldon, one of the most in-demand choreographers today, created a new *Nutcracker* for Chicago's Joffrey Ballet in 2016 that firmly grounds the production in a very different world than we usually see. Young Marie, as she is called in this telling, lives with her widowed immigrant mother in a shack on the grounds where the 1893 World's Fair – which would haul the city out of the devastation caused by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 – is under construction. That may sound dark, but it doesn't stay that way, not when the entertainment includes Basil Twist's spectacular puppets (watch for the rats!) and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

In 2020, the Joffrey is treating Chicagoans to a 30-minute visual display of its *Nutcracker*, projected onto Art on the Mart's mammoth 2.5-acre riverside façade. Not in Chicago? Why not visit the company's [website](#) and stream the Emmy-winning PBS documentary *Making a New American Nutcracker*, featuring behind-the-scenes insights from Wheeldon and his creative team. Here's the [trailer](#).

Sweet and spectacular: Houston Ballet



Houston Ballet's Naazir Muhammad | Photo: Lawrence Elizabeth Knox

Houston Ballet has experienced *Nutcracker* adversity before: in 2017, Hurricane Harvey flooded its theatre, forcing the company to cancel all 34 scheduled performances. They rallied fast, however, in the end presenting 28 shows split between two other venues large enough to contain the giant \$5million US production by Houston Ballet artistic director Stanton Welch, with sets and costumes designed by British theatrical royalty, Tim Goodchild. Artists in London, New York and Chicago spent two years creating Goodchild's exuberant designs for the lavish sets and 282 costumes, and it shows: this *Nutcracker* is a true spectacular, especially Act 2's King Louis XIV-style French court.

This year, the company has gone digital, presenting a condensed version of Welch's production combined with four new works choreographed to much-loved holiday songs. Called *Nutcracker Sweets*, the program is on-demand via [Houston Ballet's website](#) December 15-January 8.

Balanchine out west: Pacific Northwest Ballet



Pacific Northwest Ballet's Christopher D'Ariano as Mother Ginger in George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: © Angela Sterling

New York City Ballet has canceled its live George Balanchine-choreographed *Nutcracker*, but you can still see his classic 1954 footwork, courtesy of Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet.

With sets and costumes designed by Ian Falconer, author and illustrator of the *Olivia* children's books, PNB's 2015 production retains Balanchine's world-famous expanding Christmas tree, but adds new elements of whimsy and fun, including some magical video projections from local artists at Straightface Studios.

The company is making a filmed version of its *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker* available in December (watch for Olivia the pig to make a rather glorious appearance inside a painted opera-house box, and for a glittering glass star by Seattle artist Dale Chihuly).

A deluxe digital package includes a few extra bonbons, such as Olivia's reading list, Falconer's costume sketches and interviews with dancers about their roles.**RUSSIA**

Moscow sophistication: Bolshoi Ballet



The Bolshoi Ballet in Yuri Grigorovich's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: Damir Yusupov

While *The Nutcracker* originated in Russia as a two-act “fairy ballet” in 1892, choreographed by Marius Petipa for the Mariinsky Theatre, it has only recently become a popular Christmas tradition there. Both of the country’s major ballet companies – St. Petersburg’s Mariinsky and Moscow’s Bolshoi – now mount it annually, and this year is no exception.

The two companies are going live with no announced changes to their usual productions. My pick: the Bolshoi’s, choreographed by Yuri Grigorovich in 1966. His narrative is simple, straightforward and unsentimental, with no mime, and the largely white, black, silver and red sets and costumes are exquisite.

The Bolshoi *Nutcracker* runs December 23 to January 6 – but, if you’re not in Moscow, check your local movie theatre: a number in North America are presenting the Bolshoi’s recent live-capture film version. See this [clip](#).

UNITED KINGDOM

Peter Wright’s *Nutcracker*: The Royal Ballet



Federico Bonelli in The Royal Ballet’s production of Peter Wright’s *The Nutcracker* | Photo: ©Tristram Kenton

British choreographer Peter Wright first set *The Nutcracker* on London's Royal Ballet in 1984, with sets and costumes by Julia Trevelyan Oman. Oman stuck closely to the original E.T.A. Hoffman story, placing the action firmly in 19th-century Nuremberg and making it, according to *The Times*, "look as pretty as a traditional German Christmas card." And traditional it certainly is, in both look and feel, but Wright's choreography is also consistently gorgeous and engaging.

While the audience will be socially distanced, little on stage will change: the company is able to rely on life partners or established bubbles to perform all the famous pas de deux. The Royal's *Nutcracker* runs December 11 to January 3, with tickets from the [Royal Opera House](#).

A 2016 filmed version — starring Lauren Cuthbertson as the Sugar Plum Fairy and heartthrob Federico Bonelli as The Prince — is also showing, at select international cinemas, in December, including the [Vic Theatre](#) in Victoria, BC, if restrictions allow.

Wright again: Birmingham Royal Ballet

Peter Wright set a second *Nutcracker* on Birmingham Royal Ballet as a thank you to Birmingham for giving the formerly itinerant company a permanent home in 1990. This version is less tied to the original story than The Royal Ballet's, while John Macfarlane's designs are both warmer and freer (Clara flies on the back of a giant snow goose!).

This year, famed Royal Ballet dancer Carlos Acosta, appointed BRB's artistic director in January 2020, worked with the now 94-year-old Wright to downsize the story to just 80 intermission-free minutes and to COVID-proof it in clever ways. Instead of the normal 50 corps de ballet, for example, there will be just 35 corps and soloists, split into two bubbles that never cross onstage.

While the Royal Albert Hall shows in London are cancelled, the company hopes to go live at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre December 14-22, with [ticket updates here](#).



Pacific Northwest Ballet artists and PNB School students in George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* | Photo: © Angela Sterling, courtesy of Pacific Northwest Ballet