

**Choreographic treatment of the ballet**

***The Nutcracker* by Fernand Nault**

**DANCE CONSERVATORY BRNO,  
contributory organisation**

**Graduate thesis  
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Klaudie Kaňová

Note to the reader

The text has been originally written in Czeck. Free translation has been assured by the author with help of volunteers.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of my graduation thesis is the ballet The Nutcracker.

In my thesis, I focus on the history of the Nutcracker Ballet, the characters of the ballet, the musical accompaniment, as well as the comparison of different versions of this work. I have drawn information mainly from websites and from a personal interview with the director of the Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault, Mr. André Laprise.

I chose this topic because I have a very close relationship with the Nutcracker Ballet. In my second year at the Dance Conservatory, I auditioned and successfully won the lead role of little Clara. I immediately felt that the role was truly mine; it was a dream come true. While studying the role, I learned how the ballet elements I had been learning for two years could be used to express the plot and the nature of the character. I was able to experience how a ballet is created and how important every detail the choreographer insists on is in order to faithfully portray the story. I played the role of little Clara for two seasons at the National Theatre in Brno. The following year, I performed the role of the Russian Matryoshka. Every performance was always like the first one for me: full of emotions, magic, indescribable experiences. Thanks to the moments spent on stage, I realized what I would like to do in the future.

I decided that I wanted to learn as much as I could about the Nutcracker Ballet, so I could pass on the knowledge, along with my experiences, for example through this graduate thesis.

The first part of the thesis focuses on an overall summary of the ballet, including the characters and the musical score, which was composed by the world-famous composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In the second part, I discuss the important figures associated with the history of the Nutcracker Ballet. Such personalities include the choreographer Lev Ivanov and the important Canadian dancer, choreographer, teacher, and director Fernand Nault.

In the last part of the graduate thesis, I rely on the performance of several versions of the ballet, I include a personal interview with André Laprise and a final summary of the whole thesis.

The Nutcracker Ballet is one of the most famous ballets of all time and is particularly popular with younger audiences because of its fairytale theme. It is a two-act ballet with a libretto by Marius Petipa based on a fairytale by Ernest Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (E.T.A. Hoffmann). The music was composed by the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and the choreography was superbly handled by Lev Ivanov.

The Nutcracker was created at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when ballet art was primarily concerned with finding a new path away from the pessimistic, romantic traditions of ballet productions of the time. The attempt to expand the overall movement articulation in the context of the dramaturgy of the large stages was to enrich the theatre with a new imagination and poetics. This Tchaikovsky ballet, considered one of his gems of classical ballet, is traditionally performed in the run-up to Christmas.



*Fig.1 Celebration*

The story of the festive atmosphere of Christmas Eve, in which mystery and beauty are combined with reality and children's fantasy, so captivated the then director of the Tsarist theatres that he commissioned music from P. I. Tchaikovsky in early 1891.

The librettist and choreographer Marius Petipa was also involved in the work, creating the script and providing Tchaikovsky with precise instructions for the work. So precise, for example, that he demanded that the Christmas tree grow for forty-eight bars in the first act. Both authors chose a story reworked by the French writer Alexandre Dumas because they found the original version too gruesome.

The notoriously self-critical Tchaikovsky initially doubted his music and the somewhat banal subject of *The Nutcracker*. "I feel a complete inability to express musically the mountain of sweets", he wrote to his brother Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky, apparently in reference to the fact that characters such as the Sugar Plum Fairy, Prince Almond Milk, Coffee, Tea and Chocolate were to dance in the work.

Despite the fact that Tchaikovsky was preparing the music for the ballet *The Nutcracker* at a time of great mental anguish, he was very good at detaching himself from his personal problems and transporting himself into a carefree world full of childlike fantasy, playfulness and idyllic adventure. Although he had the sketch of the ballet completed, he was not satisfied and constantly hesitated over the composition of the orchestra. He postponed work on the ballet for some time. He was looking for new inspiration and ideas for the satisfactory completion of his work. Help came only on the basis of a newly found musical instrument, which was the celesta, belonging to the percussion instruments. The sound of the celesta gave him the desire to complete the whole work, as its sound reminded him of thousands of bells, symbolizing Christmas, the glitter of snow, baked sweets, and also gave the right aroma to the musical score.

The music for The Nutcracker itself, before being performed as a ballet in the theatre, was presented as a suite in March 1892 in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The performance of The Nutcracker was performed at the same time as the opera Iolanta, which was on the French model from the Paris Opera, where the opera was given in the first half of the evening and the ballet was the great attraction and highlight of the evening. Tchaikovsky died less than a year after the premiere of The Nutcracker on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1893. Although the ballet was originally choreographed by Marius Petipa, it was choreographed by the second choreographer of the tsarist theatre in St. Petersburg, Lev Ivanov, because Petipa had given up the task due to illness.

Despite unfavourable reviews, the production remained in the Mariinsky Theatre's repertoire for three years and underwent many changes over the following years. The Nutcracker Ballet was staged, for example, as a sequence of virtuoso variations and pas de deux, interspersed and interconnected with naive pantomime, or as a lyrical compact fairytale with all the charms of children's joys and wishes. The main characters include the immediately little Clara, who is the central being of the whole ballet, and it is she who receives the toy Nutcracker from her uncle. Also worth mentioning are her younger brother Fritz, her Uncle Drosselmayer, the Nutcracker, the Prince, the Mouse King, the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Cavalier and others.

The first performance of the ballet The Nutcracker took place on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1892 (December 6<sup>th</sup> according to the calendar of the time) at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. The main characters were played by Stanislava Belinskaya as Clara and Sergei Legat as the Nutcracker Prince.



*Fig.2 Gift distribution*



## 2. PERSONALITIES INVOLVED IN THE CREATION OF THE BALLET THE NUTCRACKER

### 2.1 ERNST THEODOR WILHELM HOFFMANN

Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, better known as E. T. A. Hoffmann was a German (Prussian) writer, composer, lawyer, cartoonist, critic, conductor and painter, a representative of the German Romanticism. He was born on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1776 in Kraków. His family background was probably anything but harmonious. His father was an alcoholic and his mother had mental problems. After he was politically prevented from practicing law E. T. A. Hoffmann



*Fig. 3 E.T.A. Hoffmann*

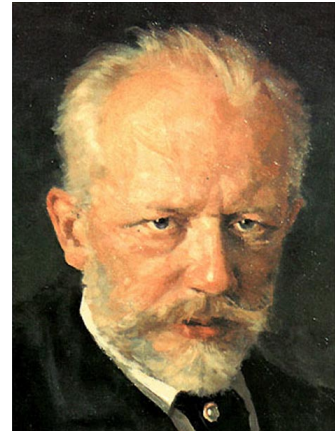
began to assert himself as a draughtsman. In 1808, a new phase of his life began, as he becomes involved in the Bamberg theatre, where he acts as a universal force for more than one activity. In addition to drawing, he begins to devote himself to music. In 1814 he composed the opera *Undine*. Its premiere in 1816 was a great success. He also establishes himself as a writer. In 1815, he published a novel entitled *The Devil's Elixir*. He changed his officially used third first name Amadeus to Wilhelm out of respect for W. A. Mozart.

In 1819, he entered the civil service as counsel for the Senate Court. However, he still remained faithful to his work as a writer. He writes a collection of short stories entitled *The Serapion Brothers*, which includes the short story *The Nutcracker* and the *Mouse King*. Another work, written towards the end of his life, is the book *The Life Views of Morouse the Cat*. In 1822, E. T. A. Hoffmann became seriously ill. In addition to his poor health, he was forced to deal with an unpleasant situation that arose after the publication of his work *Master Flea*, in which he satirized the Prussian police. Disciplinary proceedings were brought against him. He died on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1822 in Berlin.

Life of E.T.A. Hoffmann later inspired Jacques Offenbach, who composed an opera about him called *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

## 2.2 PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1840 in Votkinsk. His family owned a piano, which Pyotr Ilyich began to learn at the age of four with the help of his mother. Because he began to show undeniable talent right from the start, his parents hired a piano teacher for him a year later. In addition, during his childhood, Petr Ilyich sat happily at the family orchestration, where he listened to excerpts of works by Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti, but above all to his love aria Zerlina Forever Yours from Mozart's Don Giovanni.



*Fig.4 P. I. Tchaikovsky*

When he was ten years old, his parents enrolled him in the Imperial Law School in St. Petersburg, which seemed more promising than making a living in music. Here he took first a two-year preparatory course and then full-time studies from 1852 to 1859. However, he did not want to give up music, so he took piano lessons with the German pianist Rudolf Kündiger. After graduation, Tchaikovsky joined the Ministry of Justice, where he worked as an assistant to the head of the office. However, this occupation was not fulfilling and he was still drawn to music, so in 1862 he enrolled at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. A year later, in 1863, he left the civil service.

At the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he was most influenced by its director, Anton Rubinstein, who taught him composition. In 1866, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky graduated there with a cantata to the words of Friedrich Schiller's Ode to Joy. Subsequently, Anton Rubinstein recommended him as a harmony teacher to his younger brother, Nikolai Rubinstein, who was the director of the newly opened Moscow State Conservatory. Nikolai Rubinstein not only let him teach at the conservatory (he worked there as a teacher for a total of 12 years), but also performed his compositions. The most important period of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's work could be considered the years 1876 to 1890, when he was supported by his patroness Nadezhda von Meck.

Even before he met this patroness, he began composing his first ballet, *Swan Lake*, in 1875. In August of that year, Valentin Petrovich Begichev and Fedor Vasilyevich Geltser submitted a libretto to P. I. Tchaikovsky, for which they used as a model the fairytale *The Swan Stream* from a collection of German folk tales. The premiere took place in 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Interestingly, the first choreographer of this ballet was a Czech from Prague - Václav Reisinger, who was the chief choreographer and ballet master of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1873-1879. Although the production was not a success with the public, it remained in the repertoire until 1883 and received more than forty performances. Tchaikovsky did not live to see another performance of *Swan Lake* - a new production choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov was staged in St. Petersburg less than two years after his death.

P.I. Tchaikovsky composed his second ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty* (sometimes also referred to as *Sleeping Beauty*) in 1888 and 1889. This ballet was commissioned by the director of the Tsarist theatres, J. A. Vsevolozhsky, who wrote the libretto and also undertook the artistic design of the entire production. The choreography was created by Marius Petipa. The premiere took place in 1890 on the stage of the Tsarist Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg.

Tchaikovsky's third ballet was *The Nutcracker*, which he began working on in 1891. At that time he received a detailed script from the choreographer Marius Petipa, which specified not only the content of the ballet, but also the number of bars and the nature of the music, sometimes even its rhythmic value. A year later, the music of this work was first presented to the public in the form of a concert suite and was received with enthusiasm. Marius Petipa was only able to rehearse the first picture with the dancers - afterwards he fell ill and his assistant Lev Ivanov was put in charge of the ballet. The premiere of the stage ballet took place at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1892. Along with this two-act ballet, Tchaikovsky's one-act opera *Iolanta* was performed.

In addition to the ballets, Tchaikovsky's extensive oeuvre also includes ten operas. The libretto for two of the most famous, Eugene Onegin and The Queen of Spades, was written as a free adaptation of poems by Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was one of the most important representatives of musical romanticism. In addition to the above-mentioned operas and ballets, he composed six symphonies, symphonic poems (Romeo and Juliet, Francesca da Rimini), four orchestral suites (the fourth of which is called Mozartiana), string quartets, three piano concertos (his most famous work is probably the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No.1 in B minor), a violin concerto, romances, choruses, cantatas and many other works. This unique composer died at the age of 54 on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1893 in St. Petersburg, probably of cholera, as did his beloved mother. Experts, however, argue whether it was a suicide, to which his last work, a depressing symphony in B minor entitled "Pathetic", is a bit of a reference. While he was alive, he received many honours. Among the most important are a doctorate from Cambridge University and honorary membership of the Paris Academy of Arts.

### 2.3 LEV IVANOV

Lev Ivanov was born in Moscow on 2<sup>th</sup> March 1834, where he began his studies at the local dance school. At the age of ten, he moved to the Tsar's seat of power, St. Petersburg, where he studied at the Tsarist Ballet School and among his teachers included Jean Petipa, father of the famous Marius. After the young Ivanov joined the ballet company Tsar's Theatres, where he eventually became a principal dancer. His repertoire includes, for example, Basile from Don Quixote, Conrad



*Fig.5 Lev Ivanov*

from Le Corsaire and Solor from La Bayadere. In addition to that he was very successful in character dances, the most successful of which was reportedly as an interpreter of Italian and Spanish dances, and it can be assumed that he subsequently drew on his performance practice in his choreographic work.

He began to leave the stage in the 1880's, when Pavel Gerdt replaced him as first soloist. He first became director and then, in 1885, second ballet master of the company and Petipa's assistant. Before The Nutcracker, he created several independent ballets for the Tsar Ballet School and the theatre. His first full-length work was the ballet La Fille mal gardée, and he later created his own version of Coppélia or The Awakening of Flora, but it was not until Tchaikovsky's title that he was given more creative scope, although contemporary posters listed Petipa's name on the choreographer's line.

The Nutcracker was praised by professional critics for certain passages or solo performances, while dramatic scenes, such as the Nutcracker's fight with the Mouse King, were said to be confused and chaotic. Unlike the first performance of Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty, this time Tchaikovsky's composition received a warmer reception. The St. Petersburg daily wrote in its review that it was a pity that such beautiful music was used to accompany nonsense that did not deserve attention.

To what extent Ivanov had a completely free hand in the choreography and to what extent he followed Petipa's initial comments and sketched scenes is not entirely clear. While some audiences and critics admired his Flower Waltz, the Dance of the Snowflakes was said to bear a striking resemblance to a similar scene from Petipa's ballet Snow White. However, one thing cannot be denied: Ivanov's deep understanding of music and his innate musicality.

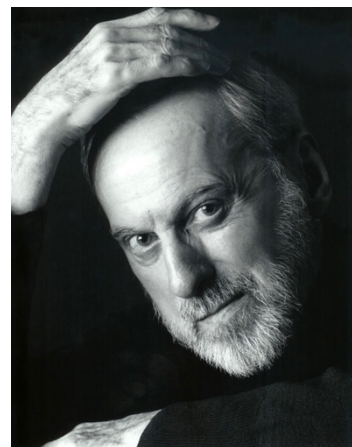
As far as we can judge from the contemporary recollections of his contemporaries and Ivanov himself, he was never overconfident and was usually nudged towards decisions. He became a choreographer essentially at Petipa's instigation, not out of his own inner conviction, and always gave his works to Petipa for his approval and judgment. Yet he is still regarded as one of the masters of choral work, indeed the glorified passages of Act 2 of Swan Lake, which are still largely passed down, are his work.

Ivanov died 120 years ago, on Christmas Eve 1901. His Nutcracker, however, seems immortal, though in fact it is not entirely certain how much of the original choreography remains in today's versions, however much they invoke tradition.

Outside of St. Petersburg, the title made its way to Moscow shortly after the end of World War I, when Alexander Gorsky brought it to Moscow in his own choreographic and directorial adaptation.

### 3. FERNAND NAULT

Fernand-Noël Boissonneault, Fernand Nault (1920-2006), artistic name, was a Canadian dancer, choreographer, teacher and director. He was born in Montreal and studied dance with Maurice Morenoff, then with renowned masters in New York, London and Paris. As resident choreographer of Les Grand Ballets Canadiens, Nault created a number of highly theatrical ballets in a contemporary style, including the ballet *Carmina Burana* and the early rock ballet *Tommy*.



*Fig.6 Fernand Nault*

These were innovative works for the time and contributed greatly to the company's popularity.

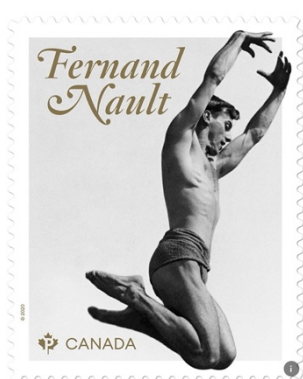
Nault, after abandoning an early plan to become a priest, began training at the popular Lacasse-Morenoff studio in Montréal and performed in *Les Variétés Lyriques*. From 1944 to 1965, he was a dancer and ballet master at the American Ballet Theatre. He became known for his legendary movement memory and from 1960 served as director of the company's school based in New York.

Nault's long relationship with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens began with his return to Canada in 1965, where he served as both associate artistic director and resident choreographer. He created nearly 30 original works for the company. For example, *Paquita*, *Firebird*, *Géhenne*, *Glazounov*, *Quintan*, *Miribilia*, *Pas de Soleil*, *La Fille Mal Gardée* and others. It is Les Grand Ballets that regularly revives selected works by Nault and continues its popular production of *The Nutcracker* every December. The Canadian government has paid tribute to Fernand Nault on three occasions, awarding him the Centennial Medal in 1967, the Order of Canada a decade later, and the Governor General's Performing Arts Award in 2000. In 1976, he won first prize for choreography at the VII International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria for the ballet *Incohérence*.

In 1984, he was awarded a prize for stagecraft and, in 1990, he was named Knight of the Ordre national du Québec and Choreographer Emeritus of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

Fernand Nault has worked extensively as a guest choreographer in the United States and Canada. In 2003, he founded the Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault, whose aim is to ensure the continuity of his choreographic legacy and to make his works available to professional dance companies and schools. In the same year, he appointed his long-time assistant André Laprise as the effective director of the foundation. Many of his works have been performed abroad, not only in the U.S., but also in Asia and Europe. Fernand Nault's work is undoubtedly an important part of Quebec's and Canada's choreographic heritage.

### 3.1 LES GRANDS BALLETS CANADIENS DE MONTRÉAL



*Fig.7 Les Grand Ballets Canadiens*

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal was founded in 1957 by dancer and choreographer Ludmilla Chiriaeff, the daughter of Russian immigrants who left Berlin to settle in Montreal. Since its inception, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens has presented a wide range of dance, from classical to contemporary works. Under the contemporary artistic direction of Italian-born dancer Ivan Cavallari, the dancers of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens perform choreography by long-established artists.

At the same time, the company is dedicated to researching and modernizing ballet in all its forms. It connects with audiences at home and abroad, stimulating discovery, imagination, evoking emotions and conveying a passion for dance. In 2017, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens moved to a new space in the heart of Montreal's Quartier des spectacles. The company has finally acquired a space suited to its needs and facilities, that met international dance standards. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens is able to provide a wide range of services to the people of Montreal.



It offers leisure services at its Les Studios and supports the National Centre for Dance Therapy, which combines clinical research, training and therapy. This division aims to improve the lives of individuals through dance, thereby enhancing the usefulness of this art form in society. It promotes all the benefits that dance contains and can bring. Since its opening in 2013, the Centre's main activity has been to develop dance therapy for people with special needs: for example, functional limitations. The dance movements are taught based on the abilities and strengths of each participant, allowing the development of better mobility and body awareness. It is a friendly and tolerant space where the joy of movement lies at the very heart of the work. With specialized training in movement analysis, body expressivity and psychotherapy, therapists use dance and movement as a tool to achieve well-being and develop body awareness, motor function, creativity, expression and self-esteem.

The company's mission is also to provide access to dance and the arts for everyone. Achievements include the endowment of the Nutcracker Fund, which enables thousands of children from disadvantaged communities each year to enjoy educational workshops and their first ballet experience with a free performance of The Nutcracker.

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens is recognized for its excellence, creativity and daring on stages around the world. All of the company's initiatives have one goal - to move the world, differently.



*Fig. 8 Les Grands Ballets Canadiens*

### 3.2 André Laprise

André Laprise, originally from the eastern black neighbourhoods, studied dance at the Académie des Grands Ballets Canadiens in Quebec City and at the École supérieure des Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal. He is a teacher and choreographer at Académie de dance de l'Outaouais since 1979. In 1982, he was appointed artistic, educational and administrative director of the institution.



*Fig.9 André Laprise*

Two years later, he created the Summer Dance Camp and became assistant to the choreographer emeritus, Mr. Fernand Nault.

His career as a dancer, teacher and trainer took him to work in Canada, in the USA, in Europe and in Asia. Among others, he has worked with Atlanta Ballet, Ballet of the Slovak National Theatre, The National Ballet of Korea, Danse-Partout, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, Kansas City Ballet, Nice Ballet Theatre, Ottawa Dance Theatre, Southern Ballet Theatre and Washington Ballet.

From 1990 to 2006, he served as a member of various companies and as a board member of organizations involved in the training, production and development of dance, such as the Quebec Classical Dance Partner Schools Network. He was also a member of the Arts, Culture, History and Heritage Commission for Gatineau from 2002 to 2011.

In 2002, André Laprise received the City of Gatineau Tribute Award, an award given to a person who has distinguished themselves through involvement in the artistic and cultural development of the Outaouais.

Since February 2003, he is appointed administrator and official rehearsal master of the Fonds chorégraphique by Fernand Nault.

André Laprise is staging the ballet *The Nutcracker* for the National Theatre in Brno since 2014. Each year he oversees the production of the ballet and spends time refining each of the children's roles.

Laprise says "When it comes to working with children, I'm here to stimulate them, even in the smallest roles. Nault has bravely conceived this tale of magic and adventure. He always wanted ballet to be accessible and to touch as many children as possible."

The show contains something of interest for everyone: "The dancing, Tchaikovsky's music, Peter Horn's sets, Francois Barbeau's costumes and Nicholas Cernovitch's lighting create an overall experience."

André Laprise says *The Nutcracker* is "a dynamic family atmosphere. It's part of our DNA."

Laprise is thrilled that by bringing the show back each year, new audiences can experience this beloved Christmas story. He puts a tremendous amount of time and work into producing all the glitz and glamour that is *The Nutcracker Ballet*, and he's not ashamed to say he has the "best job" of the season.

#### **4. THE NUTCRACKER BALLET BY FERNAND NAULT**

An incredible number of different choreographic versions of this work have been performed to date, but the original ballet takes place at Christmas time, when friends and their parents come to visit the family of Clara and Fritz. While presents are prepared by the lavishly decorated Christmas tree, the boys play merrily with the soldiers and the girls with the dolls. Clara's uncle Drosselmayer, who has been invited to take care of the children's entertainment, appears at the party. One of the first surprises are the mechanical toys that dance, specifically the mechanical soldier and Harlequin and Colombine. Finally, Uncle devises a Christmas lottery-style game where Clara gets a Nutcracker puppet that can crack nuts. Clara takes an immediate liking to the Nutcracker, but the situation is complicated by her brother, who, furious at the game with the soldiers, starts to fight Clara over the Nutcracker

and rips his head off. Fortunately, his uncle mends him again. As the evening draws to a close and the guests go home, little Clara goes to bed. However, she leaves without Nutcracker, who stays by the Christmas tree. Night has fallen. Little Clara returns to the tree and falls asleep with the Nutcracker in her arms. At the stroke of midnight, Clara is awakened by strange noises. There are mice everywhere in the room, attacking little Clara and the Nutcracker. Clara tries to protect her puppet. Suddenly Uncle Drosselmayer appears, the Nutcracker comes to life and becomes a soldier. A shot rings out and both the other soldiers and the evil mice, led by the Mouse King, slowly approach, ready for battle. The Nutcracker is wounded. Desperate and frightened, Clara throws her magic slipper at the Mouse King and saves her beloved Nutcracker.

With the help of Uncle Drosselmayer, the Nutcracker transforms into a handsome prince. The Christmas tree grows to enormous proportions and the scene slowly transforms into a world of Snowflakes. This is followed by the Snowflake Chorus Dance and the final pas de deux of the Snow Queen and her Snow Cavalier. Then the Snow Queen summons a sleigh with four reindeer to take little Clara and her prince to the world of candy.



*Fig.10 Nightmare*

The second act takes place in the world of sweets. Everybody welcomes the Nutcracker and Clara joyfully and the Nutcracker tells his experiences from the battle and introduces his rescuer, little Clara. A great celebration is held in her honour. The Spanish, Chinese, as well as the Russian Dance, the Arab Dance,

the Dance of the Sheep and the Dance of the Flowers (the Flower Waltz) are shown, and finally the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier dance a grand pas de deux.



*Fig.11 Final Pas de deux of Sugar Fairy and Cavalie*

## **5. THE NUTCRACKER BALLET PERFORMED IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

- 1908 - The Nutcracker ballet is performed in Prague, choreographed by Achille Viscusi
- 1921 - The Nutcracker Ballet is first performed in Ostrava
- 1922 - The Nutcracker Ballet is first performed in Brno
- 1923 - Augustin Berger performs his version of The Nutcracker at the National Theatre in Prague
- 1924 - The Nutcracker Ballet is first performed in Pilsen
- 1938 - Yelizaveta Nikolska performs her version of The Nutcracker at the National Theatre in Prague
- 1959 - The Nutcracker Ballet is first performed in České Budějovice
- 1960 - The Nutcracker Ballet is first performed in Ústí nad Labem
- 1979 - Miroslav Kůra performs his version of The Nutcracker at the National Theatre in Prague
- 1989 - The Nutcracker Ballet is performed in Brno, choreographed by Jiří Kyselák
- 1992 - TK Praha staged the ballet The Nutcracker under the direction of Jaroslav Slavický
- 1998 - The Nutcracker Ballet choreographed by Yuri Grigorovich is performed at the National Theatre in Prague
- 2001 - Performance of the ballet The Nutcracker choreographed by Vasily Medvedev
- 2003 - The Nutcracker Ballet is performed in Pilsen under the direction of Jiří Pokorný
- 2004 - The ballet The Nutcracker - A Christmas Story, choreographed by Yuri Vámos, is performed at the National Theatre in Prague
- 2007 - The Nutcracker Ballet choreographed by Vladimír Nečas is performed at the North Bohemian Theatre
- 2010 - Ballet The Nutcracker performed at the Antonín Dvořák Theatre with the ensemble of the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre
- 2011 - Ballet The Nutcracker performed at the South Bohemian Theatre
- 2014 - Performance of the ballet The Nutcracker at the National Theatre in Brno, choreographed by Fernand Nault

- 2015 - Performance of the ballet The Nutcracker and the Pussycat at the National Theatre in Prague, choreographed by Petr Zuska
- 2021 - Performance of the ballet The Nutcracker-A Magical Story at the Moravian Theatre in Olomouc, choreographed by Michal Štípa

## **6. NUTCRACKER BALLET IN BRNO**

The ballet *The Nutcracker* was performed five times on the stage of the National Theatre in Brno. It was first performed in 1922, directed and choreographed by Jaroslav Hladík. In the theatre programme, the ballet is described as a large ballet fairy tale with seven scenes. The production was conducted by Stanislav Staněk-Doubravský. The main role of the little heroine Ilyusha was danced by Marie Kyšperská. The ballet master Jaroslav Hladík staged the following dances with the company-Christmas Eve March, Dance of the Soldier and the Doll, Great Waltz of the Water Lilies, Dance of the Snowflakes and others. It is noteworthy here that the character of the little girl was named Ilyushka and the choreography of the Snowflake Dance and the final pas de deux were retained.

This version was followed by successful choreographies by Miroslav Kura in 1971, Jiří Kyselák in 1989, Vasily Medvedev in 2001 and Fernand Nault in 2014.

Recognising the folk appeal of Nault's traditional classical choreography, company director Mario Radačovský first introduced this version to the repertoire of the Slovak National Ballet in Bratislava, where he was appointed artistic director in 2008.

A few years later, when he became head of the ballet company of the National Theatre in Brno, his first action was to purchase the set and costumes of *The Nutcracker* from Bratislava.



## 7. VASILY MEDVEDEV

Vasily Medvedev is a Russian dancer, teacher and choreographer. He received his dance training at the Agrippina Yakovlevna Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet in St. Petersburg. Teachers Gennady Selyutsky, Natalia Dudinskaya and Konstantin Sergeyev participated in his formation. He is a graduate of the Rimsky-Korsakov College in St. Petersburg, where he studied choreography and pedagogy in the class of Professor Nikita Dolgushin.



*Fig.12 Vasily Medvedev*

During his rich dance career he was a soloist at the Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet Mussorgsky in St. Petersburg. In 1981, he was principal dancer at the state-run Vanemuine Academic Theatre in Tartu, Estonia, where he also worked as a teacher and choreographer. It was here that his first chamber and full-length ballets were created. His repertoire included mainly classical roles, for example-Albert in Giselle, Prince in The Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty, Romeo in Romeo and Juliet, Franz in Coppélia and many others. He also participated in artistic tours in the USA, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, South Korea and many cities in Europe.

As a guest dancer and choreographer he has worked with many theatres and ballet companies since 1989. He has participated in many festivals and gala concerts-as a dancer for example at Notte di stelle, (Stars of the World Ballet), but also as artistic director at events such as the International Opera and Ballet Festival in Manaus, Brazil, Stars of the St. Petersburg Ballet and many others. In 2001 he performed his version of the ballet The Nutcracker on the boards of the Janáček Theatre. Since 2003 he has been the artistic director of the International Ballet Festival Dance Open in St. Petersburg.

Vasily Medvedev's successful debut at the famous Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow was the ballet Esmeralda, which premiered on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2009. This production

was created in collaboration with Yuri Burlak-the artistic director of the Bolshoi Theatre, with whom he premiered the ballet The Nutcracker at the Berlin State Theatre 4 years later in October 2013. In May 2014 he staged his landmark ballet Onegin at the Bolshoi Theatre in Lodz and in December of the same year his ballet The Nutcracker, produced by the Berlin State Ballet, was broadcast worldwide by the MEZZO TV channel.

Vasily Medvedev is a member of the International Dance Council CID-Unesco. He is a member of the Academy of Russian Ballet A. Vaganova Academy of Ballet Dance. As a teacher he cooperates with ballet schools in Dresden, Strasbourg, Forli and Munich. He has already collaborated with the Slovak National Theatre Ballet on the production of Onegin in 2011.

## **8. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE VERSIONS OF THE BALLET THE NUTCRACKER BY VASILY MEDVEDEV AND FERNAND NAULT**

Both versions begin with a prologue in which we watch the guests arrive at the Christmas Eve party. However, the first difference in the libretto already occurs here. In Medvedev's version, the protagonist, Clara, is an orphan. She gets to the Silberhaus house through a good deed, when she gives Dr. Drosselmayer something to eat. At that moment, Drosselmayer begins to introduce little Clara as his goddaughter. Whereas in Nault's production, the protagonist Clara is the daughter of Councillor von Stahlbaum and Drosselmayer is her uncle. Both productions then continue in a common room where dances are performed by all the guests present, gifts are given and unwrapped. A common and essential element is the wooden Nutcracker that Clara receives from Uncle Drosselmayer, whose form does not differ much artistically. Another different element in this part of Nault's choreography is the gift from the grandparents. This is the magical ballet toes with which little Clara kills the Mouse King. In Medvedev's choreography, Clara also kills the Mouse King with her shoes, but in this version there is no reference to their magical powers or any abilities.

There is a snowflake scene, which is quite different and will affect the course of the second act. In Medvedev's version, only the Snow Queen appears in the Snow Kingdom, along with the snowflakes. In this scene, the little girl Clara becomes a grown woman. Whereas in the Canadian choreographer's work, there is a significant change at the end of this scene. Clara does not become an adult woman, but remains a little girl. She and Prince watch the whole scene from a distance and only in some parts do they join in the action and dance. Nault has enriched this scene with four reindeer pulling a sleigh with Clara and the Prince. In Vasilij's version, this sleigh is propelled by the magical power of Uncle Drosselmayer.

In both cases, the second act is conceived more as a divertissement, in which the plot is suppressed from a directorial point of view and the emphasis is placed solely on the dance performance. While in the Russian version the second act is set in the

Prince's Palace, in the Canadian version it is set in the Kingdom of Sweets. The ending of the entire ballet is identical for both choreographers. The two Claras go back home and wake up in the morning to find that it was all a dream.

The difference between the two productions is also evident in the costumes, the scenic design and also in the number of participants on stage. Fernand Nault's *The Nutcracker* is almost double the size of Vasiliyev's production. The production features 46 dancers, 70 children and an orchestra.

Josef Jelinek's costumes are more restrained and classical compared to those of Ludmila Várossová. They are chosen rather in muted colours. While Várossová's costumes are rich and lavish, in bright and saturated colours. They help to give the whole production a magical atmosphere.

The costumes in the national dances are not too different from each other. In both productions they express the country they are meant to represent. Várossová's costumes, however, are more detailed. They are more sumptuous and visually captivating. The props also contribute to the audience's understanding, for example, the fans in the Chinese dance, the sail in the Arabic/Orient dance, which in both cases is very effective.

In both productions, the scenic concept is complemented by the costume design. Ivo Židek has tuned the set to beige shades and refers to Russian Romanticism. The set is conceived in a classical, one could say even conservative way. On the other hand, Petr Horn's set, like the costume design, is grand and rich. This can be illustrated by the example of the feast/get-together in the first act of the first act. Ivo Židek's celebration is simply decorated in neutral colours, with soft pink-green wallpaper on the walls, on which are paintings with a floral motif. There is a small Christmas tree in the middle of the room. While Peter Horn's party gives a very luxurious impression. The walls are lined with polished wood and are covered with many ornaments and paintings of different sizes and themes. Furthermore, red velvet curtains are hung on the walls and two beautiful, large and glass

chandeliers hang from the ceiling. The room is dominated by a Christmas tree of enormous proportions, on which there are various painted Christmas decorations and Christmas lights.



*Fig.13 Clara from F. Nault's version*



*Fig.14 Clara from version V. Medvedev*

## **9. HOW IS THE AUDITION UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ANDRÉ LAPRISE?**

- Auditions run smoothly in succession according to a predetermined schedule.
- The roles for students of the Dance Conservatory of Brno include: Russian Dance, Arabian Dance, Angels, Sheep, Reindeer, Rats, Party (girls and boys at a party).
- A large number of students audition for each role.
- The audition for a given role lasts approximately 1 hour.

Mr. André Laprise's method of selecting the children for the roles is very well thought out. He thoroughly demonstrates the choreography, the nature of the role, points out any mistakes, rhythm, dynamics of movement and emphasizes expression. Next, he divides the pupils into rows of about 5 children each. Each candidate has the opportunity to express themselves to the maximum. No one is disadvantaged. Then Mr. Laprise forms certain groups that mean something like (yes / no / maybe). All these groups have the opportunity to show themselves more than once and at the end Mr. Laprise makes the final decision, the selection of the children, which he always divides into 2 or 3 casts. The number of casts depends on the number of performances and other circumstances.

André Laprise communicates with the students at the Dance Conservatory in Brno in English, and if necessary he has an English teacher, Mrs. Jana Jarrarová, by his side, who translates everything into Czech.

His auditions and individual rehearsals always take place in a pleasant and professional atmosphere. He tries to pass on as much experience and skills as possible to the candidates.

## 10. HOW IS THE REHEARSAL WITH CHOREOGRAPHER ANDRÉ LAPRISE?



*Fig.15 Studying the role with A. Laprise*

- Mr. Laprise will first show and thoroughly explain the choreography step by step.
- He then counts the dance into periods and bars.
- The next step of the rehearsal is a rehearsal of the part set to music.
- Mr. Laprise always performs the part of the choreography to music with the children.
- Once the children have the entire choreography for the part memorized, they perform it themselves from start to finish to the music “as if it were a performance.”
- In the meantime, the choreographer writes down notes and corrections, which he later points out to the children and clarifies if necessary.
- He recalls the character and performs it with such perfection that the children always relax and start playing with the role.

## **11. DIRECT INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉ LAPRISE, TRUSTEE OF THE NAULT FOUNDATION**

*How did you first meet Fernand Nault?*

I met Mr. Nault when I was studying at Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dance school in Quebec. At that time, he was engaged as a teacher, choreographer and coach for the dance school. I knew he was a man of some importance, but as a beginning student I honestly had no idea who he was.

*What led you to work with him?*

During my training, I have brought many injuries to myself because I don't have the right body for dance. I had to sit often, watch my colleagues and friends in class and learn the repertoire. This led me to learn more by observing than by dancing itself. I developed a good memory for steps, space, musicality, details and style.

We also had historical dance classes where we learned a lot of repertoire. That's where my interest in dance heritage stems from. I found that we were learning a lot of what had been danced before us.

When I became his assistant, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. At the same time, I started discussing with him his legacy, his great contributions and all of his knowledge. At first, he wasn't interested. After a few years of talking about it, and after some sincere urging on my part, he decided to explore the possibilities.

There was no other example in Canada to follow or follow in his footsteps because he was the one who did this first.

He was invited to stage his *Carmina Burana* in Washington. I went with him and from that moment it all started.

We had to find different ways of staging his work and everything there is to know from it. It was a great and exciting experience because we were both learning through this process.



I can add that I attach great importance to the dance heritage because I honestly think we can learn a lot from it.

When we study dance, we all learn Swan Lake, Giselle, Coppélia...

But today we have the opportunity to work with dance artists who have written and are writing the history of dance. So we can take the opportunity to learn directly from them.

*Why did you choose to stage The Nutcracker?*

Through my experience with Fernand Nault, I learned how to rehearse and train dance. At first, it was because I was helping him with the Nutcracker Ballet. I started with small roles, then slowly I was able to take on other roles and then professional dancer roles.

Later I had to learn more of his repertoire. This was done by accompanying and watching him work with different dance companies, mostly in the United States and once in Korea.

*In how many countries have you staged The Nutcracker?*

- In Canada: Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa, Chicoutimi, Thunder Bay
- USA: St-Louis (Missouri)
- In Slovakia: Bratislava
- In the Czech Republic: Brno
- In Finland: Tampere

*Did you have other collaborations besides Fernand Nault?*

I worked with Ottawa Dance Theater productions when I stopped dancing due to a back injury. Then I occasionally assisted small dance companies and solo artists for their productions.

*Do you have any specific requirements when selecting children for the Nutcracker Ballet?*

Of course, but it doesn't have to be an outright selection of children "to my liking".

For Louksáček, children must have a good sense of theatre with some dance ability.

For the older children, of course, I also need some technical skills.

*How long does it take to choreograph a Nutcracker Ballet?*

Mr. Nault created the original version of the choreography in three weeks in Louisville, Kentucky in 1964, working all day and night.

It took me 2 weeks (10-12 days) of rehearsals + 1 week of production in Brno and Tampere.

In Montreal it takes us more days/weeks because we only rehearse in the evenings.

But overall it's always about the same amount of time. Please note that in Montreal we have more pre-production time with accessories and costumes.

*Have you ever thought about making slight adjustments/changes to the choreography?*

There are always adjustments in every production, and with every cast. It's important that the performers feel at ease. That doesn't mean changing the choreography, it means changing the production. So it means that you can adapt the theatrical approach. The set can also have an influence.

*Which is your favourite passage of the ballet and why?*

In The Nutcracker? Or in another ballet?

It's hard to say, because I am involved in the whole production and every role and character has its importance.

Or in another ballet?

Mr. Nault choreographed a beautiful, very poetic version of Carmina Burana, performed with a live orchestra, singers and soloists. There's a Pas de deux, "In Trutina," which is simple but moving. It needs a very special dancer to bring it to life. When I have the opportunity to stage this ballet, I feel VERY honored that I get to bring it to life.

*What does your position as a trustee of the Fonds choréographique Fernand Nault in Montreal entail?*

1. I am the first and so far only dance trustee in Canada. This is because very few *choreographers* have allowed their work to survive. The latter have created a board of directors and a group of rehearsal masters who stage their works.
2. Mr. Nault *was* the very first to do this in Canada (there are many in the US: Balanchine, Tudor, Limon, Graham, etc.).
3. My job *is* to ensure that his legacy and intellectual heritage is respected and his ballets are staged.
4. As part of the 100th anniversary, I took it upon myself to celebrate dance heritage in a different way, hoping to get more attention for this important influence in dance and in life.

*What do you think is the major difference between Fernand Nault's version of The Nutcracker and other versions of the Nutcracker Ballet?*

I would say that first of all the staging and the musicality are very different. That's his trademark. Also, his staging makes it look real, especially because he uses young children and young Clara in his production. Whatever role Mr. Nault has created, it makes sense. Nothing is there just to fill space, time or music.

*How do you find working with the ballet of the National Theatre Brno and the children of the Dance Conservatory Brno?*

It's always great to work with different people from different areas, regions, countries, cultures ... etc. In Brno, I meet people who are very eager to work, so it's very pleasant. If it wasn't for the language barrier, I think I would feel at home in Brno.

*Do you also have an assistant like Mr. Nault had you?*

I still don't have an assistant. But I honestly think about it quite often.

*What do you plan to do with the Fernand Nault Foundation in the future?*

The "Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault" will only survive if there is interest in Mr. Nault's repertoire.

As part of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I staged various activities related to dance heritage and its importance. If these projects continue, it could be an opportunity to develop more than just my own staging responsibilities. It could help the Foundation to survive while becoming a specialist in dance heritage projects.

*Would you also like to "pass on" the foundation to someone later on?*

I think I have to wait for the right person. I believe in what life can bring and I believe it will come in due time. Also, depending on whether it's just staging works or directing legacy dance projects... it will depend on the person.

*Have you ever worked as a dancer in stone theatre or did you decide to go straight into choreography?*

Because I started dancing late (at 17) and didn't have the proper physical abilities for the discipline, it wasn't possible for me to join a major dance company. Honestly, as a dance student, I was always more interested in training than performing. I can't explain why. I like helping people. I definitely feel at my place behind the stage, not on the stage.

I've been fortunate to be part of small dance companies where you learn so much more, so much faster. In such an environment you can be involved in all aspects of the production: choreography, costumes, lighting, promotion, set design... etc. It was there that I was able to develop all my versatility and apply it to my real career.

*Do you have a personal “motto” that inspires you and pushes you further in what you do?*

In French, I call it “Tant qu’à le faire, fait le bien.”

In English: “If you do something, might as well do it well.”

From Mr. Nault, I learned to look at my work and imagine that it is someone else’s work and appreciate it for what it is. It helps me recognize when I’m doing it right and when I’m not.

*Have you been involved in dance since you were a child?*

I started dancing when I was 17. I was studying literature in college at the time. It wasn’t very interesting, plus the teachers were often on strike and I also had an injury that kept me at home for several months. Then I saw a TV show about dancing and immediately decided that this is what my career would be.

I quickly started studying dance. After my first year, the management offered me the opportunity to train in classical and modern dance, plus train as a dance teacher. It was a lot at once, but it all made sense to me. I could train and understand how to teach at the same time.

*The bonus?*

A former Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dancer who had started a junior modern dance group came to Quebec, where I was living and studying. I was given a great opportunity to be part of the group. All these experiences helped me discover and develop my potential and become what I am today.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

The Nutcracker impressed me from the moment I had the opportunity to study it alongside André Laprise and experience the beauty and magic of this ballet. I learned a lot of new knowledge and information while working it out. I had the opportunity to delve into the history of the development of the Nutcracker Ballet. Among other things, it was also interesting to find out the opinion and feelings about this work from André Laprise, who willingly gave me countless advice and answers to my questions. I enjoyed the work very much and I am glad that I can pass on all the information I have gained through it.

This experience has enriched me for a lifetime, and whenever I hear even a brief snippet of Tchaikovsky's music today, I am immediately reminded of that moment in the choreography and all the memories tied to it. It was thanks to these nostalgic memories that I was absolutely clear in choosing the topic for my graduation thesis.

I can recommend the Nutcracker Ballet to anyone who would like to make the Christmas holidays more enjoyable with their loved ones and be drawn into a fairytale world full of Christmas atmosphere.

### 13. LIST OF RESOURCES

<https://baletky.webgarden.cz/levy-sloupec/louskacek/historie-baletu-louskacek>

<http://www.operabalet.cz/?page=txt&id=5298>

[https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petr\\_Iljič\\_Čajkovskij](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petr_Iljič_Čajkovskij)

<https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10493418261-louskacek/21838775632/>

<https://baletky.webgarden.cz/levy-sloupec/louskacek/historie-baletu-louskacek>

<https://www.vasilymedvedev.com/en/projects-all/item/37-the-nutcracker-2013>

[https://is.muni.cz/th/ltpdw/Komizova\\_BP\\_.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/ltpdw/Komizova_BP_.pdf) <https://operaplus.cz/louskacek-aneb-casna-brnenska-nadilka/?pa=1>

[http://encyklopedie.idu.cz/index.php/Medvedev,\\_Vasilij](http://encyklopedie.idu.cz/index.php/Medvedev,_Vasilij)

Literature-The World of Dance and Ballet, Božena Brodská and Vladimír Vašut

JAMU Archive

Archive of the National Theatre Brno

Direct information from Mr. Laprise