

The Reason We Love The Nutcracker

Many people this holiday season will experience the joy of attending a local performance of “The Nutcracker” ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. It’s the most implausible American tradition imaginable, an import from fin-de-siècle Russia straight to your hometown. It’s living proof of the capacity of music and the art of dance to leap the bounds of time and space and delight us forever.

Perhaps some viewer’s own children will perform in it, and that’s part of the appeal. But there’s more. Some reports suggest that this one ballet accounts for 40 percent of the annual revenue for professional companies. It’s no wonder why: The music is brilliant, elegant, and vaguely familiar to everyone (it is out of copyright and therefore featured in countless ads).

It’s also the big-city favorite. Andrew Litton, New York City Ballet’s music director, in an interview admits how much he loves the piece. “I’m actually in love with the whole two hours,” he [told](#) the New York Times of this season’s sold-out performances.” “I’m only conducting seven of the performances, but the seventh will feel just as great as the first.”

It’s true: the melodies are filled with magic, fantasy, mystery, love, strange sounds you never otherwise hear, and unrelenting spectacle. And no matter how “classical” old-world ballet is, it never ceases to amaze us to watch this highly specialized combination of athleticism and art in action.

The Beautiful Epoch

What theatergoers don’t entirely realize is that they are watching something even more wonderful than what they see. In this one ballet, we gain a picture of a prosperous world that

emerged in the late nineteenth century, was shortly shattered by war and revolution, and then was nearly killed off by the political and ideological experimentation of the twentieth century.

Think of it: This ballet debuted in 1892. The generation of Russians living in St. Petersburg that saw it for the first time were experiencing a level of prosperity never before seen in history. It was the same all over Europe, of which Russia was considered a part.

This was a time of the full maturation of the Industrial Revolution. Income was growing dramatically. Lives were longer. Infant mortality was plummeting. The middle class could live in security and in comfortable homes, and the practical arts—electricity, lighting, telephones, universal medicine, indoor plumbing—were in a boom phase.

We see hints of all these themes in the opening scenes of “The Nutcracker.” We are in a home with a beautifully lit tree, and several generations of an extended family are celebrating the great season with abundant gifts. Gifts, that great symbol of abundance! There was enough not only for oneself but also for others, and the more elaborate the gift, the more it illustrated the existence of prosperity and confidence in the future of prosperity.

Soldier of Peace

Consider the person of the nutcracker himself. He is a soldier but not a killer, not a person destined for being maimed and killed or slaughtering others. A soldier in those days was a symbol of the nation, a protector and a well-dressed person of discipline and dignity who made the peace possible. He was an extension of regular society, someone performing a light duty deserving of extra respect.

The gift of the nutcracker first breaks and the child cries, but then a magician arrives to put it back together again, and

it grows and grows until it becomes real and then a true love. You can make any symbol you want to out of this little man, but it is not a stretch to see it as a symbol of the economic life of this nation and many other nations at the time. There was no limit to prosperity, no limit to growth, no end to the magic that could come to the world. Something that broke could be fixed and grow to new life.

Love of Prosperity

This was a world that loved globalism and celebrated cross-cultural exchange. It was an age before the creation of passports, and traveling the world and seeing it all was first becoming possible for many people. You could ride on ships and not die of scurvy. Trains could take people from place to place in safety. Goods crossed borders as never before, and multicultural chic invaded arts and literature of all sorts. And hence in the ballet, we see not only the famed sugar plum fairies but also Arabian coffee dancers, Chinese tea dancers, Danish shepherdesses, and of course Russian candy cane dancers along with a beautiful array of fantasy figures.

Here is a vision of a time and a place. It was not just Russia. In "The Nutcracker" we gain a vision of an emerging global ethos. I first realized that the late nineteenth century was really different following a binge reading of several plays by Oscar Wilde, several novels by Mark Twain, a biography of Lord Acton, an essay on capital by William Graham Sumner, and a few Victorian Gothic thrillers. A theme began to emerge that has haunted me ever since.

What do all of these works have in common? It wouldn't seem like much. But once you see it, it is not possible to read this literature the same way. The key is this: None of these writers, and this goes for Tchaikovsky himself, could have imagined the horror that was unleashed by World War I. The killing fields—38 million ended up dead, wounded, or missing—were inconceivable. The concept of a "total war" that

did not exclude the civilian population but rather made everyone part of the army was not in their field of vision.

Peace Wrecked

Many historians describe World War I as a calamity that no one in particular intended. It was a result of states pushing out the boundaries of their belligerence and power, a consequence of leaders who imagined that the more they pushed, the more they could create a globe of justice, freedom, and peace. But look at the reality of the mess they made. It was not only the direct carnage. It was the ghastly possibilities this war opened up. It inaugurated a century of central planning, statism, socialism, and war.

How could they have known? Nothing like this had ever happened. And so this late-nineteenth-century generation was innocent and delightfully so. To this generation, the injustices they intended to purge from the world were slavery, remnants of the bondage of women, the perpetuation of feuds and duels, the despotism of the monarchical class, debtors' prisons, and the like. What they could not imagine was the much vaster injustice that was just around the historical corner: mass use of poison gas, universal enslavement of the wartime draft, famine as a war tactic, the gulag, the Holocaust, mass incineration at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This is a particularly interesting fact given Russian history. What are the institutional features of the Nutcracker ballet? Faith, property, family, security. Following Russia's disastrous involvement in World War I—resulting in horrible death and economic ruin—there was a revolution in 1917, one designed to overthrow despots and replace them with something completely new. The party that took control ruled under the pretext of ideological communism. And of what did that consist? Opposition to faith, property, family, and the very bourgeois life that is so celebrated in this ballet.

If you look at the demographic data following the October 1917 revolution, you see calamity. Income fell by half. Life expectancy became static and fell. It was the total wreckage, exactly what you would expect if you tried to get rid of property and attack the voluntary society at its core. A full 70 years of communist rule in Russia gutted the country of the life and joy that this ballet puts on display. None of us were there. But those who were there tell stories of terrible things. It was a wholesale looting of all the progress that Russia had experienced until that point in its history.

Age of Innocence

What's beautiful about "The Nutcracker" is that we see none of it. This ballet was created in that that great time of innocence when all the world foresaw a beautiful future of unstoppable and unending peace, prosperity, and justice.

Here's what else moves me about this ballet. Fully formed and just as wonderful as ever, it has leapt over the century of statism, the century of bloodshed and mass murder by states, and is presented to us right now in our hometown. We can sit in our lovely arts centers and drink it all in, and smile wide smiles for two solid hours. We can share in this vision of that generation we never knew. We can dream that dream too.

I would never say that the time in which this ballet came to be was a naive time. No. It was a time of clarity when the artists, inventors, intellectuals, and even statesmen saw what was right and true, what was possible and what the human imagination can make real.

The themes of "The Nutcracker"—a culture of free association, gift giving, personal and material growth, dancing and dreaming—can and should be our future. We need not repeat the blunders of the past, the wars and horrors; rather, we can make a new world with a new theme as joyful as the melodies that have enraptured millions in this holiday season.

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