

En l'Air

News from
MASSACHUSETTS
ACADEMY of
BALLET
Educational Training
Association

FALL
2014



MAB flower fairies dance in the garden at Wistariahurst Museum as part of a special student performance titled "Flora and Fun," part of the Next Stop Holyoke celebration, on October 11. Photos: Charles Flachs

Flora and Fun in Wistariahurst Gardens

On a beautiful autumn day at the Wistariahurst Museum, MABETA dancers and MAB students premiered *Flora and Fun*, their first ever series of site-specific performances for the Next Stop Holyoke weekend of events.

From conception to production, the dances incorporated the beauty and texture of the garden as well as the natural reflections of the fall season. The creation of movement came about in response to the exquisite gardens at Wistariahurst, and was inspired by its architecture and design. The choreography expressed a gardener's co-existence with bees and the joy of growing flowers, young fairies' creative improvisation of trees blowing in the wind and

pumpkins growing in a field; and dancers' elegant waltzes in the garden.

This beautiful spectacle of dance melded perfectly with the dramatic fall weather and an appreciative audience. What a wonderful experience for our dancers and our community!



Ten Years in the Making

by Bernita Spagnoli, MAB parent



Sarah Soares at MAB in its startup year
Photo courtesy the Soares family

"It takes many years to create a dancer." I am paraphrasing Charles Flachs' comment made several years ago at the start of a spring performance, when he was describing to the audience the meticulous and steady work required to dance at the highest level. I believe this can also be said about a ballet school.

Ten years ago, our daughter Sarah, then 5, became a ballet student of Rose and Charles Flachs at their newly opened Massachusetts Academy of Ballet in Holyoke. We were looking for a serious school for Sarah, one that would give her a real introduction to dance. We were not disappointed in what we found. As we have watched Sarah and the other students transform over those years into ever more skilled, confident, and beautiful versions of themselves, we have also watched the school grow—from those initial classes (and performances!) in one room to the larger space now available and the increasingly sophisticated performances, including the unique *Nutcracker* at the Wistariahurst Museum and the spring

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The Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

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performance, now held at Holyoke High School auditorium. We are thrilled to have been there from the beginning!



Sarah (left) as Ruth in the first MAB Nutcracker & Sweets at Wistariahurst, as a brand new dancer in the new MAB studio, and a 9-year-old Sarah with Rose Flachs. Photos: Linda Keith and Soares Family



Sarah's Take: Learning the Counts

by Sarah Soares

One of my earliest memories was my first MAB performance. We were bluebirds, and the entire time we only sort of knew what we were doing. Rose had told everybody to follow me for the counts, because it seemed that I knew them. It turns out that I actually didn't; I was just a lucky guesser. Nevertheless it was a fun performance and I wanted to do it again, except next time I would be sure to know the counts.

In that same performance, I watched the older girls. They were the first dancers I looked up to, and I can still remember pieces of the performance they did. I spent the rest of the day dancing around my house, trying to mimic the steps I had seen them do. Thus my love of dancing began, and the main reason it stuck with me was MAB. We work hard and are trained well, but the school is also like a second family. I have grown up knowing Rose and Charles, and their obvious care for all of their dancers has helped shape me as a dancer and as a person. I look forward to the fifteen

minutes before class that I can spend laughing with all of my friends in the dressing room, and I look forward to the long Saturdays we spend at the studio. My best friends are at MAB, and while we can goof off in between rehearsals they are also the people that challenge me the most.

What I love about ballet is that you can be proud of something that you've accomplished, yet at the same time still be trying to get better. There is always so much to improve, so many goals to exceed, and so many new things to try. As I've been told, you can't be afraid of making mistakes, and it is much better to make a huge mistake than to dance unsure of yourself. If you mess up, you try again. This makes me want to come to class and work hard to improve. The classes that I walk out of and say, "that was a good class," are also the classes that make me want to go home and take a five hour nap afterwards. However the thing I will always remember—which has been repeated every year since I started ballet—is to "smile—it's supposed to be fun."

Nutcracker & Sweets 2014

A beloved Holyoke holiday tradition

December 12-14

Wistariahurst Museum
Tickets: wistariahurst.org
or (413) 322-5660



PAB Celebrates 40 Years



In August, MAB alumna Connie Flachs, courtesy of Grand Rapids Ballet Company and Francis Lawrence, courtesy of Dance Theater of Harlem, performed *Provencia Blu*, a contemporary pas de deux choreographed by Charles Flachs for the Pennsylvania Academy of Ballet's (PAB) 40th Anniversary Celebration in Philadelphia. The celebration included past and present students from ballet companies throughout the United States. The evening was a wonderful tribute to two of Rose and Charles Flachs' most influential teachers, Margarita DeSaá and John White, with whom many MAB dancers have also studied, through the PAB Summer Intensive Program.

A History of the *Nutcracker* Ballet

by Charles Flachs



THE NUTCRACKER, the Dance of the Snowflakes, 1892 (P. I. Tchaikowsky and the Ballet Theatre of His Time)

Why is it that even non-ballet audiences are familiar with *The Nutcracker*? How has it become an American tradition and why do so many companies and artists in different dance genres perform it regularly? Perhaps some historical context will be helpful in explaining the universal appeal of this holiday dance extravaganza.

Today almost every major ballet company in the US and Canada, as well as companies throughout Europe, perform this ballet. There are hip-hop adaptations and even Duke Ellington, the great jazz musician, composed his own version of the music. *The Nutcracker*, a classical ballet created over a century ago, is a successful tradition, artistically and financially.

The Story

Classical ballet needs specific requirements to be successful: superb music, spirited dancing, inspired choreography, and a continuation of the Romantic Era's blended themes of realism followed by fantasy. In all these instances, *The Nutcracker* excels. The

renowned Russian ballet reviewer and critic Akim Volynsky wrote, "...Ballet masters of old sensed that the fairy tale constitutes the plot of all genuine ballet. This is why the classical dances in *Giselle*, *Raymonda*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* are associated with various themes from fairy tales. They begin with a more or less magnificent and solemn opening, followed by the obligatory realistic plot. Then suddenly the realism is abandoned, and the fantastic features of the fairy tale in their abstract choreographic designs are revealed before our eyes." (Volynsky 1911-1925:238).

Despite competing claims for the "original" version of *The Nutcracker*, there are a series of historically incontrovertible facts.

The Nutcracker (or "Casse-Noisette"), a Classical Ballet in two acts and three scenes, was first choreographed in December 1892 and produced in St. Petersburg, Russia by the Maryinsky Ballet. Originally the choreographer was to be the famous father of classical ballet, Marius Petipa. Petipa was a Frenchman who had quickly

risen in the ranks of the theatre and developed the classical ballet genre over the span of sixty years of innovative choreography. However, as he began to work on *The Nutcracker*, Petipa fell ill, and it was left to his assistant, a Russian—Lev Ivanov—to complete the bulk of the work.

The story, also credited to Ivanov, is derived from the E.T.A. Hoffmann tale, "The Nutcracker and the King of the Mice." As in most classical ballets, the story line does not exactly follow the written version, with liberties taken to increase the scenic spectacle and place emphasis on the dancing roles.

In short, *Nutcracker* is the story of Clara, a young girl whose family is entertaining friends and neighbors at a party in her parents' home. Here we meet (depending on the production) all types of characters, including performing dolls, and Clara's mysterious Uncle Drosselmeyer. Clara is given a nutcracker doll as a gift by her eccentric uncle. Her brother Fritz then attempts to steal it from her. During the ensuing chase, the doll is broken, and Drosselmeyer

consoles Clara as she places the doll under the tree for safekeeping. After the party, the guests leave and Clara and Fritz are sent upstairs to bed. Clara, however, cannot sleep, and creeps back down the stairs to check on her nutcracker. She falls asleep with the doll and begins to dream.

The ballet then leaves the world of realism and turns to fantasy. The small Christmas tree seen in the first act begins to magically grow skyward as large mice, one with a crown on its head, start a battle with the nutcracker that has come to life, portrayed by a dancer wearing a nutcracker mask. During the battle, the King mouse is distracted by Clara who strikes him with her ballet slipper, enabling the nutcracker to slay him. The nutcracker removes his mask, completing his transformation into a real prince, and then escorts Clara to the land of the Snowflakes. Here, the "Waltz of the Snowflakes" is performed, concluding the first act. The second act, set in the "Kingdom of Sweets," is a series of divertissements viewed by Clara as if still

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Scene from Act 1 of THE NUTCRACKER, 1892 (P. I. Tchaikowsky and the Ballet Theatre of His Time)

Photos from "Flora and Fun" (story, page 1)



Gwendolyn Goes to Hollywood via Chicopee and Holyoke!

On October 23rd, author David Rottenberg and dancers from MAB told the story of *Gwendolyn Goes to Hollywood* to over 200 students at the Bowie school in Chicopee. Three repeat performances will be at the Barnes and Noble Bookseller in Holyoke on November 9th. Don't miss this wonderfully entertaining, free event. Purchase books at Barnes and Noble that day or at bn.com/bookfairs November 9-13 (using Book Fair code 11482163) and help support MABETA.

This project is supported in part by a grant from the Chicopee and Holyoke Cultural Councils, local agencies which are supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.



Massachusetts Cultural Council

Gwendolyn photos: Max Saito

Summer Intensive 2014 at MAB



The MAB summer intensive is a great time for students to focus solely on dance and make vast improvements. This summer, students studied with guest teachers Connie Flachs and Steven Houser from Grand Rapids Ballet. Their energetic teaching and artistic coaching of ballet technique inspired the summer students to push themselves beyond their comfort zones and explore new approaches to movement.

During the intensive, each student spends the day at MAB. The curriculum includes modern classes from Laurel Anne Boyd, jazz and yoga classes from Debra Vega, and ballet classes from faculty Matisse Madden, Cathy Johnson and Katherine Bervera. This year, the intensive flew by with barely enough time for a movie and pizza night. However, we did fit one in! The session culminated with a public demonstration of the dance curriculum that was enjoyed by all.



Photos: Charles Flachs



Summer Programs, New Perspectives

by Molly Czitrom, Level 5 student

As dancers, students at MAB understand the importance of keeping up their training even during the summer. Whether it's locally or in another state, dedicated dancers are continuously training and always working toward a goal of improving.

This summer, many dancers from MAB had the opportunity to train at other studios. Both Anastasia Lusnia and Athina Ailmonos attended the Hartt School of Music and Dance for four weeks. Anastasia described it as "challenging, but inspirational. It was a really great opportunity to dance with people from around the world and take classes from [former American Ballet Theater Principal Dancer] Angel Corella." Anna and Athina's program was primarily ballet-focused, and at the end of the program they performed a full-length production of the ballet *Don Quixote*.

Isabelle Haas, who attended a dance program at the Ailey Institute for six weeks, was in more of a modern dance program. Isabelle noted that studying side-by-side with many international students this summer was a fascinating experience. She also really enjoyed being able to train seriously in multiple techniques.

Level 4 students Sarah Soares, Emma Jane Konkoly, and May Saito attended the "sister studio" of MAB—the Pennsylvania Academy of Ballet—and trained with Margarita DeSaá and John White, former teachers of Rose and Charles.

Many adolescents who are not dancers enjoy sleeping in and going to the beach in the summer; however, Level 5 student Minh Sullivan says that it's important for dancers to keep working even in the summer "to keep in shape and work on technique." Training in the summer can be really difficult, but it can also be a lot of fun! The students who stayed local and focused their studies on the four-week MAB Summer Intensive, such as Erica Mailliet, said they "enjoyed it and made a lot of good memories."



Clockwise from left: Izzy with friends at the Ailey summer program, May with her host family at PAB, Anastasia dances in Elizabeth Park, and Athina receives a correction from Angel Corella in the Hartt summer intensive



Timothy Stoukolkin as Drosselmeyer in THE NUTCRACKER, 1892 (P. I. Tchaikovsky and the Ballet Theatre of His Time)



in a dream. These dances often represent, more or less, countries and dances throughout the world. Clara is given a seat of honor where she presides over the action. The ballet ends with Clara awakening back in her home with the toy nutcracker in her arms. She and the audience are left wondering how much of the ballet was a dream and how much reality.

The music

Ivanov had already assisted Petipa with another classical ballet, *Swan Lake*, where he is

credited for the impeccable musicality and phrasing of the choreography in the 2nd and 4th acts.

The music for *The Nutcracker* was again by the same composer, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Perhaps Ivanov had an affinity for the music of Tchaikovsky; we know that the composer was greatly impressed with the choreography when he saw the ballet performed.

Tchaikovsky accepted the commission from the director of the Imperial Theatres, Ivan Vsevolozhsky. It was Vsevolozhsky who came up with the idea of using a streamlined version of Hoffman's story by famed French writer Alexander Dumas in 1844. Dumas called his version "The Story of a Hazelnut-Cracker."

While composing the music, Tchaikovsky is said to have made a bet with a friend who asked if the composer could write a melody based on the notes of the octave in sequence. Tchaikovsky asked if it mattered whether the notes were in ascending or descending order, and was assured it did not. This resulted in the Grand Adage section of the "Grand Pas de Deux." Among other things, the score of *The Nutcracker* is noted for its use of the celesta, a featured

solo instrument in the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from the second act. Tchaikovsky had doubts about his creative work and initially was not pleased with his composition. Eventually, as he worked on the score, he came to think his music had potential.

The early productions



In the Maryinsky production, Antonietta dell' Era, an Italian ballerina, appeared in the leading role of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Other roles were performed by a veritable "Who's Who" of ballet history, with Paul Gerdt dancing the part of the Prince, Olga Preobrazhenskaya one of the clockwork dolls, and Sergeï Lagat dancing the role of the nutcracker. Although the ballet continued to be performed in Russia after the premier, it was not an unqualified success. Critics complained of a disjointed storyline, too many children in the cast, and some, surprisingly, even disliked the score. Tchaikovsky died within a year of the staging never knowing how popular his music would become.

It was left to the Russian émigré community to promote the *Nutcracker* tradition. As early as 1932, a few Russian expatriates were staging partial *Nutcrackers*

in Vancouver, Canada and Portland, Oregon. In 1934, a version was performed at London's Vic-Wells (later named the Royal Ballet) staged by Nicholas Sergeyev, who was the Maryinsky Theatre's former chief régisseur.

In the United States, audiences became familiar with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's condensed *Nutcracker*. It had a brief party scene in the first act, moved quickly to the Snowflake Waltz (which was eventually eliminated in their presentation) and then on to the second act divertissements and "Grand Pas de Deux." That specific choreography, for the "Pas de Deux" section of the complete ballet, was still being passed on to new generations of dancers in many regional American ballet companies as late as the 1980s, with staging by the masterful Ballet Russe dancer, Frederic Franklin.

The first full-length restaging of the ballet is often attributed to George Balanchine, but there was another company that preceded New York City Ballet's storied version.



As one of three brothers in a dancing family, Willam Christensen, first put together the second act divertissements in Portland with the help of a Russian émigré composer, Jacques Gershkovitch. Willam knew nothing about the production but choreographed an inspired series of dances that drew raves in Portland. By the 1940s, Christensen had become the founder and director and of the San Francisco Ballet, a company originally associated with the Opera. Looking for a full-length ballet to establish the fledgling company, Willam chose *The Nutcracker*. He again drew on the Russian community, picking up details of the staging that were missing from the abbreviated version performed by the touring Ballet Russe company, a version that he had undoubtedly seen.

Willam's brothers Lew and Harold were both dancers who performed under the direction of George Balanchine, who was working in New York before the formation of his company, the New York City Ballet.

When Balanchine, who was choreographing for the Ballet Russe Company at the time, arrived in San Francisco, Willam invited him to his apartment to ask questions about the original staging. Balanchine encouraged Willam to choreograph his own steps and acquainted him with the buffoon character Mother Ginger, who appears in the second act. Staged in 1944, the success of this full-length production helped establish San Francisco Ballet and Willam Christensen as its director. However, the company did not do regular December performances of the ballet until the 1950s.

Popularization of the ballet

Movie audiences were already familiar with music from *The Nutcracker*. Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, released in 1940, was a very popular animated film that set one of its segments to "Nutcracker Suite." Animation of fairies, fish, flowers, mushrooms, and leaves used most of the score's second act music.

However, it was undoubtedly the George Balanchine version that propelled the ballet into a holiday spectacle today enjoyed by millions. Balanchine created his full-length *Nutcracker* in 1954 for New York City Ballet. In his own words,

"I have liked this ballet from the first time I danced in it as a boy, when I did small roles in the Maryinsky theatre production. When I was fifteen, I danced the Nutcracker Prince. Years later in New York, when our company decided to do an evening-long ballet, I preferred to turn to The Nutcracker with which American audiences were not sufficiently familiar." (Balanchine's *Festival of Ballet* 1978).

After the New York City Ballet's successful 1954 premiere, the ballet ran an entire month of performances the following Christmas. Now that full-length versions were regularly performed on both coasts, its popularity soared. Part of the appeal can be attributed to the secular observance of Christmas in North America. The ballet dovetailed neatly into what is often considered a festive children's holiday without the somber overtones of religious themes and rituals. Children in the cast added to the popularity of the ballet, resulting in a wider audience and more accessibility, especially for those who considered ballet to be elitist entertainment.

Balanchine and his company also enjoyed an unexpected benefit of having children in the cast. Their presence contributed to the financial success of the ballet by having more of the extended families participating as audience members. There are few certainties in the business of promoting classical ballet, but presenting *The Nutcracker* often ensures an audience and can thus be counted on to allow a company to meet its financial obligations.

The Nutcracker today

In America, it is possible that four generations of the same family have delighted in watching this ballet. Given its long history, the ballet invites a wide range of dance styles and staging.

Each company seeks ways to make the production feel new. Some companies infuse a local atmosphere into the ballet, especially in the first act. The local historical context can increase the audience's enjoyment as they recognize references seen in the ballet that relate to their own lives.

Nods to history and the use of artistic and renowned personalities in the staging thrive, as ballet companies continue to find fresh approaches. A perfect example



combining these aspects of production emerged in Seattle, Washington where Kent Stowell's version had sets and costumes designed by the famous children's author Maurice Sendak—a tradition for Seattle-area audiences since 1983. It is now being replaced by the original 1954 Balanchine version.

An interview with one major American ballet company director revealed that the choice of how to shape a new production, or even terminate an old one, is fraught with conflict. He described presenting the ballet as if it were a restaurant. The food must be good enough to have the customer enjoy the meal but not so extravagant that they cannot see themselves coming back to dine again. *The Nutcracker* needs to be a success and continue to draw in an audience, especially one that may not regularly attend the ballet. At the same time, it must have high artistic quality, enticing the audience to see other diverse company productions. Regardless of the history or local flavor costumes and sets choose to highlight, ultimately the choreography and dancing remain key to stimulating interest.

Thankfully, those of us who love *The Nutcracker* can breathe a sigh of relief. In one form or another this ballet, now well over one hundred years old, will continue to be a beloved holiday celebration. Each year a party will happen, Clara will fall asleep, the mice will fight soldiers, and the audience will be taken to a magical land where they can dream...at least until the curtain falls.



Photo: Charles Flachs

Dance with the professionals



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