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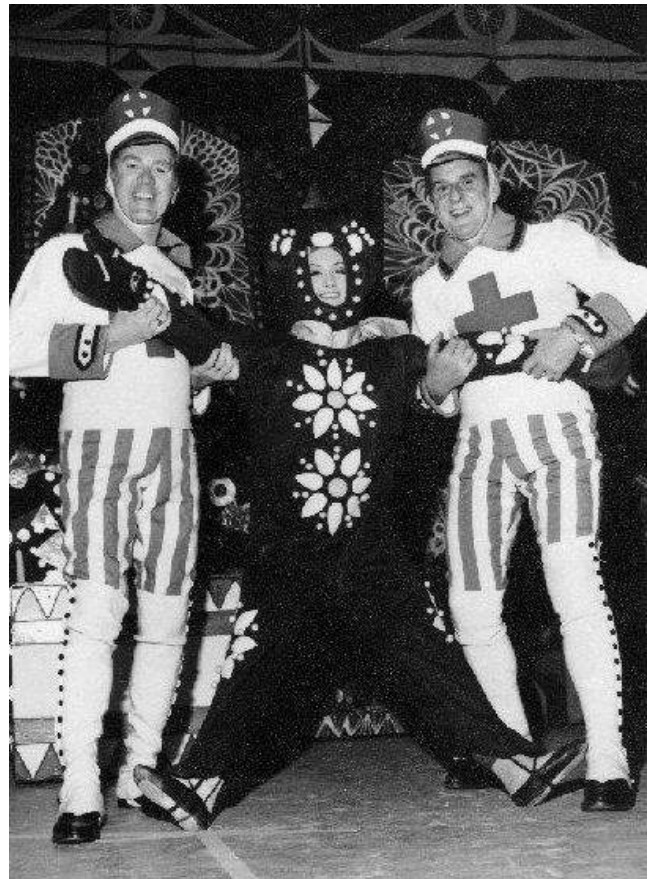
FOREVER YOUNG

GORD ATKINSON'S SHOWBILL

A Nutcracker to Remember

The holiday season conjures up images of fir trees ablaze with lights, candelabra glowing in the dark, garlands of yuletide decorations and the sounds of sleigh bells, familiar Christmas songs and carols and the music of Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky's score from his sugarplum ballet, *The Nutcracker*.

The perennial yuletide theatrical treat has bedazzled children, their parents and grandparents since its premiere performance in 1892 at the Marrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia. I was dazzled and beguiled one December evening in the 1970's when I was an observer in



“the wings” of the National Arts Centre and a participant on stage in the National Ballet of Canada's stunning production of *The Nutcracker*.

Along with media personalities and parliamentarians I was one of the stretcher bearers who carried the wounded gingerbread dancers off stage during the dream sequence battle between the gingerbread soldiers and the army of the Mouse King. My partner was the decorated veteran of World War II and Canada's then Minister of Defence, Barney Danson. When it was time for our brief appearance at centre stage we made the most of our few moments by doing an impromptu comedy exchange in the manner of Laurel and Hardy. In the midst of the turmoil on stage, as we fumbled with the stretcher and attempted to go off stage in different directions, I am not certain if we only contributed to the confusion or got a few laughs along the way -- but we sure had fun.

Over at the magnificent Canadian War Museum, the multi-purpose theatre is named after my fellow "Stretcher Bearer", Barney Danson. Each time I have visited the museum's theatre, my thoughts have drifted back to the NAC and our night on stage in the gingerbread battle. It was a lark and an honour to be in the spotlight with Barney J. Danson, an officer and a gentleman.

That evening, so long ago at the NAC, while waiting for my off stage cue, I gained an insight into the professional stature, mobility and physical stamina of the dancers in a corps de ballet. As I stood in the wings the dancers seemed to float across the stage. However, when they were out of view of the audience it was obvious that they had experienced an exhaustive workout as they breathed heavily

before going back on stage. Like professional athletes they follow a strenuous physical regime for the mastery of their art.

The libretto of *The Nutcracker* was an adaptation of a favourite children's fairy tale, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The ballet production was not a success when it made its debut and failed to capture the imagination of Muscovites of the late 19th century. However, by the mid-20th century, its universal appeal had established *The Nutcracker* as a beloved yuletide musical fantasy. It has been filmed in various formats for the screen and performed on the opera and theatrical stages around the world – from notable productions by the Bolshoi Ballet, the Royal Ballet featuring Rudolph Nureyev and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

The Nutcracker had three major motion picture releases, a variety of international television productions and its score has been frequently recorded by the world's famous symphony orchestras. *The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* has been recorded in a variety of musical styles.

Best of luck to all the little ballerina dancers and their instructors who will perform during the holiday season for the enjoyment of their parents, grandparents, relatives and friends.