

Sugarplum Visions in 3-D

By SARAH LYALL

LONDON

THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL movie has come a long way since the 1950's, when audiences in flimsy paper eyeglasses watched, mesmerized, as overgrown lizards in rubber suits seemed to leap straight from the screen and into their laps. These days, 3-D films are shown on screens as tall as small apartment buildings, with spectacular, hyper-realistic details to go with up-to-the-minute technological innovations. Even the glasses are high-tech: every audience member gets an enormous "Star Trek"-style, liquid-crystal headset, more goggle than spectacle, with its own "fixed personal sound environment."

This fall, Imax, the company that has given us three-dimensionally swimming fish, airplanes that appeared to swoop down from the screen and skyscrapers that looked a little too close for comfort, is releasing "The Imax Nutcracker," a 3-D version of the E. T. A. Hoffmann story that is most familiar in its ballet version. The film, directed by Christine Edzard, best known for her acclaimed six-hour film version of Dickens's "Little Dorrit," and starring the British actress Miriam Margolyes ("The Age of Innocence") as a nondancing Sugarplum, will open in Imax theaters across the United States and abroad on Thanksgiving, Nov. 27.

Until now, Imax has been known for documentary films like "Across the Sea of Time" and "Into the Deep." But the company, based in Toronto, is embarking on an ambitious expansion campaign. In 1995, Sony Classics brought out "Wings of Courage," a 45-minute aviation drama starring Val Kilmer, Elizabeth McGovern and Tom Hulce, using Imax 3-D technology. With "The Imax Nutcracker," which is costing about \$8 million and is the company's most elaborate production to date, Imax itself is turning to drama, hoping to create a perennial holiday feature — much like the ballet that captivates children in concert houses each year — at its 150 or so screens around the world.



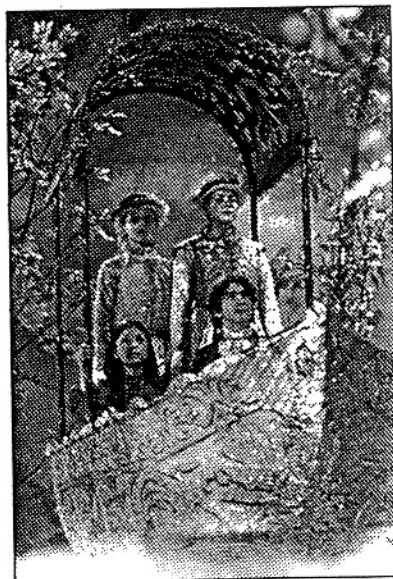
Photographs by Roberta Parkin/Imax

Lotte Johnson and Benjamin Hall in "The Imax Nutcracker."

"We had a real desire to create an evergreen for Imax, to create something that families could go to year in and year out that would be a good alternative to a \$65 play or ballet," said Andrew Gellis, Imax's senior vice president for film and the executive producer of "The Imax Nutcracker." "We wanted to broaden our audience, to reach out to a broader group of people who might not be aware of what Imax has done."

And Imax wants to make more narrative dramas. "This is a very good model for the type of film we could and should do," Mr. Gellis said. "The demographics are good, it's timeless and has universal appeal, and it's not the kind of film that will be released into 2,000 theaters, have a three-week run and then go directly into video."

The film is a rendition of "The Nutcracker," the familiar story describing the adventures of Clara, a young girl who is presented with a soldier-shaped nutcracker by Drosselmeier, an eccentric inventor (played in the film by the British author, actor and playwright Heathcote Williams) and then slips into a dream world of adventures and toys that come to life. But while it is set to Tchaikovsky's music and includes intricately choreographed action and tumbling sequences, performed by circus performers, mimes, stilt walkers and performance artists who help make up a cast of 150, "The Imax Nutcracker" is clearly a drama, not a ballet. There is only one dance scene, performed by Tamara Rojo of the English National Ballet.



One of the elaborate sets in the 3-D drama that will open in Imax theaters on Thanksgiving.

"The Imax Nutcracker" is also produced by Sands Films, a London-based company known for creating lavish and breathtakingly accurate costumes for dramas like "Emma" and "Pride and Prejudice." Under the direction of its co-founder, Ms. Edzard, who also adapted the script, Sands designed and constructed all the sets for "The Imax Nutcracker"; the costumes were designed in collaboration with Claudie Gastine.

Visions of Sugarplums, Now in 3-D

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FILMING THE NEW "NUTCRACKER," which took place over the summer at nine sets around London, proved to be a complicated affair, technically, dramatically and logistically. For a start, the Imax camera — in which two strips of 70-millimeter film run simultaneously over two camera lenses, to replicate what a person would see from the same position — is necessarily cumbersome and extremely slow. The camera also requires a great deal of light and works best on wide-angle shots, presenting another challenge for actors.

"You have much less freedom to move quickly because the camera imposes certain technical restraints," Ms. Margolyes said. "Also, the camera likes perspective — it likes things to come toward it — so there was rather a lot of that, which was difficult, since I'm not usually someone who likes to come toward the camera."

It took weeks of rehearsal before the huge contingent of jugglers, acrobats and actors was ready to perform large choreographed numbers like an intricate battle scene that lasts a full 10 minutes.

Ms. Edzard, the director, said that the Imax technology, which she had never used before, presented its own challenges as well as its own rewards. In fact, every director using Imax technology faces the same learning curve when confronted with the new camera and its special requirements. "The takes are much shorter, and of course the machine's very noisy," Ms. Edzard said during a break on the set. "It has extraordinary potential visually, and you can do things you can't do with a normal camera. But you have to learn to use it, to accommodate it. You need to be able to see big, and you need to see movement in both plains. It's much more difficult to do small, contained scenes."

The film is very much the vision of Ms. Edzard, who is known for being an exacting, imaginative director who steeps herself in every detail of the film — from the sets to the costumes to the choreography. "Attention to detail is the hallmark of an Edzard production," Ms. Margolyes said. "Nothing misses her eye, and everything has a symmetry and individuality about it. She's also amazingly inventive."

How will "The Imax Nutcracker" translate onto the Imax screen? For one thing, it will look completely three-dimensional, as if the audience were in the room with the performers. This is due in part to the liquid-crystal headsets, which have been in use in Imax theaters for nearly three years. "Historically, one of the limitations has been the delivery system," said Lorne Orleans, an Imax producer of the film. "You put on the paper glasses and you get a headache after a while." Imax's headsets, though, take the two separate images being projected on the screen and align them vertically so that the correct information travels to the left and to the right eye, tricking the brain into thinking it is seeing in three dimensions.

"There's been a lot of debate about how long you can tolerate sitting watching a film in 3-D," Mr. Gellis said. "Your eyes are constantly having to readjust to what you're looking at. But watching a movie is much more powerful in this format in 35-millimeter, where the screen sits in front of you and you absorb it without having to do any work."

"This is the ultimate storytelling medium because it is so much more absorbing, immediate and experiential." □