

LIVE

FROM LINCOLN CENTER



The Holiday Season in New York brings with it many traditions, among them the lighting of the Radio City Christmas Tree; the spectacular Christmas Show at the Radio City Music Hall; multiple performances of Handel's "Messiah"; and the remarkable George Balanchine choreography for Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" Ballet, performed some 45 times in December and January by the world-renowned company he and balletomane Lincoln Kirstein founded in 1948, the New York City Ballet. Our cameras and microphones will be on hand for one of those performances---the evening of Wednesday, December 14---the next and very special presentation on Live From Lincoln Center.

It all began in 1816 when the German author, E. T. A. Hoffmann, produced his fairy-tale narrative, "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King". A good many years later Alexandre Dumas Senior made a French language version of the fanciful tale. When the Dumas version came to the attention of Marius Petipa, the famed ballet master of the Russian Imperial Ballet, he recognized that the story lent itself perfectly to ballet treatment and he commissioned Tchaikovsky to compose the music. Tchaikovsky was hardly enthusiastic about the prospect, and in any case work on the score was interrupted by his highly publicized journey to New York in 1891 to participate in the opening of Carnegie Hall. He finally completed his score for "The Nutcracker" nine months later, in February, 1892.

The ballet itself is in two acts. Act I begins at a gala Christmas party attended by children and mechanical dolls. The heroine is little Marie Silberhaus (called Clara by Tchaikovsky), daughter of the host and hostess, who receives as a gift a marvelous German Nutcracker shaped in the form of an old man with huge jaws. During some rough play the Nutcracker is broken by two boys. Later that night Clara is unable to sleep, disturbed by the fate suffered by her prized Nutcracker. She climbs out of bed to take another look at him, and wondrous things begin to happen: the Christmas tree grows and the Nutcracker is healed and alive. Suddenly a ferocious battle breaks out between the tin soldiers, who are led by the Nutcracker, and the mice. The Nutcracker and the Mouse King engage in hand-to-hand combat, and for a time the Mouse King seems to have the upper hand. But a well-aimed toss of Clara's slipper puts the Mouse King out of action. The battle is over, the Nutcracker triumphs, and then begins the most miraculous adventure of all: the Nutcracker is transformed into a handsome young Prince, who thanks Clara for saving his life and invites her to join him in a visit to his enchanted Kingdom of Sweetmeats and Lollipops.

Act II takes place in the fairyland of the realm of the handsome young Prince. Clara and the Prince are welcomed by the Sugarplum Fairy and all her court and there is a series of dances by the several sweetmeats to celebrate the liberation of their Prince.

The first performance of the Ballet was given in St. Petersburg, Russia in December, 1892. In early March of 1892 Tchaikovsky had led a concert of his music at the Imperial Russian Musical Society. The hit of the evening was a Suite he had extracted from the complete score of "The Nutcracker" made up of the Overture, the March of the children from the First Act, and the characteristic dances from Act II. This Nutcracker Suite has ever since been a cornerstone of the orchestral repertory, while the complete ballet languished virtually unknown outside of Russia for the better part of half a century.

Enter George Balanchine. In 1919, at the age of 15, Balanchine had danced the role of the Prince in a production of the ballet in his native Russia. Over the following years Balanchine became one of Europe's most celebrated choreographers. In 1933, at the invitation of Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine settled in the United States and together the two of them created a ballet school and a succession of ballet companies. Finally in 1948 their long-held dream came to fruition: they created a grand new company which they called the New York City Ballet. With Balanchine's extraordinary artistic vision and with Kirstein's indomitable executive power the New York City Ballet Company quickly became one of the world's finest.

Drawing upon his encyclopedic knowledge of the classical music repertory, Balanchine proceeded to choreograph dozens of those works--in effect creating a whole new ballet repertory. Early on he returned to the work of his youth, Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker", and created a fanciful new choreography. It was produced for the first time by the New York City Ballet in February, 1954 with a cast that included such luminaries as Maria Tallchief, Nicholas Magallanes and Tanaquil LeClerq. It was an immediate and overwhelming success. And ballet companies throughout the country have picked up on this success: many of them stage their own performances of "The Nutcracker" in their communities during the Holiday Season.

So a very special treat awaits you on PBS on the evening of Wednesday, December 14: the inimitable "George Balanchine's The NutcrackerTM" with music by Tchaikovsky in the classic performance by the New York City Ballet Company. My usual parting suggestion: check your local station for the exact day and time of the transmission in your area.

Merry Christmas!

By MARTIN BOOKSPAN