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A Different Land of Sweets

When Nutcracker season was forced onto video during the pandemic, it might have taught the dance world more about issues of accessibility

by Alyson Ely

The pandemic knocked the ballet world flat on its back, but that's not what this essay is about. This essay is about what was uncovered, for me and countless others, after COVID forced us all to get creative in how we make art—and in the process revealed the cracks beneath ballet's “pristine” surface.

Like so many of my peers, I moved home once school moved to remote instruction in early 2020. I started to take zoom classes at the studio where I had grown up dancing. After a few months, we were allowed back into the studios with masks and social distancing. I began teaching and dancing full time there. As *Nutcracker* season rolled around and COVID cases were still rising all over the world, the studio had to make a choice— skip the tradition or risk investing the time and money into it, possibly just to get shut down?

The owner of the studio, who sculpted me as a person and dancer, called all the teachers and community members involved in the studio together to discuss what to do about *Nutcracker*. She knew that having a *Nutcracker* would boost the morale of our students. Due to the amount of time they spent online for both school and dance classes, the dancers desperately needed something to look forward to. After lots of deliberation, we decided to make a *Nutcracker* movie. This small decision to not let the pandemic stop us, had a huge impact.

When auditions rolled around, the dancers were buzzing; they hadn't had anything to look forward to since the pandemic; there was excitement in the air. The studio owner and director is a strong believer that preparing for a role leads to immense improvement in individual dancers technique and artistry. I had noticed this in myself years prior because when I am cast in a performance, I work harder in class and dance more hours than I would without rehearsal. This was my first time being a full-time teacher though and seeing this improvement in my students first hand was more than inspiring.

Ballet for video is far different from dancing live onstage for several reasons. A lot of ballets feature soloist and principal roles, with lots corps dancers posed around them. However, that kind of stage ornamentation doesn't work on video, with its ability to show different angles and closeups. So, many of *The Nutcracker Movie* dances featured intricate choreography rather than formations and poses. This gave corps de ballet dancers more opportunities for technical growth, since they had more choreography to learn and get comfortable with. Instead of the corps dancing in one large group on the stage, we had small groups dance different sections, giving more screen time for individual dancers to be noticed.

Since most dances were being changed and adapted to look better on video, I saw this as an opportunity to suggest changing our choreography for the Chinese Tea dance. My studio had old choreography filled to the brim with inaccurate representations of Chinese dancing; this ended up being rechoreographed as a celebration of Chinese culture, featuring a dragon and acrobatics which is common in traditional Chinese dance performances.

Another benefit of making a video for *Nutcracker* is that the dancers experienced less stress about their performance because they knew there would be multiple takes of each dance and

the editors would choose the best one. This allowed the dancers to experience the excitement of performing with a fraction of the nerves. A lot of my students in previous years would be deadpan on stage, clearly focused on doing the choreography, not on performance quality and expression. Instead, I saw students grow their artistry in this process, partly because their teachers emphasized this more in rehearsals and reminded them, given that the camera would be much closer to them than an audience, so facial expressions and intricate movements would often be the focal point. In filming, the dancers had far fewer injuries than usual—instead of performing 5 shows in 3 days after a whole week of late-night run-throughs and tech rehearsals, we filmed the whole thing in just one week, doing a few dances per day. While this did not build stamina the way live performances do, dancers were able to showcase their best dancing and performance quality since they were not overworked.

The Nutcracker Movie was shown at a drive-in theater that had just opened in our town, which turned out to be more affordable for audiences. When ballet is performed in a theater, it draws only an audience who can afford twenty dollars or more per person and also have the desire and ability to sit quietly in a theater for two hours. Playing a movie of *The Nutcracker* opened it up to more people, because it cost twenty dollars per car, so people could bring their whole family for even less than it costs to go to a movie theater. This was amazing, because it drew in an audience of people who likely would never have seen *The Nutcracker*, or potentially any ballet. People were itching to get out and do something COVID-safe and this was the perfect setting for that.

Ballet performances that have this kind of accessibility have been long overdue. In her 2005 book *Invitation to the Party*, Donna Walker-Kuhne wrote, “The changing demographics of the twenty-first century demand that you change how you do business, not just for the sake of our collective cultures, but for the survival of our institutions.” The pandemic’s impact on this small dance studio forced something that should have happened long ago: making art more accessible. Not only were larger families, and elderly and disabled people better able to access the ballet but also low-income families, or those unfamiliar with ballet, who might not invest in more expensive tickets. Exposing more people to ballet is the first step in making the ballet less exclusive; this is more important than anything else I learned over the process of *The Nutcracker Movie*. Until the ballet world can welcome all communities with open arms, there is an immense amount of work to be done. As a teacher, student, and dancer I plan to actively advocate and create this change.

As we’ve seen, with every silver lining found in the pandemic there are still downsides. There is a beautiful energy that comes with live theater that cannot be captured on film, like the feeling you get when the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier nail the overhead press. It is equally as beautiful on video, but you know it’s going to work when it’s recorded; live performance gives the audience an element of fear, followed by a sigh of satisfaction when the dancers nail every turn and lift. Dancers feel the energy of an engaged audience and feed off of it—that’s what makes live performances truly unique. My hope for the future is to have the best of both; keep dance performances accessible and affordable, inspire the next generation of dancers to come from all different backgrounds, and make dance for both video and the stage.

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Aly Ely graduated in June 2022 from University of California, Irvine with a B.A in dance. After directing the ballet Don Quixote at Agape Dance Academy, she will be auditioning for various ballet and contemporary ballet companies as well as jazz and musical theater dance opportunities.