

La Crosse Dance Centre's

The Nutcracker

Study Guide



-ACT I-

The curtain rises on the house of Josef and Catherine Silberhaus who are celebrating Christmas Eve, 1892. The children are busy creating mischief and merriment. Maria Silberhaus and the girls perform a joyful dance in anticipation of the celebration to come.

The excitement builds as Godmother Drosselmeyer's Assistant attempts to make toy soldiers dance for the children. When he finally succeeds, the children enjoy playing with the toy soldiers.

Maria's Godmother Drosselmeyer suddenly appears in the middle of a grand dance the guests are performing. She has brought a mysterious guest with her, who carries a basket of sugar plums. The children are elated to receive a gift from Drosselmeyer, who is known for her superior toy making skills. They are less than excited to be offered sugar plums from the mysterious guest, though Maria graciously accepts the sugar plum, appreciating the time and care taken to make the treat. All the children receive a gift, including Fritz, Maria's mischievous little brother, who gets a mouse puppet. Godmother Drosselmeyer seems to have forgotten a gift for Maria. Godmother asks the mysterious guest to show Maria a story they have been writing. Maria quickly becomes enraptured with the story, and then Godmother brings a Doll, a Harlequin and five other mysterious Dolls from the pages of the book into the ballroom and has them dance for the guests.



After all the dolls have danced, Maria loses sight of Godmother Drosselmeyer but soon finds her holding a curious present. Unveiling it, Godmother Drosselmeyer reveals a Nutcracker in the form of a man, which she gives to Maria. Overcome with surprise and gratitude, Maria dances with it and Godmother Drosselmeyer. Fritz sees the Nutcracker and is envious of Maria's gift, so he grabs it and breaks it with his sword. Maria is heartbroken, but Godmother Drosselmeyer fixes the doll using her magic.

The girls return to the parlor from dinner and join Maria in a lullaby dance with their dolls. The parents then return and dance a final promenade. Then the guests say good night and travel home. Before Godmother Drosselmeyer leaves, she gives Maria the book she's been writing with the mysterious guest.

After everyone has gone to bed, Maria creeps back downstairs to see her beloved Nutcracker, and read her book. As the clock strikes midnight, Maria falls asleep under the tree with the Nutcracker in her arms.

Godmother Drosselmeyer reappears as a magician and a weaver of dreams. She transforms the mysterious party guest into the enchanted Sugar Plum Fairy, Queen of the Land of Sweets. Together, Drosselmeyer and the Sugar Plum Fairy shrink Maria and summon the evil Rat Queen and her rat and mice subjects, now Maria's size, to come forth from behind the walls.



The Nutcracker and his army of toy soldiers battle the Rat Queen. At the end of the battle, Maria saves the day by striking down the Rat Queen.

The curse under which the Nutcracker has been placed is lifted, since someone showed him a selfless act of courageous kindness. He is transformed into his original form, a brave and kind Prince. He invites Maria to visit his kingdom, the Land of Sweets. Guided by the Snow Royalty and the tiny Snow Angels, Maria and the Prince make their way through a snow-bedecked pine forest.



ACT TWO

The second act opens as the Candy Cane Guard, Sugar Plums and Cupcakes welcome Maria and the Nutcracker Prince as they enter the Palace of the Sugar Plum Fairy in her Kingdom of Sweets. The Sugar Plum Fairy knights Maria and makes her an honorary Princess in appreciation for her defeat of the evil Rat Queen. The Chocolate dancers perform for Maria, and the Reed Pipe Shepherdess play their soothing music as they dance with their Sheep. The Bakers find the Gingerbread Kids have their own plans for fun as they entertain, and the energetic Peppermint Dancers perform. The Tea dancers

and the reverent Coffee Dancers also perform to show their appreciation for Maria's courage. The Nutcracker Prince performs for Maria. Then the Cupcakes persuade Maria to dance. The Sugar Plum Fairy and the Dew Drop Fairy with her attendants, the Flowers, entertain Maria. The Prince and Maria then perform a final farewell pas de deux. During this pas de deux, Maria realizes that, even though she is still a child, she must begin to accept the challenges of becoming an adult and that she has the power within her to help good triumph over evil in the world.



DID YOU KNOW?

- This is 33rd year that the La Crosse Dance Centre (LDC) has performed their production of The Nutcracker here, in La Crosse.
- There are 98 Members in the company that you see onstage today.

- Auditions for the production are held in August, and rehearsals begin shortly thereafter. That's approximately four months of rehearsals to bring the story to life.
- The Director of the production, Nikki Balsamo, was the original Maria and danced the role for the first two years. She also played the role of the Rat Queen three times. This is now her 22nd year directing the production. Her parents started this tradition with Kathy Gorman and remained active in the production for many years.
- Michael, the lighting designer, has designed the lights for the production for 29 years.
- The rat puppet that Fritz receives has been used every year since 1990 and is the only prop that has remained the same since then. The other props have had to be altered or changed year after year just due to wear and tear.
- This year, a number of dancers from the first productions now have children dancing in the production.



THE HISTORY The story of the Nutcracker is one that is steeped in history. It

began as a story in 1816 by E.T.A. Hoffmann about a young girl named Marie who receives and falls in love with a nutcracker doll for Christmas. The nutcracker doll does come to life, but only when she falls asleep. The original story is much darker than what is presented in the ballet. That is because the ballet is based on an adaptation of Hoffmann's story by the French author,

Alexandre Dumas Pere, which was toned down for children in 1844 and became known as *L'histoire d'un casse noisette* (The Story of a Nutcracker). Roughly fifty years later, the Russian Imperial Theatre, at the request of choreographer and ballet master Marius Petipa, commissioned the famous composer Peter Tchaikovsky to write a score for a ballet to the story. Petipa and Tchaikovsky had previously collaborated on *Sleeping Beauty* in 1890. Rehearsals were soon underway for the production, however, Petipa fell quite ill during the rehearsal process, so the job of creating the choreography was left to his assistant, Lev Ivanov.

The world premiere of the ballet was held on December 17, 1892 in St. Petersburg. Due to the overwhelming success of *Sleeping Beauty* two years earlier, the opening night performance was sold out. Even Czar Alexander III was in attendance that evening. The overall consensus was that the ballet was overall foolish and too childish for adults with the music being “too symphonic” for a ballet setting.

In 1905, Russia's Revolution began and a great deal of the dancers who had danced in the original production began to flee the country, taking with them the traditions of Russian ballet, including the story and choreography of *The Nutcracker*. The first production of the ballet outside of Russia appeared in Budapest in 1927. It eventually worked its way over to London in 1934 and finally, made its way to American soil in 1940 in an abridge version performed in New York City by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. The first complete version was performed at the San Francisco Ballet in 1944, using the original choreography from 1892.

Perhaps the most famous American production came in 1954 with George Balanchine's production for the New York City Ballet. Balanchine had learned the ballet when he was a student in Russia. It was his production that made *The Nutcracker* an annual Christmas staple for dance schools and companies across the country. Not only is the story a Christmas staple, but the score has become timeless as well, particularly *The Nutcracker Suite*, which includes a *Miniature Overture*, the variations from Act II, and the “Waltz of the Flowers.”

There have been many filmed and televised productions of *The Nutcracker* throughout the years, making the audience reach for the story even greater than Tchaikovsky and Petipa could have ever imagined. What makes the story of *The Nutcracker* so special is the fact that no two productions are exactly the same; some productions may utilize similar choreography or scenic and costume designs.

While there are a number of productions that follow the original story from 1892, many choose to implement their own adaptation of the story and create their own choreography. For example, in the original story, the little girl is named Marie Silberhaus, but some productions refer to her as Maria or even Clara. It all depends on the version of the story that a particular company has elected to tell. Nevertheless, audiences are still whisked away year after year to the magical Snow Forest and the decadent Kingdom of the Sweets, allowing the tradition of The Nutcracker to carry on, generation after generation.





THE AUTHORS

E.T.A. Hoffmann (Original Story) was born on January 1, 1776, in a small college town on the Baltic Sea in what is now Germany. He had a troubled upbringing and found solace in many different things, particularly music, art, writing, and even law. Hoffman was an accomplished musician, having studied the piano, violin, harp, and guitar. Hoffman studied law at the Koenigsberg Law University from 1792-1800 and eventually worked in the Koenigsberg Supreme court. Although, he was accomplished in the field of law, it is his stories and artistic endeavors, particularly his story of *The Nutcracker*, that have given him lasting success. He died in 1822 in Germany.



Alexandre Dumas (Story Adaptation) was born on July 24, 1802, in France. He is, perhaps, one of the most celebrated authors in France. He moved to Paris in 1822 and began to write both comedic and dramatic plays in the Romantic style. He also wrote a great deal of essays, short stories, and novels, including *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*. While many people do not think of Dumas immediately when they think of *The Nutcracker*, it is his adaptation of the story from the original ballet that was adapted. In effect, he is responsible for the tale of *The Nutcracker* that many know and love, today. He died in 1870 in France.



Marius Petipa (Original Librettist/Choreographer) was born in France on March 11, 1818. Many consider him to be the “father of classical ballet.” Even though he did not enjoy dancing early on, he made his professional debut in 1831. After finding success throughout North America and Europe (primarily in Paris), he made his way to Russia in 1847 where he began working as a principal dancer with the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg and eventually became their Ballet Master in 1869. It is particularly his work on the ballets of Tchaikovsky (*The Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*) that have given him lasting fame. He died on July 14, 1910, in Russia.



Peter Tchaikovsky (Composer) was born on May 7, 1840. He studied piano as a young child but did not get seriously into music until the age of twenty. Upon completing his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he went on to teach at the Moscow Conservatory at the age of twenty-six. While he was an accomplished conductor and composed many symphonies, operas, and concert pieces throughout his life, he is known especially for his three ballets: *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Swan Lake*, all three becoming classical repertory pieces for ballet companies around the world. He died in 1893 in Russia.

THE CHOREOGRAPHY

Nikki Balsamo (Director/Choreographer) has her BFA in Dance from the University of Minnesota and the MA in Servant Leadership from Viterbo University. Nikki has performed as a guest dancer with "JAZZDANCE!" by Danny Buraczeski, works by Christine Maginnins, Cyndi and Brad Garner, and Emily Johnson. Nikki served as Dance Coordinator in the Theatre & Music Theatre Department at Viterbo University from 2004-2014. Nikki currently serves as the Artistic Director and Owner of La Crosse Dance Centre. Recent choreographic credits include La Crosse Dance Centre's *Nutcracker Ballet*, *The Seasons: A Collaboration between La Crosse Dance Centre and La Crosse Symphony Orchestra*, and La Crosse Dance Centre's *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Paper Bag Princess*, and *Some Call it Oz*. A choreographer is the person who makes the dances. They take their ideas and put them together in movement and patterns to the music creating a total piece of art from start to finish. There have been many different choreographers of *The Nutcracker* over the years, and there are four choreographers who have worked on the show you will see; Nikki, Jen TeBeest, Angela Imhoff, and Joey Miller. You could even choreograph your own ballet!

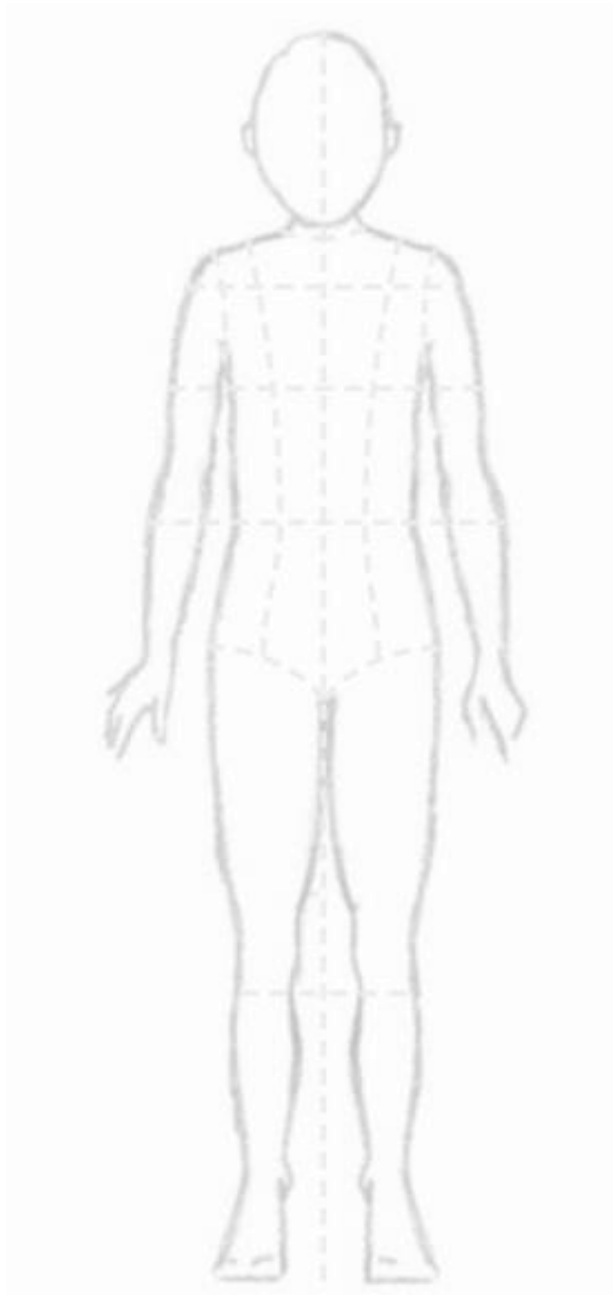
One of the most beloved scenes in *The Nutcracker Ballet* is the Snow Scene, choreographed by Angela. Angela had to think about how to make the dancers move like snow moves when she choreographed this section.

Let's try this: Can you think of 20 words to describe snow? These words are called "adjectives," and can be defined as word that describes a noun or a pronoun.

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 1. | 11. |
| 2. | 12. |
| 3. | 13. |
| 4. | 14. |
| 5. | 15. |
| 6. | 16. |
| 7. | 17. |
| 8. | 18. |
| 9. | 19. |
| 10. | 20. |

Costume Design:

Be CREATIVE! It's your turn to design. Draw how you think the snowflake costumes should look.





How to Draw a Snowflake



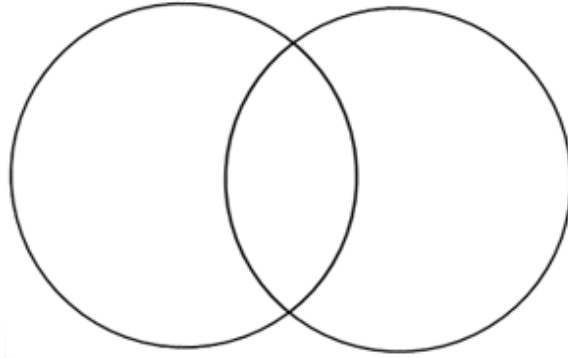
Classroom Activities

Language Arts:

1. Writing: Have students write a friendly letter to one of the characters or dancers from *The Nutcracker*. Have students use sensory details to describe what they liked best about the character they chose.
2. Compare/Contrast: Read a different version of *The Nutcracker* aloud to your students. The version of the *The Nutcracker* that you have read is slightly different from what students will see in the ballet. Have students chart the differences they notice on a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer. Depending on the grade level, have your students use their or graphic organizer to write compare and contrast sentences, paragraph(s) or an essay.

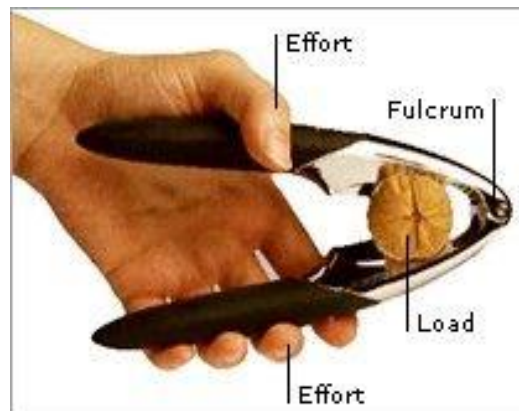
Social Studies & Language Arts Social Studies: Change the Setting for *The Nutcracker*

1. For this production of *The Nutcracker*, the ballet had been set in Western Europe in the 1800s. Have students write about what would happen if the story took place in a different time period and a different location. What would you change? (Costumes, sets, characters, folk dances, music, landmarks, locations, events, animals, etc.)
2. Have students re-write their own version of the story using a different setting, time period, or both be sure that they consider how costumes, sets, characters, folk dances, music, landmarks, locations, events, and animals might be different. Social Studies: Families & Traditions *The Nutcracker* story takes place at Christmas and shows how Clara's family celebrates the holiday. What holiday traditions are special to your family? Use a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer to compare and contrast your holiday traditions with your parents or guardian. How are your parents' tradition different than those of your grandparents?



Science: *How does a nutcracker work?*

A nutcracker is a simple machine (A basic mechanical device for applying a force, such as an inclined plane, wedge, or lever), and specifically, a nutcracker is a lever. Character nutcrackers are created for decoration, so they do not work as well as the more functional nutcrackers (pictured below on the right), but they still have the same basic premise. An individual must pull a lever in the back of the nutcracker down, and then the jaw of the nutcracker opens up. A nut is placed in the mouth of the nutcracker, and the lever is then pushed in the opposite direction. This brings the jaw back up and if done with enough force, the nut cracks under pressure. Watch some simple machine videos online or try to recreate some! How can they measure force?



Reflecting on the Performance: Write a Review

1. Create an idea map on the board by asking students to brainstorm everything they remember from the performance. The first part of this activity should be objective; remind students that they will be able to express their opinions when they write the review. Prompt students with the following questions: What kinds of songs did they sing? In what different ways did the actors use their voices? What costumes did the actors wear? How did the different characters move? What did the set on the stage look like? What else can you remember? Was it hard to follow the story without using words?
2. Instruct students to write a review that includes the following components:
 - A rating (from 1-5 stars)
 - Write one paragraph that objectively describes what you saw and heard at the performance
 - For each star in your rating, explain one thing you liked about the performance (e.g. a four star rating equals four things you liked about the show)
 - For each star under five, explain one thing you didn't like about the performance (e.g. a three star rating equal two things you didn't like about the show)

Music:

Have your students listen to parts of *The Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky. Here is a link to the full album:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mis008Czk90>

Discuss how the music helps set the tone for the scene and creates emotion. As you play a song ask them to identify the tone/mood, the speed, and how it makes them feel. Discuss music terms and definitions.

Dance:

While you play them sections from *The Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky and have them free dance. Then have the have the students work in small groups to create a dance to one of the selections. Groups take turns performing their choreography for each other. Audience members can think or write critically about what they think the dancers were trying to express to the music. Did they capture the feel of the musical section?

History: *What's a sugar plum anyway?*

Good question! It's a little round or plum-shaped sweet with a hard sugar shell around a fruit, nut, seed, spice or chocolate. They were popular from the 16th to 19th centuries, when the technical term was "dragée" or "comfit" (indeed, the French name for our fairy is "La Fée Dragée". M&Ms are a clear descendant. Have your students research the history of their favorite Christmas treats (candy canes, gumdrops, hot chocolate, gingerbread) and compare and contrast the historical candies and how they've changed today?



WORD SEARCH

D A N C E B T V F S L D C K P
W E J F T O N S U L R E S C U
R B G G H V O A K O O R T P X
U V G L Q L H D S D P W Z D I
S T U D D R O S W K T R E H V
S C G I E Q E U L L K E R R N
I J E B Z L O S Y C R K S A S
A R L T M D M A I J A C Q C T
N I I E Y K S V O K I A H C T
S R Y S R T T E O G R R C D U
F E N N K Q E G V I A C S W S
R O M F W Y C L H E M T M D N
S T E E W S N N L A C U J L H
S U G A R P L U M A Q N Z F K
S Q T Q O K P P B U B Y P J F

BALLET

NUTCRACKER

DANCE

SILBERHAUS

DROSSELMEYER

SOLDIER

FLOWERS

SUGARPLUM

FRITZ

SWEETS

MARIA

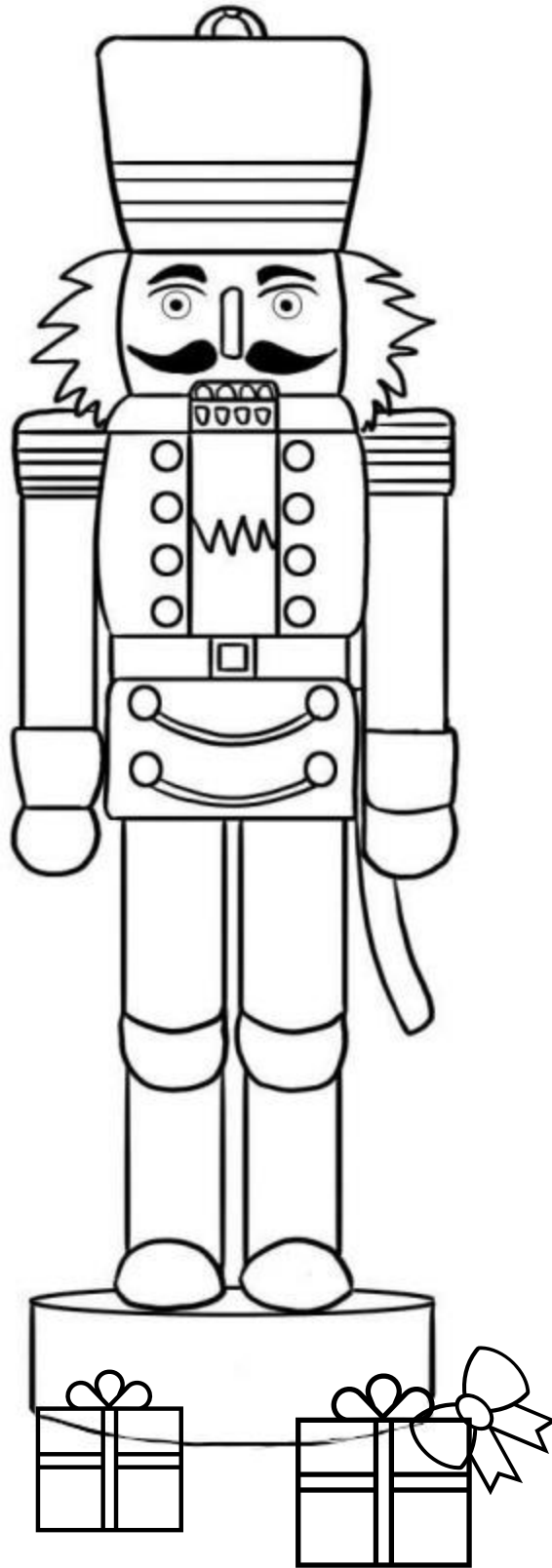
TCHAIKOVSKY

RUSSIAN

RAT

COLORING ACTIVITY

Color in your own version of the Nutcracker doll that you would go on magical adventures with!



BEING A GOOD AUDIENCE MEMBER

Unlike actors on television, performers on the stage are aware of their audience and want very much to communicate their art to you and feel your appreciation in turn. In fact, by the time you arrive at a theatre for a scheduled performance, many people (choreographers, composers, dancers, technicians, costume, and lighting designers, etc.) have worked very hard to bring you their best efforts. In order to show respect for those efforts, every audience member must give the performance their full attention and avoid any behavior that interferes with anyone else doing the same. We have rules that help us accomplish this goal, and you should do your best to understand and follow them:

1. Always arrive at the theatre with plenty of time to find your seats and settle down into them. Late arrivals mean disruption for everyone else, including the performers
2. No shoving or running in the lobby
3. No cameras or video recorders. Flashes are dangerous for dancers and unapproved photos and videos violate copyright laws
4. No hooting, whistling, or yelling during the performance. The performance has begun when anyone on stage starts talking or dancing, or when the music starts playing. You are welcome to show your appreciation for the performance with applause at the end of the ballet or sometimes at the end of a section or solo. You are welcome to laugh if someone on stage is being intentionally funny
5. No talking or whispering during the performance. You will have plenty of time to discuss your impressions at intermission or after the show
6. No gum, candy, or food in the theatre (it makes noise and sticky messes)
7. Use the bathroom before the show begins or at intermission, not during the performance
- 8. Please turn off your cell phones or silence them *before* the show!!**

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