

HOUSTON BALLET

STANTON WELCH - ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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HOUSTON BALLET RINGS IN THE HOLIDAY SEASON WITH *THE NUTCRACKER*

**Brazilian Star Marcelo Gomes
Makes His First Appearances with Houston Ballet
as the Nutcracker Prince**

Nao Kusuzaki and Bridgett Zehr Debut as the Snow Queen

Houston, Texas – From November 26 – December 26, 2004, Houston Ballet will bring Texas its most joyous holiday gift, Ben Stevenson's breathtaking production of **The Nutcracker**. The beloved ballet tells the story of a little girl named Clara who is given a magical nutcracker doll on Christmas Eve. She encounters the frightful King Rat before embarking on a wondrous journey through the Land of Snow and the Kingdom of Sweets. Young and old alike will experience the many special effects, including the Christmas tree which "grows" to forty feet, 200 pounds of "snow" falling during the snow scene, and the firing of a cannon onstage. Houston Ballet will give 31 performances of **The Nutcracker** in the Brown Theater at Wortham Theater Center in downtown Houston. Tickets may be purchased by calling 713-227-2787 or logging on to www.houstonballet.org.

Houston Press dance critic Christie Taylor wrote of the company's 2003 performances, "The ballet's vibrantly colored costumes were captivating, and its choreographic nuances marvelous....This year's show was as surprising as going to unwrap a sweater on

Christmas morning and instead finding a box of diamond earrings.” (*Houston Press*, December 4, 2003)

The charismatic Brazilian star Marcelo Gomes, an acclaimed principal dancer with New York’s American Ballet Theatre (ABT), will make his first appearances with Houston Ballet in the role of the Nutcracker Prince at select performances in December. “Marcelo is a wonderful dancer and partner,” observed Houston Ballet Artistic Director Stanton Welch, who has worked with Mr. Gomes on several occasions at ABT. “He’s a real role model with his work ethic, speed, and versatility. Having artists like Marcelo here in Houston is an opportunity for some of our dancers to build connections with some of America’s other leading dancers.”

Twelve different casts will be featured during this season’s performances of **The Nutcracker**. Six Nutcracker Princes, seven Sugar Plum Fairies, and nine Snow Queens will rotate throughout the run. Additionally, more than 60 students from Houston Ballet’s Ben Stevenson Academy participate in the production, and each show features seventeen young children. Overall, there are over 80 roles performed by dancers each night.

On opening night, Friday, November 26, Houston Ballet Principal Lauren Anderson will dance the Sugar Plum Fairy opposite principal Andrew Murphy’s Nutcracker Prince. Of Ms. Anderson’s **Nutcracker** performance in November 2001, the *Houston Chronicle’s* Molly Glentzer said, “Anderson owned the stage...she danced with big-hearted personality and dynamic force.” (November 26, 2001) Soloist Kelly Myernick will appear as the Snow Queen.

Two young artists in the company will be given an early holiday gift: corps de ballet dancers Nao Kusuzaki and Bridgett Zehr will make their first appearances as the Snow Queen, one of two leading female roles in the ballet.

A wonderful ballet for the entire family, **The Nutcracker** is the perfect way to ring in the holiday season and to introduce young children to the power and beauty of classical dance. For over one hundred years, the story of the ballet has proven irresistible to both children and adults alike. Set in nineteenth-century Germany, the ballet opens at a Christmas party at which the mysterious Dr. Drosselmeyer gives his little niece Clara a magical toy that takes her on an unforgettable journey. From the battle scene between the King Rat and the Nutcracker in the first act to the cooks who fly magically through the air in the second act, **The Nutcracker** is sure to enchant audiences of all ages.

Tickets are available at a discount for select reduced-price performances of **The Nutcracker**: patrons can save up to \$10 off the regular price when purchasing tickets for these reduced-price shows, including evening performances on Friday, November 26 and Saturday, November 27; Friday, December 9; December 12, 15, 16, 20, 21, and 26; and matinees on Saturday, November 27 and Sunday, November 28; and December 20-21.

Houston Ballet's performances of **The Nutcracker** are generously underwritten by Continental Airlines, HALLIBURTON, Locke Liddell & Sapp LLP, Devon Energy Corporation, Bank of America, and Riviana Foods Inc.

Marcelo Gomes to Dance with Childhood Friend Sara Webb

Guest artist Marcelo Gomes, a Houston Ballet Academy alumnus and current principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre in New York City, will dance the Nutcracker Prince at select performances December 9 through December 21, 2004. Stanton Welch first met Mr. Gomes in 2001, when he created a role for him in his ballet, **Clear**. Mr. Gomes has also performed in two other works by Mr. Welch: **Within You Without You: A Tribute to George Harrison** (2002) and **HereAfter** (2003).

Mr. Gomes has friends and colleagues here in the company and in the academy, and will be a natural fit for Houston Ballet's production of **The Nutcracker**. He and Houston Ballet Principal Dancer Sara Webb trained at Harid Conservatory from 1993-1996 and spent a summer session together at Houston Ballet Academy. Commented Ms. Webb,

“I’m looking forward to seeing him again and catching up. He was my first real ballet partner; we complemented each other and were always paired together. Not only was he a good partner, but we were also best friends.” The last time they performed together was for an academy production of **Don Quixote**, so dancing **The Nutcracker** will be a sweet reunion: “We always thought that we’d dance together professionally,” said Ms. Webb, “but it hasn’t happened until now.”

Mr. Gomes will be partnering Ms. Webb and Mireille Hassenboehler as the Sugar Plum Fairy, and Kelly Myernick as the Snow Queen.

Mr. Gomes, a native of Brazil, was born in Manaus and raised in Rio de Janeiro, where he began his dance studies at the Helena Lobato and Dalal Achcar Ballet Schools. He went on to study at The Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida, and at the schools of the Paris Opera Ballet, Houston Ballet, Boston Ballet, and Cuballet. The recipient of the Hope Prize at the Prix de Lausanne in 1996, he was also awarded second place at the National Society of Arts and Letters in 1994, and the Winter Festival in Brazil in 1993. Mr. Gomes joined American Ballet Theatre in 1997 as a member of the corps de ballet, was promoted to soloist in August 2000 and to principal dancer in August 2002. His roles with the company include the Prince in **Cinderella**, Espada and Basilio in **Don Quixote**, The Man (Heaven) and Fortune in **HereAfter**, Camille in **The Merry Widow**, Onegin and Prince Gremin in **Onegin**, The Man From the House Opposite in **Pillar of Fire**, Romeo and Benvolio in **Romeo and Juliet**, Prince Siegfried, Benno, and von Rothbart in Kevin McKenzie’s production of **Swan Lake**, the second movement in **Symphony in C**, the **Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux** and leading roles in **Études**, Mark Morris’s **Gong**, **Petite Mort**, **Theme and Variations**, **Within You Without You: A Tribute to George Harrison** and **workwithinwork**. He created Aktaion in **Artemis**, the Portrait in **Dorian**, Death in **HereAfter** and leading roles in **Black Tuesday**, **Clear** and **Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra**.

Performances Includes Several Role Debuts by Rising Young Stars

Two new members of the corps de ballet, Nao Kusuzaki and Bridgett Zehr, will debut as the Snow Queen. Commented Mr. Welch, “Nao and Bridgett have pure classical lines, and will be perfect for the role. I think they both have the ability to be important future dancers for Houston Ballet, and these performances will be significant milestones in their development.”

Japanese native Nao Kusuzaki danced professionally with Boston Ballet for five seasons before joining Houston Ballet. She has been featured in the Arabian pas de deux and Marzipan pas de trois in Boston Ballet’s **The Nutcracker**, as well as several other productions by that company, including **Swan Lake** as a lead swan and in the pas de cinq (solo girl) and Maina Gielgud’s **Giselle** as a lead Wili.

Bridgett Zehr, who in July progressed to the final round at the Shanghai International Ballet Competition with corps de ballet member Connor Walsh, joined the corps de ballet this fall. Last season, in her apprentice year with the company, Ms. Zehr was featured as Calliope in **Apollo** and in the Arabian pas de deux in **The Nutcracker**. Her repertory includes **In the middle, somewhat elevated, Divergence**, and **Theme and Variations**.

The Nutcracker:

Playing a Key Role in Houston Ballet’s Development Over the Last 35 Years

During Houston Ballet’s 2004-2005 season the company celebrates its 35th anniversary, and **The Nutcracker** has played a key role in the company’s meteoric rise to the forefront of American dance, helping to provide a firm financial basis for the company to grow and develop.

The Nutcracker was the first full-length ballet to enter Houston Ballet’s repertoire, and over the past 35 years the scale and scope of the production has expanded tremendously, reflecting the growth and development of the company. In 1972, Houston Ballet

employed just 27 dancers and presented three casts of **The Nutcracker** over the course of six performances. In 2004, the 52-member company will offer 12 casts in 31 performances running from Thanksgiving through Christmas. Last year the production grossed over \$2 million dollars in revenue for the organization.

The Nutcracker has been a favorite in Houston since the 1940's when Sergei Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and American Ballet Theatre toured to the city. In 1972, Houston Ballet Artistic Director Nina Popova enlisted Frederic Franklin, artistic director of the National Ballet, Washington, D.C., to choreograph the company's first full-length production since its inception four years earlier. Four years later, during Houston Ballet Artistic Director Emeritus Ben Stevenson's inaugural season, he re-choreographed several sections of the ballet. The company presented thirteen performances in the bayou city that year.

When the current production of **The Nutcracker** was unveiled in 1987, the company gave twenty-nine performances at the newly opened Wortham Theater Center (eleven more performances than the previous year in Jones Hall). Reviewing the premiere in the *Houston Chronicle*, dance critic Ann Holmes declared that **The Nutcracker**, "It looks and acts like a million dollars and cries out to be telecast." (December 5, 1987)

The Story of *The Nutcracker*

The Nutcracker tells the story of Clara and her magical nutcracker doll. One Christmas Eve, the mysterious Dr. Drosselmeyer arrives at the Stahlbaum family's Christmas party and presents Clara with a special gift: a wooden nutcracker. After the party, as the clock strikes midnight, Clara awakens to find the room filled with giant mice. The Nutcracker comes to her rescue and a fierce battle ensues as the Nutcracker leads the toy soldiers against the mice and their leader, King Rat. The Nutcracker overcomes King Rat, and then is transformed into a handsome prince who takes Clara on a magical journey.

To the delight of Clara and the audience, the evening is filled with dance. The Snow Queen leads eighteen snowflakes in a brilliant waltz in the Land of Snow, where the trees are laden with icicles. Then the Nutcracker Prince takes Clara on a boat ride across the Lemonade Sea to the Kingdom of Sweets where they are greeted by the Sugar Plum Fairy. The Sugar Plum Fairy treats Clara to sweets and entertainment provided by the inhabitants of the kingdom: chocolate, a Spanish dance; coffee, an Arabian dance; and tea, a Chinese dance. Next comes the comical Madame Bonbonaire whose huge skirt is filled with tiny clowns. Then there is the Russian dance and the Waltz of the Flowers. Finally, the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Nutcracker Prince dance a grand pas de deux. As the celebration draws to a close, Clara becomes sleepy. She awakens back in her bed, as the Nutcracker salutes his little princess Clara.

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HOUSTON BALLET
THE NUTCRACKER
FACT SHEET

WHAT: **THE NUTCRACKER (1987)**
Music by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Choreography by Ben Stevenson
Designs by Desmond Heeley
Lighting by Duane Schuler

Generously underwritten by:
Continental Airlines
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**ABOUT THE
PROGRAM:**

A little girl named Clara receives a magical nutcracker on Christmas Eve, and sets out on a wondrous journey to the Land of Snow and the Kingdom of Sweets. Featuring breathtaking scenery and costumes by Desmond Heeley, *The Nutcracker* is the perfect yuletide gift: the ideal means of introducing children to the power and beauty of classical dance, and a delightful way for the entire family to ring in the holiday season.

WHEN: At 7:30 pm on November 26*, 27* and
December 4, 9*, 10, 11, 12*, 15*, 16*, 17, 18, 19, 20*, 21*, 22, 23, 26*,
2004

At 2:00 pm on November 27*, 28* and
December 4, 5, 11, 12, 18, 19, 20*, 21*, 22, 23, 24, 26, 2004
* indicates reduce-price performances

WHERE: Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center
Texas at Smith Streets in downtown Houston

TICKETS: \$19 - \$150. For tickets call (713) 227 2787 or 1 800 828 ARTS.
Tickets are also available at www.houstonballet.org, the Houston Ballet
Box Office at Wortham Theater Center and all Ticketmaster outlets,
including Foley's, Fiesta, and Warehouse Music.

FOR MORE

INFORMATION: Visit Houston Ballet on the World Wide Web at
www.houstonballet.org