

In this Nutcracker, the audience stars

BY SAM WHITING

Chronicle Staff Writer

For one dreamy moment in the overture to the "Dance-Along Nutcracker," four little girls in pink tutus had the stage to themselves, backed by a full orchestra. Then up the aisles came a parade of adult Wooden Soldiers and Sugar Plum Fairies.

By the end of the overture the four girls had been squeezed into a tiny circle, surrounded by ballroom dancers, slam dancers and trained ballerinas on pointe — as well as by all forms of fairies and queens. Strangers improvised fancy choreography with one another while relishing their time in the spotlight.

"You're sharing the experience but hoping people are watching," said Charles Freeman, 50, who drew attention in a smart red jacket. "You have to breathe inside of yourself and say, 'Look at me. Look at me.'"

The "Dance-Along Nutcracker" (a name trademarked by the Jon Sims Center for the Performing Arts) occurs in the second half of a Christmas variety show by the San Francisco Winds of Freedom, a crack 50-piece ensemble conducted by Nancy Corporon in black tails and tutu.

This year's 11th annual show drew a capacity crowd of 400 to each of two performances at the Forum at Yerba Buena Center. It was the group's largest venue yet, and next year they'll need an even bigger one — the dance area was

packed.

"Any excuse to dance in front of people," said Sue Swain, a ballroom teacher who took to the floor with her husband, Jay Dusenbury, also an instructor. "There's no penalty for screwing up," he said.

For costumes, some rented a lacy skirt and put it over jeans. One woman came as the Nutcracker himself, decked out in felt fez, rosy cheeks, velvet jacket and black leather boots. A man came as the Snow Queen's Evil Sister, in black leotard, pink ballet slippers, long silver hair, heavy eyeshadow and false lashes an inch and a half long.

'Very Anarchistic'

There are no assigned roles, though people adopt them, which is fine. The more kings and queens the better. "It's a very anarchistic form of 'Nutcracker,'" said co-producer Lisa Clayton.

The first number of the dance-along portion is performed by the Bay Area Raw Raahs, a gay cheer-leading and dance squad of fresh-faced boys and men. Then the audience is invited to dance a number, and the two groups alternate until the holiday suite is complete.

But the would-be stars must sit through the first half, an excruciating wait for some, especially the youngsters.

"When do we do it?" asked Gemma Grossman, age 6, who came with pals Rosie Stevenson and Sophia Schrank from Clarendon School in San Francisco and Miranda Sachs from Lakeshore. "They are the epitome of excitement," said parent chaperone Rachael Grossman, as the girls stood on their seats, at the ready, before the show.

Others weren't quite so eager.

"What makes anybody want to put on a tutu and dance?" asked Lorna Shivey, 42, who had come over from Oakland with two friends to search out the answer, steadied by a few cocktails. "I can't fathom what they want," she said before the show, "but if everyone else wants to make an ass out of themselves, what the hell."

Gemma and her gang were persuaded to sit on their tutus for the entire first half — but that was long enough. At intermission they dashed out into the lobby to fine-tune their pirouettes.

"They are way ready," said Rachael Grossman. "They're so ready, you can't believe it." So was Robin Dell of Mill Valley, who had waited 15 years for this, after retiring from the Boston Ballet.

"I know that if I don't warm up I'll go out and pull something," said Dell, 43, who stayed loose by stretching on a stair railing. "Once

yond my capacity."

The only rule is that when a dance-along number is over, you must return to your seat. This was sometimes difficult to enforce, especially for the youngsters.

"The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" was a solo by Jose Sarria, a gay-community fixture who used to gather bar patrons in a circle to sing "God Save Us Nelly Queens." Sarria, aka The Widow Norton, came out in wings.

But as spirited as the entertainers were, people were there to be stars themselves.

Dell arrived in leotard but declined to accent it with rented props. "If I wanted a tutu, I'd want the whole Swan Lake type of thing," she said. Her point was made on the "Chinese Dance," when she pranced up the side like a prima ballerina and took center stage with an elegant sweeping arm gesture. Dell had something to prove. She had brought along 50 members of her extended family, including her 14-year-old son, Orion, who stayed seated in sunglasses and Santa hat.

At the end of the "Chinese Dance," the man in the long silver hair and false eyelashes, who described himself as "160 pounds of ballerina," was carried off by a large man in a Santa hat.

"Well, we can say they met here," deadpanned the director Corporon, who is also a vice president at Wells Fargo Bank. For "Dance of the Reed Pipes," Dell finally coaxed her partner, Beth Barrell, onto the floor. "It was wonderful," Dell said afterward. "We did a dip."

By the finale, "Waltz of the Flowers," even the reluctant got out there, including some men who looked to be in frail health and some women who looked wide enough to require two chairs. Men twirled men, women twirled women.

"They were robust and full of flair, and that's what it takes," said Swain.

'They'll Be Back'

At the end, nobody wanted to leave, least of all Gemma and her cohorts. Like divas, each held a rose in her hand, presented by band members. "They did great," said Rachael Grossman. "They'll be back."

The "Dance-Along Nutcracker" is like no other anywhere. Tutus R Us rented 250 skirts and 50 wands. The celebrity tutu auction at intermission raised \$600. The matinee was filmed by NBC's "Today Show" for airing Christmas morning. If you're up, turn it on. It will make your Christmas.



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Jose Sarria, a gay-community fixture also known as the Widow Norton, tried to take flight as the Sugar Plum Fairy