

Classically Speaking_7_Love Magic And A Mechanical Tree_12182020_PP2.mp3

[00:00:00] This episode of Classically Speaking was released in 2018. It's called Love, Magic and a Mechanical Tree named after three of the best things about the famous ballet, The Nutcracker. This year, you can see Nashville Ballet's Nutcracker on television. For more information on how to watch, visit Nashville Ballet.com. Paul Vasterling and I recorded this interview backstage at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center during dress rehearsals, a bustling and crowded time that feels like a relic now, a relic that I can't wait to return to. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

[00:00:35] Listen to this overture.

[00:00:38] Notice anything about who's playing? Is anyone missing? There's no low strings. I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking. Tchaikovsky's opening to the iconic ballet. The Nutcracker is even called Overture Miniature, a perfect title for a piece lighter than air setting the stage for ballerinas and children.

[00:01:01] It's buoyant, playful and according to National Ballet artistic director Paul Sterling, it's all about magic, the magic of this season, the magic of thought of the holiday seasons that we have here and the magic of being a kid and that sort of wide eyed approach to life and the world around you.

[00:01:23] I, too, was wide eyed as Nashville Ballet. Let me sneak in to the dress rehearsal of The Nutcracker. The shepherd and shepherdess were finishing their a small while. I climbed over stretching ballerinas backstage to find a quiet room and give Paul vassalage. A little pop quiz to figure out just how traditional is his version of The Nutcracker.

[00:01:45] So The New York Times published a story last year, 10 Ways to Tell If Your Nutcracker is traditional. The heart is going to read the right and let you respond to that. OK, number one, it's not a love story.

[00:01:58] Mine is not a love story. It is about finding out what love is. It's not a love story, though.

[00:02:03] Number two, Drosselmeyer and the Sugar Plum Fairy never meet. They don't meet in mine, which led me to the question like Batman and Bruce Wayne. Are they?

[00:02:11] Maybe they're the same person. Maybe. So I want to save that version of others alter egos. That's actually a pretty good idea. I kind of like it, especially for the 21st century, right?

[00:02:31] Number three, you see no characters during the overture.

[00:02:36] Mine is not traditional in that sense. You do see characters during the overture. You know, I had this I sort of Wizard of Oz ish idea that is permeated. It goes from sepia, a world of no color to color and light. And the ideas that Drosselmeyer brings her to those things sort of light, imagination, color that's going to the ballet progresses.

[00:02:54] So we kind of start in the CPA world number four, Clara should be played by a kid and she should only dance at the party.

[00:03:02] She dances at the party in mind, but she also dances when she arrives in the land of the sweets because she's really happy.

[00:03:08] Number five, Clara is not on point number five.

[00:03:12] Clara is not on point. I really did not want to put my Clara on point. Your point. She's so magical, right. And she's she's a human. She's a person. And it takes away from the magic of the Sugar Plum Fairy of Clara's on point number six.

[00:03:25] The score goes in order.

[00:03:27] Act one is is exactly how Tchaikovsky wrote and he wrote it really well. Speed is hard to cut and change, right?

[00:03:41] The second act I wanted to just shorten just a little bit for attention span, so I just I took out a repeat where they tell the story of what happened, you know, so you hear the rap music one more time. And I just thought it was it's lovely, but I thought we could skip it. So I have a little tiny cut there.

[00:03:57] I took the input that was the flowers near the beginning of the act to give us a little bit of a respite from these dance episodes. So in that sense, it's not traditional. That's the only thing, though.

[00:04:09] Not much.

[00:04:13] Number seven, the tree grows, tree grows, number eight, the post battle music should not be danced to that.

[00:04:22] It's not nontraditional. That's what we call the snow part house. Beautiful, beautiful. Addazio that was originally, just as you know, is called something about in the snow forest or something. And Balanchine's does not dance.

[00:04:37] That is actually the only nutcracker I've seen the Balanchine. Yeah. So the bed kind of floats around in that rape scene.

[00:04:45] And I remember kind of thinking, why isn't anybody dancing to this really gorgeous music? Many a choreographer have thought that.

[00:04:52] And that's that's not a love story.

[00:04:55] The number nine mother, Ginger, apparently mother Ginger is not in a lot of productions because she's too bawdy.

[00:05:03] We we have a mother, Ginger. We call her Madam Bonbon. Yeah. Because she has her bonbons. But she's basically the idea of Mother Ginger. She's the woman of many children and she's kind of crazy.

[00:05:14] Number ten, the partida should be between the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier. That is correct. OK, so I got about eight, you know, seven or eight out of ten. That's pretty good. But if we only have the slightest record of the original, you know what's original bees in a hive? What's at the end in the original. Right. OK, and we already knew

Nationals' is not completely traditional because for one, it's not set in Nuremberg. No, it is set here in our hometown.

[00:05:38] Was there something pulling you to put your personal when you know, when the executive director at the time came to me and said, I think we really should think about doing a new nutcracker, I was like, oh, I don't know, man. That's a hard one to do. I mean, it's such a tradition, right? It's like in our bones. And I had been in the one I was doing for since 1989, you know, twenty years of one same production. And I was like, how am I going to get this out of my bones, you know, to think of something different to do with it. You know, I wanted to connect to the community as much as I could here and the sense of of place. I was in the library and came across this little book of a centennial exhibition, which I didn't really know was around that much. And it just occurred to me that there was a parallel between these international exhibits that someone could have seen at the at the Exposition and the Diverters Martin Act to.

[00:06:53] You added to it over time, I haven't really added natural elements, I've added a lot of magic and I changed the choreography all the time.

[00:07:01] I just change a little bit. This year I've redone the Russian dance floor as a solo because of the guys. I have a really great and, you know, I wanted to do something new for them. People see a lot more, you know, and they want they need to see more more things. And so I without messing with the music, I try to add a lot of things into a little magic tricks and little things that are fun and can grab your attention without, you know, really completely ignoring what the music is.

[00:07:29] It's a pretty tough balancing act actually there because the scores is so good, you know, and I don't want to mess it up. There is an actress here and she's called the actress. Her name is Lucille Assir and she was in Nashville and she actually had a career on stage, but she ended up being the voice of the witch in Snow White. And so I imagine that she came home for the holidays in this production. So she she's very, very grand. She will be in the party scene. She's in the party scene. You'll you'll see her for sure. The party is in Bellarmine Mansion inside of Bellvue Mansion. And when you get into act two, you go in, you see the Parthenon there.

[00:08:15] You know, you see the columns of the Parthenon. All the characters are based on Nashville people, although I don't name them in the program because it's a little bit too complicated. But, you know, the chancellor is Chancellor Kirkland from Vanderbilt. We call him that. And there's a physician there. And he had a name were all real people that I based them on. I wanted to keep it as kind of simple as possible for for folks coming in to see it for the first time.

[00:08:40] She Clara or is she maybe she's Clara.

[00:08:43] Yeah. And her name is the same as Stallman's. The same name. And she lived she could have lived right. Really close to here actually. If you go down Sixth Avenue toward where the capital is now, there were houses on that street and she could have easily have lived there.

[00:08:59] And, you know, when you look out at the at the end or you can look in the window of that at the parlor, in the party scene and you see the capitol there. And at the end, you find Clara, of course, asleep on her couch in her house with the, you know, the night sky of Nashville over her.

[00:09:49] It's time for a short break.

[00:00:00] Paul Vasterling created Nashville's Nutcracker, his own spin on a beloved tradition. So I wanted to know how common it is to make these kinds of changes. I was reading about the history of The Nutcracker, and it's gone through so many different versions. But that's not that unusual for a ballet, right.

[00:00:16] You know, the text of some of these classic ballets, the way we dance them, even though we say that the choreography is after Ivanoff, the original choreographer, you know, the dancers were so different at the time. And a really good example of that is if you look at the enactment of Nutcracker, we do what what is thought of as the grand part of the is after event of the original choreography. But the truth was, is that in 1892, men didn't really do lifts. They didn't they certainly didn't do overhead lifts. If you think about what that choreography might have looked like and how different it is now, the ability, the technical abilities that they have is so different than they had then even when I was a dancer. The dancers now are so much better than than we were here. I mean, the dancers just improve every year with with training, with cross training, with, you know, scientific. All those things have have helped make dancers better and so they can do more things. And then, of course, we, the choreographers, put more things in. You know, if you and I could go back in time right now and see it, we would both like go, oh, wow.

[00:01:21] Hmm. I think if we went back and heard it, we would do the same thing. Yeah, I never thought of that because the instruments compare. Maybe the violins from the 90s are still being used now. I mean, like in the Nashville Symphony of violins that are older than that. But I mean, don't you think that like the cellist, the very first class that he had imported probably sounded like garbage, right.

[00:01:48] While we're talking about the journalist, my favorite character of the ballet, who I think is the real hero of the piece, we talk about the sugar plum cherry for many.

[00:01:57] Of course, you know, that choreography, the choreography for the grown of and for her solo is the most traditional that we have. And it is brilliant. The choreography enhances the music and vice versa. How that is built around it and just the way it is fit to the rhythms of the of the Czajkowski is pretty darn brilliant. I mean, that's my favorite part of her to grab on to the role is kind of difficult because she doesn't really have a character.

[00:02:25] And what we think about her is being in her and her Cavalier's, she introduces Clara to the idea of love, which is a theme that comes back and many of the things that I do. And if you look at the sugarplums tutu, you see that she has hearts on her. And I always you know, you're you're explaining in this part of the you're explaining to this young woman who has just become infatuated with this young man, that she sees the nephew of Drosselmeyer and she just becomes sort of like, wow, who is? And then the sugar plum says, this is what love really is.

[00:03:07] And, you know, even in the potato, there's a place I kind of love, it is they at the very end, they finish just some turns downstage and then they walk. And it's a Hakodate pattern they walk up to and they stop and they both gesture to her and make a heart and then they come back together at the center of the art. It's quite lovely, actually.

[00:03:29] I also like to say that's how you can tell it's a little girl's dream in the end, the leaders of the realm are all women. That's true. Total patriarchy. That's true.

[00:03:37] And it's the dewdrop fairy and the Sugar Plum Fairy. Those are the two. I mean, that's ballet, though. I mean, in ballet, the woman is the leader being that point work is the realm of of a female dancer. And they really do it, are able to do it better, kind of sets them apart in the world of ballet. And I like to think of it as something that sets them apart as being powerful. There's a specialness about being on point that the sugar plum very kind of embodies. I mean, what we have when she first enters, she comes down the stairs and the first thing she does is a about, you know, those little set that's on point.

[00:04:11] That's all that sort of glides across the stage.

[00:04:14] That whole description makes me think of being a little girl and putting on my mother's shoes. Right. And how that was such a power move. Yes.

[00:04:24] But the Sugar Plum Fairy has a lot to do with her Cavalia, and it always made me wonder, like, what is that love story like between the two of them?

[00:04:33] I mean, I think it's about perfect love. It really is.

[00:04:35] The music is so beautiful.

[00:04:38] And I love that adagio so much. Still to this, it gives you so many goosebumps and it is just a descending major scale. I know you read it on a day or 40 years for me of Nutcracker.

[00:04:50] Not kidding. 40 years every year.

[00:04:53] I still adore that Addazio is so beautiful and so just so brilliantly simple and so romantic.

[00:05:58] Didn't Balanchine say that the tree is the ballerina of Act one and the Sugar Plum Fairy is the ballerina?

[00:06:04] I'd never have heard of that, but the tree is so important to me. Ask anybody around here. Drosselmeyer makes the tree grow and then he throws light onto it, and then he changes the light into colored light. You know, the reason that the music for the tree growing is so loud is because they needed it to be to mask the mechanics of the tree. If you can imagine, it was making a lot of noise as it was growing up. And that's why his music is so loud that some of the greatest music in the valley when the key changes, which I adore that moment to.

[00:06:55] The harp solo at the beginning of the Waltz of the Flowers, I've played the last part for Sugar Plum Fairy, but as excited as I was about that, I think I would have been more pumped to be the harpist actually getting a waltz, because that's a really nice part.

[00:07:08] It's beautiful. Yeah, it's really gorgeous.

[00:07:21] I mean, I love the beginning of the snow, what we were the part that shouldn't be choreographed per The New York Times, there's harp in that, too. It starts with the harp, too. You know, in the very beginning. It's really beautiful. I have a lot of moments that I'm kind of a geek about it.

[00:07:36] I mean, I guess you'd have to be, you know, to to see it and hear it every time. I could still remember my first experience of it. You know, I lived out in the country, kid on the bayou in this little and this little town outside of New Orleans. And this woman recruited me in the summer to be in her school. And of course, the first December that came around, I was in The Nutcracker. I was the I was The Nutcracker. I couldn't do a thing. I just stood there. But I watched I got to watch the whole thing. The music was what got me. I mean, of course, the choreography did, too. But I mean, music is what got me. Czajkowski Ballet scores. Yeah.

[00:08:09] Do you ever know what might have been moment with the music since you were a pianist? Do you do you have a like a little bit of a.

[00:08:16] Oh, I could have been conducting that.

[00:08:19] Oh man. I think that I am really frustrated. I think if I could, you know, have at any profession, I would probably be a composer. That would be what I would really, you know, in the next life. I suppose I would like to I like to just stand there and let the music wash over me. I don't want to have to have any responsibility for it.

[00:08:38] So I envy the conductor being able to stand there because you're surrounded by the music and it makes you I mean, it makes me want to move, but I don't know that I would want to conduct what I think is the best and when and when it really works is that the to work and mesh together and they enhance each other's existence. You know, the dance, the choreography and the music, they are so connected. They're not you know, I try not to mimic it too much. The music I'm not trying to do every little single thing. I'm trying when I do my best work as a choreographer, I accent the music in a different way and try to open up new things.

[00:09:14] And when I'm doing the best choreography that I've done, actually it's going to be magical. That's it. You just look for the magic. Listen for the magic to.

[00:09:27] Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio's Ninety-One Classical. The show is edited by Nina Cardona and Anita Bugg. Excerpts of The Nutcracker Suite came from the Cincinnati Pops and the Montreal Symphony, and movements of the full ballet came from the Boston and St. Louis Symphony. Listen to classically speaking for free any time on Ninety-One Classical Dog in the National Public Radio app or subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Also, help us get the word out with a rating or a review. I'm Colleen Phelps. Thanks for enjoying your backstage pass to Nashville's classical music, classically speaking.