



Audio Description Pre-Show Notes

The Australian Ballet Present Storytime Ballet: The Nutcracker

Please note: flashing wands and theatrical haze will be used during this performance.

It's time for a story with The Australian Ballet! Join them on a magical adventure as they bring this festive fairytale to life.

Through the power of music and dance, we will be transported to a wintery Christmas Eve over 100 years ago. We will meet a young girl called Clara and her enchanted nutcracker doll.

Dance along in your seat with Clara and the Nutcracker as they battle the Rat King and visit the magical Kingdom of Sweets!

These notes will introduce the venue and set where the ballet will take place, as well as the characters in the story and their costumes. The notes will also provide some information about the music you will hear during the ballet, and some descriptions of the ballet movements that will be performed by the dancers.

The Venue

This ballet is staged in the Drama Theatre, one of the Sydney Opera House's smaller theatres located in the Western Foyer on the ground floor.

The Drama Theatre has 540 seats arranged in 19 straight, continuous rows that slope down toward the stage. The concrete walls are painted black, the floor is carpeted in a deep blue, and the chairs are made of light wood with orange cushions.

The floor of the stage is covered in a special light grey vinyl called Tarkett. Tarkett is smooth but not slippery, allowing the dancers to move their feet with perfect control.

The Set

The set is simple, leaving plenty of open space on the stage for dancing. A few pieces of furniture will be moved on and off the stage during the ballet. The lights will also change to create different settings and moods.

We begin our story in Clara's grand family home, before travelling to the mystical Kingdom of Sweets. The set is a dream-like blend of these two different worlds, the wooden details of a fancy living room surrounded by a soft, dusky sky.

The carved wooden elements of the furniture and set are all in a decorative Art Nouveau style. This is an old style of art inspired by the curling and interlacing curved lines found in nature.

Halfway back from the front of the stage, a large wooden archway frames the whole set, stretching over the top of the stage from one side to the other. The wood has been carved into long, curving lines, like bending tree branches or the stems of flowers.

Covering the very back wall of the stage is a painted backdrop, a blue and pink sunset sky full of fluffy, wispy clouds. Two archways of fluffy pink cloud stretch over the set, one in front of the other, between the front wooden arch and the backdrop. They make the sky pop out in 3D from the backdrop.

In the back middle of the stage, just in front of the sky backdrop, is a tall, open door frame draped with pink curtains. Running across the back of the stage to either side of the doorway is a shorter wooden fence, carved into a repeating pattern of circles and curves that look like fanning peacock tails.

At the beginning of the ballet, a Christmas tree sits in front of the fence at the back left corner of the stage. It is decorated with shiny gold and silver ornaments, with a silver star at the very top. The base of the tree is surrounded by a white fur rug scattered with presents.

A carved wooden grandfather clock sits just in front of the fence to the right of the doorway.

The Cast and Characters

There are 12 people in the cast: one narrator and 11 ballet dancers.

Most of the dancers will change costumes throughout the ballet to become different characters in the story.

The women all wear pointe shoes in different colours. Pointe shoes are boxy, satin-covered ballet shoes with hard, flat tips, tied on with two ribbons criss-crossed over the ballerina's ankles. These shoes help them balance on tip-toe and spin around on their toes.

The men wear different styles of ballet flats and boots made from soft, thin material.

The Narrator: Drosselmeyer the Great

Drosselmeyer the Great is a friendly magician who visits Clara on Christmas Eve. He is also the Narrator of the story, telling us what is happening.

He has a moustache which is curled up at the ends, and a big smile. A red silk turban is wrapped around his head, with a tall peacock feather sticking up from the front.

He wears a deep red velvety jacket with little gold dots and lacy golden borders. Under this, he wears a glossy black silk waistcoat with a red and silver dragon pattern, and a light silk cravat. He also wears black trousers and polished black leather shoes.

Clara

Clara is a polite young child. She is sometimes a little shy, but her heart is full of kindness and bravery.

Clara's long hair is worn loose and flowing, the front pinned back from her face with a hair piece of dainty white flowers.

She is dressed up in a swishy, ankle-length party dress of light pink lace, wispy silk, and cream satin. She has a cluster of dainty white flowers pinned to the top of her dress, and a sash of cream ribbon painted with the same flowers around her waist.

She also wears silky pink pointe shoes and pale white tights.

Clara's Mother

Clara's mother is called Mrs Stahlbaum. She is a posh, elegant lady.

Her hair is pinned back in a tidy bun. She also wears an ornate beaded headband.

She wears a long, straight sleeveless gown made of deep purple velvet, with matching satin heeled shoes. Over the top of the gown, she wears a short-sleeved beaded lace jacket, held in place by an orange silk belt with a big shimmery butterfly buckle.

She also wears a pair of cream-coloured gloves that go all the way up to her elbows.

The Nutcracker

When we first meet Clara's Nutcracker, he is a painted wooden doll standing to attention at about 30 centimetres tall. He is decorated in a colourful uniform like an old-fashioned army general on parade, and he has a tall, drum-shaped hat. His little mouth can open and close, but the rest of him is very stiff.

Clara's Nutcracker doll later comes to life as a handsome Nutcracker Prince. He is still dressed for an army parade in a navy blue jacket decorated with gold cord, lace, and fringing.

His tall, drum-shaped hat is black with a smooth gold crown shape wrapped around the middle. It is held in place with a black chin strap.

He also wears a pair of white tights tucked into soft black ballet boots that reach halfway to his knees.

The Party Guests

Six young party guests arrive to spend Christmas Eve with Clara and her mother. There are three Party Girls and three Party Boys.

The Party Girls all have their hair slicked back into neat low buns. They wear long, swishy party dresses, each a different colour, with light pink pointe shoes and tights. Their dresses and hair are decorated with little clusters of flowers.

The first girl's dress is a caramel-coloured silk with a faint floral pattern, and has short, gold lace sleeves.

The second girl's dress is made of orangey-pink silk, with a pattern of large, connected V-shapes embroidered around the bottom of the skirt.

The third girl is more boisterous and cheeky than the other girls. Her dress is made of glossy purple silk and silvery lace.

The Party Boys have short, tidy hair. They all wear posh three-piece suits with brown tweed jacket, waistcoat, and knee-length shorts. They have long black socks worn up over their knees, and soft black ballet flats.

The first boy is polite and helpful. He wears a black bowtie with his suit.

The second boy is very cheeky. He wears a light brown silk tie with thin stripes.

The third boy wears a dark brown silk tie with a criss-cross pattern.

Harlequin and Columbine

Harlequin and Columbine are dolls who are brought to life. They are both dressed in colourful, old-fashioned clown costumes.

Harlequin wears a silky tunic made from a patchwork of white and colourful diamonds. The bottom of his tunic is cut out into long, pointed flaps tipped with fluffy black pom-poms. There are three pom-poms down the front of his tunic, and a black belt around the waist.

He has a big ruffled collar made from layers of crinkly white material, with smaller ruffles around the ends of his long sleeves.

He has a cone-shaped red hat with a pom-pom on the top, like a party hat. A black mask covers the top half of his face.

He also wears light blue tights, long black-and-white striped socks, and red ballet flats with pom-poms on top.

Columbine has a mess of curly red hair and pink rosy cheeks. She wears a big, puffy dress that matches Harlequin's outfit. The top is made of glossy, bluey-purple satin, with short puffy sleeves and three pom-poms down the front.

Pointed flaps of satin with pom-poms on the tips flop down over the top of her wide skirt, which is made of the same colourful silk patchwork as Harlequin's tunic. A black-and-white striped petticoat sticks out under the bottom of the skirt.

She also has a ruffled white collar, and a pointed red hat with three pom-poms. She has light stripey tights and red pointe shoes with pom-poms on top.

The Rat King

The Rat King is the enemy of Clara and the Nutcracker. He is played by the same dancer as Harlequin.

The Rat King has big grey ears with tufts of black hair sticking out, a grey snout with wiry black whiskers, and a long, worm-like pink tail.

He wears a tattered, dark green woollen coat that drags along the floor. Under the coat he wears a dark stiped shirt tucked into brown tweed knee-length knickerbockers. Long black-and-white striped socks cover his legs up to the knee, and he has black ballet flats.

He also wears brown fingerless gloves and a long, knitted scarf with thick stripes of different coloured wool. The tops of his big, round ears are flattened under a squashed brown top hat.

The Mice

The Rat King has an army of three cheeky Mice, played by the same dancers as the three Party Girls.

Their round grey ears are smaller than the Rat King's. They have grey snouts with wiry grey whiskers, and pink, worm-like tails.

They wear fluffy grey shorts and brown tweed suit jackets, with brown checkered hankies knotted around their necks. They have dusty brown flat caps on top of their furry heads.

They also wear pink pointe shoes and tights.

The Tin Soldiers

An army of three Tin Soldiers come to life and do battle with the Rat King and Mice. The Nutcracker is their leader. The Tin Soldiers are played by the same dancers as the three Party Boys.

They wear a similar army parade uniform as the Nutcracker, in a sky blue colour with gold, white, and black details.

They also wear black bucket-shaped soldier hats with a short black brim at the front and a black chin strap. The hats are decorated with a lacey gold crest, gold cord and tassels.

They also wear white tights and soft black ballet flats.

The Sugarplum Fairy

The dainty Sugarplum Fairy rules over the magical Kingdom of Sweets. She is played by the same dancer as Clara's Mother, with the same neat hairstyle. She has a dainty tiara with five glittery stars sticking up in an arc over the top of her head.

She wears a sparkly purple tutu decorated with silvery beaded stars. The tutu has a short, stiff skirt made from layers of netting, mesh, and lace. It sticks out in a wide circle around her waist and bounces a little as she moves around.

She has light pink tights and pointe shoes.

The Flamenco Dancers

A pair of Flamenco dancers, a man and a woman, live in the Kingdom of Sweets and represent the Spanish delicacy of chocolate. They are played by the same dancers as Harlequin and one of the Party Girls.

Both dancers wear flashy Spanish Flamenco-style costumes in matching colours.

The woman wears a form-fitting, floor-length gown that flares out at the bottom in a deep red skirt of frills and ruffles.

The black top of the dress is covered with embroidered roses in vibrant reds, pinks, and creams. She also has a headdress of the same coloured roses and black lace that sticks up from her head, with a black veil flowing down the back of her neck.

She wears black lace tights and black pointe shoes.

The man wears high-waisted black trousers, a black waistcoat with a frilly white shirt sticking out the top, and a short red velvet jacket decorated with black lace and tassels.

He has a black hat with a wide, round brim and loose chin strap. He also wears soft black leather jazz shoes.

The Dragon Dancers

Two Dragon dancers, both men, also live in the Kingdom of Sweets. They represent the Chinese custom of drinking tea. They are played by the same dancers as two of the Party Boys.

They both wear matching cream linen sets of loose-fitting shirt and pants.

A bright orange silk sash is tied around their waist, with yellow, pink, green, and blue stripes along its bottom edge and a fringe of orange tassels. The same type of silk is wrapped tightly around their legs from their ankles up to their knees.

They also wear white socks and soft black ballet flats.

Both dancers work together under a big Chinese dragon costume. The front dancer has his head and shoulders inside a large, hollow dragon's head mask, his legs becoming the dragon's front legs. The dragon's head is elaborately decorated in blue, gold, and orange. It has bulging round eyes, short curved horns, bouncy whiskers, and a big mouth with red tongue and pointy teeth.

A large, sheet-like body of orange and gold silk drapes down from the back of the dragon's head, covering the dancer behind. He hunches over to become the long back of the dragon, his legs becoming the dragon's back legs. Shimmery blue scales cover the dragon's back.

The Cossack Dancer

Another person in the Kingdom of Sweets is a Cossack dancer who represents the Russian treat of gingerbread. He is played by the same dancer as the third Party Boy.

He wears a Russian folk outfit, a white long-sleeved tunic decorated with deep blue and gold details with a braided blue and gold cord tied around the waist.

His deep blue silk pants are tucked into knee-length black ballet boots. He also wears a brimless woollen black hat covering his hair. It is a short cylinder shape, like a round biscuit tin.

The Marzipan Dancers

The final subjects in the Kingdom of Sweets are a group of three charming women who represent the French sweet, Marzipan. They are played by the same dancers as Columbine and two of the Party Girls.

They wear matching outfits, each with their own colour scheme. All three wear the same strapless dress made of stiff, pleated silver silk, short skirts flaring out from their waist. The dresses look like they have been made by folding up giant foil cupcake cases.

Under the dress, they each wear a different-coloured beaded top that shows their shoulders. Their tights are patterned with long vertical stripes of black and the same colour as their top. Their legs look like an assortment of liquorice allsorts.

One Marzipan dancer's top and tights are light green, like peppermint. One has a yellow top and tights, like lemon. The last dancer has a pink top and tights, like Turkish delight.

All three Marzipan dancers also wear elbow-length black gloves, a thin black ribbon in a bow around their neck, and black pointe shoes. They each dance with a long candy cane that has the same colour stripes as their top and tights.

The Music

The music is a recording of excerpts from Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky's famous score for The Nutcracker ballet, performed by 60 musicians of Orchestra Victoria and conducted by The Australian Ballet's former Music Director, Nicollette Fraillon.

Listen out for "toy instruments", played by the orchestra when the party guests open their Christmas gifts!

You will also hear the bell-like sound of a celesta – a newly invented instrument at the time the music was composed – in the delicate and magical theme of the Sugarplum Fairy.

The Ballet

Ballet is an artistic type of dancing used to tell stories. Ballet dancing is all about precise, balanced, and graceful movements. Dancers create soft, flowing lines and shapes with their bodies.

Ballet dancers must be highly skilled and athletic to perform this style of dance, demonstrating impressive strength and balance. At the same time, they must keep their movements light and graceful, and their faces calm and elegant. Trained ballet dancers are able to make a difficult performance look smooth and effortless.

Classical ballet like The Nutcracker has its own language of movement. A collection of French words and phrases refer to specific steps, poses, and movements, which can be arranged in different ways to express different ideas.

Some common words and phrases are described below.

Ports de bras

Ports de bras means "carriage of the arms". This term describes the different positions a dancer can hold their arms in as they dance. The dancer's arms curve gracefully around them, tracing lines in harmony with the shapes made by their body and legs.

Common ports de bras positions include curving the arms in a circle in front of the chest or up above the head, and stretching them out wide either side of the body.

En pointe

En pointe means to dance on the very tips of the toes, holding the rest of the foot up in a straight, vertical position. This movement is most often performed by women, who wear special pointe shoes to support their toes.

Men do not tend to wear pointe shoes and will more often dance “en demi-pointe”, meaning half-pointe. This is done by balancing on the ball of the foot with the heel raised up off the floor.

Arabesque

Arabesque is a popular pose in ballet that creates a long, smooth curve with the body. Standing on one leg, the dancer lifts and stretches their other leg behind them. The arms flow out in long lines that match the path traced by the lifted leg.

Pirouette

Pirouette means “to whirl about” and is another popular ballet movement. The dancer stands on one leg and spins around on the spot. Women usually spin en pointe, while men usually spin en demi-pointe. The other leg is raised, and may be bent inward toward the spinning leg or extended outward. The arms curve around the body.

Sometimes a dancer will perform many pirouettes in a row, spinning and spinning on the spot.

Jeté

Jeté means “thrown”. It is a leap, the dancer throwing one leg forward or to the side and following through with the other.

A “grand jeté” is a particular type of jeté, meaning “big jeté”. The dancer leaps through the air with legs stretched out in the splits, one leg pointed straight in front of the dancer and the other leg pointed straight behind them. The dancer’s legs look like a straight, pointed spear thrown in an arc through the air.

Pas de deux

Pas de deux means “step of two” and is when two people, usually a man and a woman, dance a duet together.

The dancers move in harmony with each other, making connected lines and shapes with their bodies. They often perform turns with one dancer supporting the other. The man often lifts the woman into the air.

Mime in ballet

Ballet dancers do not speak their lines, but use actions and facial expressions to mime what their characters are saying.

A number of special mime actions are used in ballet to mean certain words and phrases. For example, lifting both arms above your head and rolling your hands around each other, then pointing to another person, is the mime used to invite someone to dance.