

SURVIVING NUTCRACKER

BY JESSIKA ANSPACH

Imagine this: I'm at a beautiful July wedding, and at the moment the furthest thing from my mind is work—that is, until in the buffet line I run into an acquaintance who introduces me to his friend Kim.

And as Kim and I shake hands he continues: "Kim this is Jessika. She's a professional ballerina with the Seattle Ballet..."

Quickly I interject: "It's actually Pacific Northwest Ballet..."

But before I can say anymore, her eyebrows rise with astonishment as she says, "Wow! So were you like in *The Nutcracker*?"

The magic words are uttered and another friend standing behind us interrupts our conversation with:

"Oh, Jessika! I think I want to take my nieces to see *Nutcracker* again this year. Do you know which shows you'll be in, because we want to buy tickets for the one *you're* in."

I don't even know which question to answer first. Was I in *Nutcracker*? As a member of the corps de ballet, it's laughable to even think that I'd have the option of *not* being in it. And wait, what month is this? I don't begin *Nutcracker* rehearsals till mid-November. It's July.

Maybe you've experienced a similar situation. For most people *Nutcracker* is all they know about ballet. Balanchine? Forsythe? Who? But mention *Nutcracker* and their eyes light up. For them *The Nutcracker* is ballet. For me, as a professional corps de ballet dancer, it's an inevitable and inescapable part of life. Even in July.

And reminders of this only intensify as October turns into November. Suddenly storefronts are strewn with snowflakes, tinsel, and twinkle lights. I'll be driving in my car and the "all Christmas all the time" radio station will play the ever-popular Sugar Plum Fairy variation tune. I'll turn the TV on to

How one PNB corps member gets through the nuttiness

relax, only to hear the whirling-dervish music (PNB's version of the Russian divertissement), blaring in some blowout department store ad. But the all-time worst is when, between shows, I'll be aimlessly wandering the aisles of the grocery store, hungry and exhausted, and all of a sudden the cascading of the harp plays over the sound system, signaling the

beginning of the "Waltz of the Flowers." And I'm not hungry anymore—just sick at the thought that I have to dance that part yet *again* in a few hours.

Beginning on Black Friday (the day after Thanksgiving) and generally ending just a couple days shy of New Year's Eve, PNB gives somewhere between 35 and 40 performances. And with 11 different parts,



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I'm lucky if I get a couple of those shows off. My mantra during the month of December sounds something like "Don't stop. Just go. Don't think. Just do." But in this incessant whirlwind of *Nutcracker*, more things than nuts are cracking. Let's just say my mind, body, and general sanity are hard-pressed on every side.

One particular day stands out in my memory, but honestly it could represent *any* day in this marathon that is *Nutcracker*. Running toward the quick-change area as I rip off the doughnut of fake curls that surrounds my bun for the Frau Stahlbaum role in the party scene, the only thing occupying my mind is the fact that I can't remember which Snowflake part I'm dancing. Snowflake No. 1 or Snowflake No. 11? As the dresser hooks up my baby blue tutu, I try and picture the sign-in sheet for that show. Which number did I cross off? Think, Jessika, think! Nope. Nothing. Pinning in my blue scrunchy headpiece, I feel like I'm playing hide-and-seek, and I'm the one seeking someone who dances one of my two parts. Finally I find my answer as Snowflake No. 11 sits at the rosin box putting on her pointe shoes. With a sigh of relief I quickly warm up my cold feet and stiff ankles as I mentally go through No. 1's steps and counts using my hands to do the dancing—I've got to save my legs, which are already sore and tired from the shows earlier this week.

Later that day, after completing another two acts of dancing, I stand in front of the call board by the backstage doors, staring blankly at the casting sheet that looks like someone's little kid went to town on it with a rainbow of neon highlighters. Suddenly the giant bag of ice I'm bringing home for an ankle ice-bath starts dribbling, waking me from my stupor. And I realize I've been standing for a good five minutes trying to figure out if any of the changes (unfortunately due to illness and injury) affect me. Jessika, it's time to go home.

So how do I persevere? How do I survive *Nutcracker* without cracking? How do I make sure I'm not one of those highlights on the casting sheet? And more than that, how do I keep the magic alive?

Well, I may be the wrong person to ask, because in truth I have a secret confession to make: I actually *love* *Nutcracker*. A part of me looks forward



Jessika as Frau Stahlbaum

to it every year.

You see, PNB's *Nutcracker* holds a special place in my heart. It was the first ballet I ever saw. Now, our *Nutcracker* is not your typical *Nutcracker*. When Kent Stowell (PNB's founding artistic director) created it in 1983, he collaborated with the world-renowned Maurice Sendak—author and illustrator of the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. From the sets to the costumes to even the exotically patterned marley floor, no detail was left untouched by Sendak's genius. The result: a children's storybook come to life onstage. And Stowell's choreography perfectly matches the beautiful Tchaikovsky score, conveying with energy and intrigue the original story by E. T. A. Hoffmann.

As a little girl I remember sitting there in the audience watching, all starry-eyed, the breathtakingly beautiful snow scene, serenely lit by soft moonlight. And as the snow began to fall and the dancers dressed in their baby blue tutus swirled, swooshed, leaped, and lunged, a seed was planted deep within my heart. I longed for the day when I would don that tutu, when I would be a Snowflake. And this desire only increased when at the age of 11, I got my first taste of the stage as the tallest member of the toy soldier infantry. *Nutcracker* was not only the first ballet I ever saw, but also the first ballet I ever danced. I remember standing in line waiting for our cue to go on, clad in my little military costume, my face ghostly white with fright and cheeks rosy red with face paint. But my anxiety quickly lifted as a puff of blue tulle passed by. And I must have looked like the strangest soldier going to war with an enormous smile plastered on my

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Tips from the Troupers

Practical advice from PNB dancers on how to survive *Nutcracker*

"I love booking a trip to Hawaii after *Nutcracker*! I have done that trip for nearly 10 years now! It is a great way to help a dancer get through...Just keep repeating 'Beach, sun, relaxation' before each show!" —Stacy Lowenberg, corps

"Whatever you need to do to recuperate (ice, massage, put your feet up), don't be lazy, do it after each performance. Treat sore spots as if they were injuries—because they probably are injuries in the making. You want to nip those things in the bud and not wait until they really hurt. For me, arnica does a wonderful job, either in massage oil, gel/cream or granules to take orally." —Liora Reshef, corps

"Keep snacks and drinks around, as well as make sure you have fun when not at the theater to give your mind a break." —Chelsea Adomaitis, corps

"Have an energy back-up, like 5-Hour Energy, for the second act of the umpteenth show on the last day of the week." —Barry Kerollis, corps

"Take this opportunity to challenge yourself, to push yourself a little harder. In *Snow and Flowers*, work on your technique: tighter fifths, pointed feet, prettier port de bras." —Jessika Anspach, corps

"Make sure to get your protein between shows and get lots of sleep." —Margaret Mullin, corps

"Acupuncture!" —Kylee Kitchens, corps

"Embrace the energy from what is going on around you—your fellow dancers, the audience of children who are seeing this



Stacy Lowenberg as the Peacock (Arabian) in the Kent Stowell/Maurice Sendak *Nutcracker*

for the first time. It is powerful, especially at this time of the year." —Boyd Bender, PNB physical therapist

"A hot bath and Ben & Jerry's gets me through the Nut! I love it!"

—Maria Chapman, principal

"Cookies!" —Sarah Ricard Orza, soloist

"The party scene is my favorite, and I usually try to push the envelope a little bit by playing characters of different nationalities complete with appropriate accents, and I attempt to talk to as many party 'guests' as possible. Whatever I find humorous during that party scene is enough to lighten my mood for the rest of the show." —Abby Relic, corps

face. But I'd seen my dream up close. How could I *not* smile?

Fast-forward 14 years and now I'm the one in the baby blue tutu. My dream has come true. And as I stand at the barre warming up with those little tin soldiers all lined up next to me, eyes wide and jaws dropped, my heart can't help but hiccup. Suddenly all my aches and pains seem to die down. I remember where I came from, and I am thankful; I am inspired. My mind turns to all the little girls out there in the audience who might be seeing this for the first time; for whom this very show might plant the seed of dance in their hearts. And I can be a part of that.

These thoughts and memories are what

keep me from cracking. Sure the long run of *Nutcracker* can be monotonous, strenuous, and draining. But each show is a gift, not just for others but for me as well. I'm blessed to be on the stage and I love to dance and perform. *Nutcracker* provides me with ample opportunities to share these loves. But the reality is I won't be a dancer forever. So I try to enjoy each and every moment I'm out there.

So how do I survive *Nutcracker*? I remember the past, I enjoy the now, and I dance in the snow.

Jessika Anspach, a Seattle native, is a senior corps dancer with Pacific Northwest Ballet. She is also a blogger and aspiring writer.

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