

Who ate all the Sugar Plums...? Mary Brennan Nov 2003

Once upon a time, a man with a darkly febrile imagination fell to musing about what might happen if an ugly Nutcracker Doll was in truth a handsome young man, cruelly trapped inside its wooden limbo by a curse... Next, what if a young girl was then given the toy as a Christmas present? What if she suddenly found herself confronting evils her parents hadn't really prepared her for - evils she didn't quite understand, but knew she had to fight. If, that is, she was ever to grow up into womanhood and find love and fulfillment.

in 1816, that man was the German novelist and composer, E.T.A Hoffmann whose bizarre stories, with their fantastical shifts between illusion/delusion and reality were visionary precursors to Surrealism and the modern horror genre. Hoffmann it was who first conjured up the characters and confrontations that were later shaped - by Alexandre Dumas (pere) - into the sugar-almond scenario that underpinned Ivanov's Nutcracker of 1892. In 2003, however, the man resolutely drilling through the ballet's 19th century candy-coating, and reaching down to the shadowlands that lurk underneath, is Scottish Ballet's artistic director, Ashley Page. In tandem with designer Antony McDonald, he's harking back to certain, piquantly sinister, strands in Hoffmann's story of The Nutcracker and the King of Mice - and in so doing, he has created a new and highly distinctive Christmas production for the company.

It's tempting to say 'not before time.' The late Peter Darrell's much-loved 1973 Nutcracker, a witty confection full of nursery charm, whimsical jokes and real magic, did sovereign service for almost a quarter of a century. By the 1990's, it had been on-stage so often that the costumes probably could have danced the divertissements by themselves - those that hadn't already fallen apart at the seams and been replaced, that is. And indeed, a new Nutcracker was supposedly on the cards some seven years ago. But like other goals and good intentions that were on the same Scottish Ballet wish-list, it didn't make the leap from page to stage.

Luckily Ashley Page didn't need any coaxing to create the longed-for seasonal attraction. He'd been hankering to do a Nutcracker for quite some time - well before the topic was raised during his initial meetings with the Scottish Ballet board. What's more, Page had thrilling, provocative ideas! Had already discussed themes and content with a designer he knew shared some of his enthusiasms and attitudes: Antony McDonald.

Right from the start, one thing was set and incontrovertible. Any Nutcracker that had the Page-McDonald stamp on it was not going to be the customary assortment of soft-centred sweeties that companies world-wide serve up every December. "I never wanted to do your usual Nutcracker, ever," says Page, brisk but genial with it. "I've seen so many of them - all more or less the same - and I've been in so many of them, during my time at the Royal Ballet. And I just knew that wasn't how I'd do it. I always wanted it to be different and challenging - for dancers, and for audiences. "

So... just how different, and how challenging, would that be, then?

Imagine the moment, please, when you light the blue paper and stand well back... Page engagingly resembles the firework as it catches, sparks, goes whoosh! He swiftly produces colour print-outs of McDonald's designs,

covering the floor around his feet with images for back-cloths, front curtains, interiors. And he talks rapidly, cogently, passionately: becoming more and more energised as he plunges deeper and deeper into the thinking behind aspects of a production that he acknowledges will strike many as being of, and on, the darker side of fairy-tale mysteries and moonbeams. "Like most of Hoffmann's work, there is a dark - even a grotesque - side to things. But it's also, in the grand tradition of European fairy-tales, very beautiful as well. There is that good, positive side: the light against the dark - and it's the tension between those two sides that gives it its fabulous spark. I know we've been saying to theatres, to box-offices, that we don't think it's particularly suitable for children under seven. But that's not because it's horrendously scary - my own boys watch things on television that are much gorier and nastier than our terrifying mouse-masks! It's because younger children might find it hard to follow all the details of the story."

It's those details which really define how Page and McDonald have edged this version closer to the troubled heartlands of the Hoffmann original. Page himself identifies the essence of the piece as a 'rite of passage.' Marie - often called Clara, and played by a child in some productions - is on the cusp of womanhood. Still young enough to be amused by toys, but increasingly aware of how adults can, flirtatiously, see members of the opposite sex as ideal playthings. For Marie, the family's Christmas Eve party is at once cosily familiar - a statement of all that is (supposedly) secure in her life - and yet just a tad puzzling... When, in Act II, Marie revisits those memories in feverish dreams, it's with an awakening understanding of those adult party-games. And when the Nutcracker Doll arrives, free of enchantment - albeit captivated by Marie - the girl is ready to be his partner. It's their coming together that prises the famous Grand Pas de Deux out of the crystalline clutches of the Sugar Plum Fairy and makes it a flesh-and-blood love duet instead.

"Oh, if you really want to, you can think of Marie as becoming the Sugar Plum Fairy," laughs Page. "Tho' that's not how I see it. We don't have a Sugar Plum Fairy in my version. So why have I kept to the original choreography?" It is, in fact, the only sequence he has left untouched: everything else - the Battle Scene, Snowflakes and so-called National Dances - have been new-made on the company as it now is.

When he answers, you catch a glimpse of Page's ambitions for Scottish Ballet. "Well, it's kind of a benchmark, isn't it. It sets certain standards. You've got all these other companies doing it, so it becomes something to be measured by - and we've got some good dancers who are capable of doing it, I think, really well. We haven't got the luxury - like at the Royal Ballet - of having lots and lots of casts to choose from, but we do have young dancers with lots of ability, but not necessarily very much experience. And this is an opportunity to push them that little bit forward, give them the challenge. And actually, I do think the pas-de-deux itself is pretty perfect, especially with that music, and I couldn't imagine topping it."

Ah, the music... Now that he's shaped his own movement to the Tchaikovsky score, Page can cheerfully admit that it was a tough process, keeping all the familiar associations at arm's length. "You hear that truly

beautiful score and - no question - you have to respond in a certain way. A waltz is a waltz. You're not going to change that, but you do have to find other ways of working with it. We're trying to make that music fit what we've taken from the Hoffmann. We're not following his story to the very last detail, we're adopting the flavour of it and the basic ideas behind it - and they don't necessarily match up exactly with all the wonderfully pretty music. But that's what inspires solutions, isn't it?"

It's interesting to note that Tchaikovsky himself was less than inspired by the somewhat feeble scenario that emerged from Dumas' edited take on Hoffmann's darkly fantastical tale. The composer is on record as saying that he felt it 'a complete impossibility to reproduce, musically, the Konfiturenberg (The Kingdom of Sweets)'. Nonetheless, he conjured up some luscious musical bon-bons that have since been hijacked and re-contextualised by cartoon-makers, song-writers and the advertising groups who fashion TV commercials.

Breaking free of the sugar-plums - the choccy-bar fruit and nut cases, the customary veneer of Victorian Christmas-tide - has been greatly assisted by McDonald's designs. Both he and Page were keen to find a more modern period that would chime in with Hoffmann's love of slippery, elusive dark-lands tinged with hints of decadence and menace. The moment they fixed on 1920's Germany and the heyday of the Weimar Republic, a host of fascinating connections and possibilities began to fall into place.

A front curtain of a girl reading - but with her head cracked open like a walnut, revealing Drosselmeyer apparently tinkering with her brain - can, in one image, flag up the psychological twists that Hoffmann unerringly twined into his narratives long before Freud started attaching labels to them. And while Page and his associates have worked hard to ensure that this Nutcracker will appeal to all ages, it's also true that older children and adults will recognise that the power-struggle between Good (represented by Drosselmeyer) and Evil (Dame Mouserink, masquerading as the family's Governess) reflects the real life conflicts that surround growing-up.

"We've created this new role of the Governess," Page explains. "And combined it with Dame Mouserink, which means that the threat of evil is now actually in the house, looking after the children. Actually, it saves us having to bring her bursting up through the floorboards!"

This little piece of scheming may have avoided one potential headache, but Page's vision of how he wants this thrilling, brooding, mystical adventure to unfold has kept his creative team burning gallons of midnight oil.

Hoffmann's text is full of allusions, nuances and blurrings between fact and fiction, and somehow these have to be translated into a mesh of visual clues and recurring objects, not always spied from their previous perspective.

After all, what could be more disorientating than rooms that don't stay the same size, or personal belongings that turn up where you least expect them. This Nutcracker constantly rejoices in teasing our powers of observation.

'Slippage' is how Page himself refers to the way Marie's midnight journey takes her back in historical time - and yet forward, in terms of her own life experience. The skirmish between the rodents led by the King of Mice and the toy soldiers who support the Nutcracker spirits us back, to the battlegrounds of World War One. But it's an 18th century German court that hosts the 're-make' of the Stahlbaum's Act I party that might actually be

happening, in some other fantastical dimension - or it might just be something that Marie has dreamed up courtesy of a high temperature and stirring hormones.

“It’s a little bit like Alice Through the Looking Glass” is how Page sums up the second half of his Nutcracker. “There’s this slippage between worlds. Marie has had these quite dramatic experiences, first with the battle and then in the snow-storm. She’s been carried into the forest by Drosselmeyer, and now she’s floating, in this dream-state while he reads The Hard Nut to her. She’s hallucinating. Things seem familiar but they’ve mutated. It’s that whole business of a young girl getting closer to the adult world, really. Starting to understand things in a more knowing way. Like when she watches the Arabian sequence. Is that really Mum? Dancing like that with those men?”

Now audiences who saw Scottish Ballet’s autumn programme will know - from the highly-charged choreography in Cheating, Lying, Stealing - that Page can deftly convey lust and seduction in close encounters of a consciously sexy kind. But Nutcracker is most definitely intended as a Christmas ballet for all the family - so the moments of slinky ardour will simmer, but not so as to make parents overly hot under the collar! Those moments will, however - like the rest of the piece - embody various challenges for the dancers.

In fact, you could almost see This Nutcracker as a ‘rite of passage’ for the company, as well as for Marie. Page speaks, feelingly, of an ongoing process that is to do with finding the company’s future identity. “We’ve just done this very modern programme - and we’ll be doing more of that stuff - so to turn ourselves into a traditional, classical ballet company at Christmas...well it’s almost impossible. We’re not big enough for a start, to do the spectacular with hundreds of snowflakes. But we do have some good young dancers who can carry off that Grand Pas de Deux, dancers who can do pointework - but also other things too. I hope that I’ve given them a Nutcracker that really shows off those talents.”