

Sherri J. Thompson in the wardrobe room, where *The Nutcracker* costumes are prepped pre-performance

BEHIND THE SEAMS

PNB'S WARDROBE MISTRESS KNOWS *THE NUTCRACKER* INSIDE AND OUT

By **Brandon Taylor**
Portrait by **Hayley Young**

While you sit in the audience watching Pacific Northwest Ballet perform *The Nutcracker* with flawless grace, the backstage is buzzing with quick costume changes and last-minute fixes. This is the purview of PNB's Sherri J. Thompson, who waits—needle and thread at the ready—should the Nutcracker lose a button or the Sugarplum Fairy tear her tutu. “Everything I do is to avoid chaos,” says Thompson. She started working for PNB as a part-time stitcher and craftsperson in 1984, and since 1986 has been the full-time wardrobe mistress, ensuring that every outfit arrives at the right dressing room and supervising the repair, maintenance and fitting of costumes for all the PNB dancers—including the 46 company members and 266 students who perform in *The Nutcracker*. This year marks the last run for the beloved Maurice Sendak-designed set and costumes, which have been in play since 1983. (Next year *The Nutcracker* will feature a new look designed by children's book writer/illustrator Ian Falconer, known for the *Olivia* series.) Understandably, the Sendak costumes are a bit worse for wear—the child-sized soldier outfits are the originals; the snowflake costumes are in their third incarnation. And while their fate is unclear (they may be sold or stored), Thompson says, “It's going to be sad to see them go.” But the show must go on, and as with all PNB performances, she says, “There is nothing between the dancer's body and the audience except that costume, and it's got to be right.”



NEED TO KNOW

- 1/** Thompson began her long stint with PNB in 1980, as a backstage volunteer.
- 2/** The Prologue Mouse King is one of the most complicated costumes, with a unitard, stuffed belly, hood, gloves, pants, belt, shirt, cape, booties, sword and mouse head.
- 3/** Due to the frenzy backstage, Thompson reports, male dancers occasionally arrive onstage with their pants on backwards.