

## **‘The Nutcracker’ wasn’t always a beloved ballet. Early critics liked only the music.**

The ballet debuted in the U.S. 75 years ago and grew to become a holiday tradition.



*Moscow Ballet’s Uncle Drosselmeyer and local ballet students at Christmas Eve party*

By **Marylou Tousignant**

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The critics were not kind after the first performance of “The Nutcracker” ballet in 1892 in St. Petersburg, Russia. The battle scene was called clumsy, the costumes were described as dull, and the Sugar Plum Fairy was dissed as chubby (our word, not theirs). Even the composer found the premiere “rather boring.”

But the music — oh, that wonderful music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky — got rave reviews. And it still does.

Somewhere along the way, seeing “The Nutcracker” became a holiday tradition. For some children, it’s their introduction to classical music. For others, the story of the little nutcracker that comes to life on Christmas Eve and fights the evil Mouse King, is their first ballet.

Tchaikovsky (pronounced chai-KOFF-skee), who also composed music for “The Sleeping Beauty” and “Swan Lake,” probably would be surprised at how “The Nutcracker” has overcome its shaky start. It is among the most performed of all ballets and is popular in the United States, where it is celebrating its 75th anniversary. Its first complete performance in America was in San Francisco, California, in December 1944.

Moscow Ballet’s “Great Russian Nutcracker,” now on its 27th North American tour, will make 144 stops. The ballet company teams with local dance studios to find young talent to put onstage with the pros.



This year marks Corbin Holloway’s sixth “Nutcracker” role with Moscow Ballet. His first was at age 7, before he had even started ballet classes. Now the Rockville preteen has a featured role in the Bethesda show’s “Celebration Dance” scene, which opens Act II.

Corbin wanted to study ballet because “it was the hardest” dance. “Ballet is such a challenge,” he said, but he loves that it combines athleticism and artistry. Corbin’s grandmother was a professional singer, and his father played pro football, so maybe he is a natural, although he does practice several hours a day.

He is now able to turn seven or eight pirouettes (peer-uh-WETS) — full turns on one foot — regularly and competes in international competitions.

“Talent like Corbin’s comes along every 20 to 30 years,” said Lorraine Spiegler of CityDance, where Corbin is a student.

Adley Strider said she “found my love for ballet” at age 6 or 7. “I wasn’t the best at it,” the Spotsylvania sixth-grader said, “but I just kept progressing. You never give up.”

Now 11, Adley will be in two dances in Moscow Ballet’s Fairfax shows. In one scene, she must dance on just the tips of her toes (“on pointe,” in ballet language). “It can be kind of scary at first,” she said, “but you get used to it.”

Adley and Corbin think other kids will enjoy “The Nutcracker.”

“It’s really entertaining, with a lot of acting and movement going on,” Corbin said.

“It’s a very beautiful dance to watch,” said Adley. “The story is easy to figure out even if you’ve never seen it before.”

Just beware of the Mouse King.

### **See for yourself**

Moscow Ballet performs “Great Russian Nutcracker” on December 10 and 11 in Fairfax at George Mason University’s Center for the Arts; December 13 and 14 in Baltimore at the Hippodrome theater; and December 15 and 16 in Bethesda at the Music Center at Strathmore. More details are online at [nutcracker.com](http://nutcracker.com).