

NOTES ON NUTCRACKER: THE DRAMA OF CLARA'S LIFE

By Michelle Potter

In 1992 when Maina Gielgud commissioned a new *Nutcracker* for the Australian Ballet from choreographer Graeme Murphy and his long time friend and associate Kristian Fredrikson, it was always thought to be a risky step. Who would tamper with a ballet that was loved and cherished by so many? Fredrikson said, when interviewed just before the work's first performance in 1992, "We are expecting some controversy. There will be people who will say: This is not *The Nutcracker* I came to see."

But the bold step paid off and what emerged from the Murphy/Fredrikson collaboration was a work that was deeply moving in its explorations of dance and life. These explorations form the dramatic text of the ballet. The drama unfolds onstage through events in the life of Clara, a dancer whom the audience encounters in three significant stages of her life — as a child and young adult learning her art in Imperial Russia, as a fully fledged artist travelling the world, and as an elderly woman living in Australia who in her heart is still a dancer.

Dance and destiny

For Clara dance is her destiny. It is an inevitability in her life and a compulsion from which she cannot escape. We know this is so from the opening scene as we watch her as an elegant, older woman deeply moved by the archival film footage that her doctor brings to her home and that shows her in her the prime of her dancing life. We know it too when we are transported back to Russia and the classroom in which she learnt to dance. Clara the aspiring young student practises relentlessly and falls to the floor exhausted and disappointed. But in the classroom mirror she sees an image of herself as an emerging artist. It is a premonition of what her life will soon become, and it inspires her to go back to her practice and to what she knows is her destiny.

As Clara travels through life, dance is the constant presence that supports her.

Love and loss

Clara's lifelong love is a Russian officer whom she encounters as a young ballerina. We watch their youthful pleasure in each other's presence as they picnic with their friends. We watch his pride in her as she dances for the Tsar and Tsarina at the Imperial ball. We are moved by their love-filled pas de deux that follows the ball.

But we are also shaken when Clara's beloved is killed. The pas de deux leads into a scene in which the young officer is called to arms. Clara is distraught and through a scrim she watches subsequent events unfold. Her beloved is shot during a battle. As the enormity of the events flood over her she sees a series of visions that cascade before her one after another. They reveal the older Clara holding a portrait of her lover, the same lover we have just seen shot and mourned by the younger Clara. The two women, one young, one old, dance together. They share memories of their love for the officer and their pain at losing him.

Love and loss are two parts of one lifelong experience.

War and politics

The shadow of war and the political environment from which it emerges are a constant presence throughout Clara's story. At times we see just fleeting references. As Clara and her fellow dancers picnic with their officer friends, a farmer hurries by with his young son. The peasant worker looks anxious and protects his son. The officers simply look bemused and pass off the incident with a shrug. But it reminds us of the impending revolutionary war that will ultimately remove the Imperial family from the Russian throne and raise the status of the worker.

At other times war and its outcomes dominate the action. Early in the work the elderly Clara wakes during the night and encounters an army of rats, whom she fights as she relives the drama of the death of her beloved. With their red armbands and with a red flag flying, the army of rats represents the forces of the Bolsheviks whose political activities were at the heart of the Russian revolutionary wars.

War and its aftermath have a significant impact on Clara's future career as a dancer and ultimately on the direction of her life. War is the reason she cannot return to her homeland and must travel the world as a touring artist. And it is the reason she finds herself in Australia where yet another war has made it impossible for her to return to her origins.

Life and death

Perhaps the most moving of all the explorations that go to make up *Nutcracker* is that of life and death. In the first scene, Clara, exhausted after reliving her past triumphs with her émigré friends, is ordered to bed by her doctor. As she mounts the stairs and is farewelled by her guests, we know that we are yet to experience the full drama of her life. It will unfold before us in a series of flashbacks and transformations. But we know too that the story will end in her death.

In the last scene of the work, as Clara the ballerina accepts applause for her final performance she is replaced onstage by the elderly Clara. The realisation that old age has replaced youth is initially a shock to us. Then, there onstage we see the old woman give her final bow to us before the child and the ballerina beckon to her and she is enfolded into the arms of her childhood, her career and her memories.

Like love and loss, life and death are part of one experience.

Renewal and continuity

In essence, *Nutcracker* relives the life of an elderly Russian dancer. But it also connects closely with and gives renewed acclaim to the stories of a number of dancers who built careers in Australia following the tours of the Ballets Russes companies between 1936 and 1940. Like Clara those dancers elected to remain in Australia rather than return to war-torn Europe, and through their efforts Australian ballet flourished. Clara's final

performance is as a dancer with the Borovansky Ballet, one of the major companies that formed in the wake of those Ballets Russes tours to Australia.

In this *Nutcracker* Graeme Murphy and Kristian Fredrikson have built a complex cross-generational story that moves forwards and backwards through time. And as the work progresses, Murphy stresses the linking of lives through his use of a recurring choreographic motif. As men and women, children and adults encounter each other in a variety of circumstances across time their outstretched arms meet, without touching, in a circling pattern of the wrists and arms.

The pattern of life and dance is unending.

This is a *Nutcracker* to be loved and cherished. Its Australian connections are heart warming and a source of pride and pleasure. But the dramatic text is universal.

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