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'Nutcracker' Spate: Boston's Two Ballets Go Toe to Mistletoe

It's No Competition, Says One,
Though Sales Have Fallen
As Sugar Plum Fairies Duel

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Boston Ballet has developed a strategy for dealing with the "Nutcracker" that opened down the street from its own: Pretend it doesn't exist.

Since Ballet Theatre of Boston's production of the Nutcracker opened seven years ago, attendance has risen steadily. Meanwhile, the 34-year-old Boston Ballet, one of the top companies in the country, has seen its audience drop for the holiday extravaganza.

A lot is at stake. The Nutcracker — which traditionally features a growing Christmas tree, anywhere from dozens to hundreds of dancing children and a treacherous Tchaikovsky score — is the cash cow for American ballet companies, typically providing one-third to one-half of a company's annual budget, ballet officials say.

More people go to Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker" than to any other ballet in the country, including New York City Ballet's "Nutcracker." But while Boston Ballet sold about 141,000 tickets in 1992, the 100th anniversary of the Tchaikovsky ballet, last year it sold only about 114,000, a plunge of nearly 20%. And in the three most recent years, attendance is down 10%.

Meantime, Ballet Theatre's audience climbed 18% over the past three years to more than 23,000 — nowhere near enough to put Boston Ballet out of business, but seemingly enough to ruffle its tutus.

Outside of the ballet world, some people are confusing the two. Ballet Theatre dancers performing a Nutcracker excerpt at Faneuil Hall last month were introduced by Mayor Thomas Menino as members of the Boston Ballet, a common slip. A picture in December's Boston magazine of Boston Ballet dancers gave details for Ballet Theatre's performances underneath.

Boston Ballet General Manager David Brown admits to being tweaked when Ballet Theatre hung up a Nutcracker shingle: "We're not particularly thrilled about it, but I don't think it's the place of the leading ballet company to make comments about peers," he says. "While there may be room

Please Turn to Page NE4, Column 1

'Nutcracker' Duel Puts Two Ballets Toe to Mistletoe

Continued From Page NE1

for two Nutcrackers, we would've preferred they not be right down the street."

Yet he and other Boston Ballet officials insist that the other Nutcracker — being performed in a smaller theater by a younger company with fewer dancers and an annual budget that's only twice what Boston Ballet spends on Nutcracker advertising alone — is not forcing them to do things any differently.

If not, then what about the Boston Ballet radio ads in 1994 that featured Nutcracker tunes barked by dogs, quacked by ducks and gargled by human beings and warned: "Accept no imitations this holiday season. There is only one Nutcracker?"

"It was not aimed at them at all," says marketing director Rebecca Crawford, but rather at the myriad holiday productions consumers now have to choose from.

And the revamped \$1 million production with new scenery, costumes and special ef-

fects unveiled in 1995? That was something

they're spending the money. Boston Ballet isn't the only company across the country suffering a downturn in Nutcracker attendance because of competition from touring Broadway musicals and a burgeoning number of holiday shows. But Boston Ballet's production is the only major one that has to compete against another professional ballet's Nutcracker so close to home.

Ballet Theatre's numbers are tiny by comparison. Last year it took in \$241,855 from ticket sales and played to an audience of 23,266 (not all those seats were paid for, as some were special promotions). Boston Ballet's Nutcracker revenue was \$5.1 million, with the sale of 113,595 tickets.

Six years ago, when his company was six years old and after performing Nutcracker in other New England towns, Ballet Theatre's Mr. Mateo decided Boston could support another Nutcracker, at the 980-seat Emerson Majestic Theater.

Mr. Mateo calls his production a more serious ballet, one that even ballet fans — who tend to roll their eyes at the mention of Nutcracker — can enjoy.

"A common mistake is to treat Nutcracker as a shoo-in for a big audience and a throwaway in terms of what it can be artistically," he says. "It's not going to have the profundity of 'Othello,'" he adds, but it can be a cohesive story rather than a collection of dancing tidbits.

With prices ranging from \$9 to \$28, says Scott Fraser, Ballet Theatre's associate director, his company targets a different demographic from the Boston Ballet crowd, which pays \$12 to \$59 per ticket.

"We're going after a more diverse audience, a younger audience," says Mr. Fraser. "Our product is priced and designed for younger families."

Boston Ballet has a \$500,000 advertising budget for the Nutcracker, with one TV spot and two radio ads running on local media, as well as newspaper ads. Ballet Theatre relies mostly on news media, fliers and appearances at community events.

A Boston Ballet fact sheet quantifies the excess of its production, from the "one ton" of white confetti used as snow, to "an enormous dancing bear, an army of toy soldiers, 16 dancing snowflakes, 16 dancing flowers, 12 cherubs, a harp, four French horns, seven first violins, one tuba, a big brass gong, a brown-and-white bunny, four cuddly white lambs with little black noses, a heavenly children's choir and a small herd of white reindeer." It notes also that total attendance is "19 times the population of Nauru, the world's smallest country."

The Ballet Theatre fact sheet boasts that its Nutcracker discards "the pomp and excess of traditional elitist ballet" and offers affordable ticket prices.

At Ballet Theatre, any Nutcracker advertising works to its advantage. "Anything that gets the word out helps," says a spokeswoman.

But Boston Ballet's Mr. Brown begs to differ. "We regularly have people at our theater with tickets to the other production," he says. "Anything that creates frustration or confusion or a hassle for ticket buyers hurts us all."

Bitter and Suite

Ticket sales of the competing "Nutcrackers"

YEAR	BALLET THEATRE	BOSTON BALLET
1991	12,345	129,397
1992	15,271	141,370
1993	17,978	126,772
1994	19,006	125,733
1995	19,678	136,458
1996	23,266	113,595

Note: Ballet Theatre figures include complimentary tickets.

Source: The companies

facts unveiled in 1995? That was something Boston Ballet had been planning for a long time, says a spokeswoman.

Mr. Brown and other Boston Ballet officials say they've never seen the dancing sugar plum fairies down the block. (Ballet Theatre's artistic director, Jose Mateo, says he has never been to Boston Ballet's Nutcracker, either.)

Boston Ballet officials say what worries them most is the city's revived theater district. Their Nutcracker, at the 3,500-seat Wang Theatre, used to be the only holiday fare in the district. Last year it competed with "Rent" and "Master Class" in neighboring theaters. This year, "Stomp" and "Chicago" are playing within walking distance, and "Cats" is opening across the street Dec 16.

Even Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," which doesn't open until next summer, worries Boston Ballet because tickets went on sale at the same time and in the same theater as its own Nutcracker tickets. Buyers aren't looking at when they're going to the theater, Ms. Crawford says, but when