

Those Christmas classics that pay the bills

By [Karen D'Souza](#)

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Make way for "The Nutcracker," "A Christmas Carol," "The Velveteen Rabbit" and the "Messiah."

The holidays have officially arrived, which means it's once again time for fruitcake, eggnog and the cash cows -- ahem, chestnuts -- of the arts world. These beloved tales of cuteness, kitsch and redemption hit the spot for audiences craving sweet seasonal treats.

These crowd pleasers are often a mixed blessing for companies because they can get a little ho-ho-ho hum over the years, but big bucks are involved for nonprofits in need of a quick cash infusion.



So, if you are a ballet looking to pad the ledger, it's time to dust off your Nutcrackers. The Mouse King reigns from San Francisco and Oakland to San Jose. Theaters big and small, including the American Conservatory Theater, San Jose Rep and Center Rep, break out the Dickens. San Francisco Symphony, American Bach Soloists and Berkeley's Philharmonia Baroque ring out with Handel's "Messiah." There are also Grinches who steal Christmas, various and sundry Santa Clauses and a few George Baileys. God bless them, everyone.

—%o'Nutcracker' is a moneymaker. It's the bread and butter of every ballet company in America," says Richard Cammack, artistic director of Contra Costa Ballet, which has been dancing "Nutcracker" for 21 years and packs eight shows into a three-day run.

While arts organizations are stingy with details when it comes to holiday show finances, there's no question that seasonal chestnuts bring in a huge chunk of annual revenue. Contra Costa Ballet's "Nutcracker," for instance, pays for its entire spring repertory.

"It's the audience's choice and they love the war horses," Cammack says. "That's what keeps them alive year after year. You can't beat them at the box office."

Many theatergoers crave the ritual of the holiday show the way others long for the smell of a freshly cut Douglas fir, with productions becoming the cornerstone of a family tradition. That's why ACT has revived "Carol" for 35 years and ODC has hopped through "The Velveteen Rabbit" for 25 years.

"There's a real thrill to it," says Robert Kelley, artistic director of TheatreWorks. "The familiarity of the experience builds anticipation for the holiday, especially for the younger audience."

"The great holiday stories remind us of many things -- our best qualities, or at least the qualities we aspire to; our childhood, shared experiences with our friends and families," says Rick Lombardo, who is directing his new adaptation

of "Carol" at San Jose Rep. "We do have a need to come back to certain things in our lives in cycles. ... Perhaps it's something about the rhythm of life."

Still, many artists bah-humbug these box office no-brainers and critics generally sneer at them. Like sugar plums, these productions are often so sweet they make your teeth hurt.

Certainly repetition can dim anyone's enthusiasm. In the tart satire "Every Christmas Story Ever Told," now being revived at San Jose Stage, the actor playing Marley's ghost rants that he has been trapped in "Carol" since he was wee enough to play Tiny Tim.

"After a while, the energy is gone," suggests Kelley, who often stages family-friendly shows such as "Secret Garden" and "Peter Pan" during the holidays. "It becomes a routine and you feel stuck."

Gingerbread isn't the only thing that can get stale fast. The high burnout factor is one of the reasons yuletide lampoons have such bite and there are regular productions of such satires as the Mark Morris Dance Group's "Hard Nut" (which sends up "Nutcracker") and David Sedaris' "Santaland Diaries," now being revived at City Lights.

"You have to be willing to take it all apart and start over or you may well get a little bored," says James Carpenter, who plays Scrooge in ACT's lavish "Carol." "You run the risk of just getting the sucker up and running."

Carpenter admits he was a little blasé last time around (this is his seventh "Carol" at ACT) so he's trying to take Dickens to a darker place this year. Northside Theatre is also doing "Carol" with a twist, a female Scrooge named Ebeneeda. Some orchestras take the do-it-yourself approach with "Singalong Messiah."

But some believe the appeal of the productions goes deeper than mere nostalgia and that classics such as "Carol," with its indictment of capitalism run amok, have much to say about the world today.

"It's not Mr. Magoo's Christmas, it's really political theater," Carpenter says. "Dickens was not a happy man when he wrote this story. He was furious about working conditions in England. This was the height of the Industrial Revolution and people were being used like machines, like cogs that could be thrown away."

Another reason these stories never get old is that the audience is constantly renewing itself. There is always a new generation of wide-eyed little ones eager to watch the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Kelley recalls a gaggle of tiny tots scurrying toward the stage after one holiday show. Were they sneaking a peek at the orchestra pit? Nope.

"They were making a mad dash for the fairy dust," he recalls, "grabbing as much of it as they could and throwing it up in the air."

Unless your heart is two sizes too small, that's hard to resist.

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- **Total budget for the first "Nutcracker" show in San Francisco given the hardships of World War II: \$1,000**
- **Material used to make the velvet coats worn by party guests in act one: old stage curtains**
- **Number of times James Carpenter has played Scrooge at ACT: six (seven including the year he understudied the part)**
- **Theatergoers who have seen ACT's "Carol" over the years: 825,000**
- **Pairs of pointe shoes used during a season of "Nutcracker" at Ballet San Jose: 650**
- **Number of rhinestones encrusting Maria's magic dress at Ballet San Jose: 4,000**

- **Pounds of hanging scenery used for Ballet San Jose's "Nutcracker": 18,925**
- **Pounds of confetti dropped at Ballet San Jose: 60**
- **Height of the giant Fabergé eggs used in the Russian dance in San Francisco Ballet's "Nutcracker": 9 feet**
- **Musicians and singers it takes to perform San Francisco Symphony's "Messiah": 110**
- **Years S.F. Symphony has performed "Messiah": 40**
- **Years Contra Costa Ballet has staged "Nutcracker": 21**
- **Number of performances of "Nutcracker" that Contra Costa Ballet packs into a three-day run: eight**