

Tchaikovsky a focus of 'Casse Noisette' at Bridge Street Theatre

Play finds parallels between two men in distant eras

By Joseph Dalton

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Some years back, during the annual ramp-up of holiday cheer that occurs across all media, playwright Michael Whistler was watching a TV broadcast of "The Nutcracker." He became captivated by the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." It was the music that grabbed him — the delicate pizzicato strings and the glimmering celesta giving way to the surging tempos and swelling crescendos of the full orchestra.

"We think of it as lighthearted and connected with candy and Christmas, but it's in a minor key and disturbing," says Whistler. "What kind of imagination would make this up?"

The answer, of course, is buried deep in the psyche of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. For more than a century his grand, romantic music has enamored audiences, while his sad and introspective life has captivated scholars. In his new play "Casse Noisette" (French for "Nutcracker"), Whistler tells two tales simultaneously — the events leading up to Tchaikovsky's death in 1893 and the gradual coming out process of a middle aged gay man, circa 2005. The world premiere production opens Thursday at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill where it plays through Nov. 18.

Whistler, who lives in the Philadelphia area, states that his mission as a playwright is to depict the lives of contemporary gay men with humor, honesty and dignity. One of his recent works is a series of monologues depicting contemporary gay archetypes.

"I'm fascinated by the cultural language of being gay," says Whistler. Sometimes his method is reaching back to the secular saints of gay life. "Mickle Street," another of his plays, imagines Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman conversing over afternoon cocktails.

It was an easy next step to embrace Tchaikovsky, who is known to have been tortured and conflicted about his homosexuality. While the facts of the composer's personal life are sometimes iffy, Whistler says he could read the music plain as day.

"People find what they want to find in the lives of the famous," admits Whistler. "But the music of Tchaikovsky is gay. There's the unabashed passion, how dramatic it is, the showmanship, heartache and endurance, and the celebration of the survivor."

In order to connect Tchaikovsky's story with contemporary times, Whistler created the character of Joe, a high school science teacher who lives an isolated life in suburban Washington state. For solace and companionship, Joe listens to the music of Tchaikovsky.

"I wanted to find stakes in the 21st century world, that would match Tchaikovsky's," explains Whistler. "These are two men dealing with their homosexuality and making different choices. Tchaikovsky takes his own life and Joe doesn't. He decides to get out of there."

Joe, played by Jason Guy, emerges into the world with caution. His first oh-so-tentative step involves calling up a gay chat line. Rather than talking, he plays music of Tchaikovsky into the phone receiver. The person on the other end of the line is a 19-year-old runaway named Blaine, portrayed by Bradley Levine.

Much of the first act consists of their fitful phone exchanges. Eventually, Joe stops letting the orchestral music speak for him and uses his own voice. He and Blaine make a date, which leads to their relationship in Act Two.

Whistler says that music is "another character in the play" and he's made Joe a discerning, eccentric music lover. His favorite recording of "The Nutcracker" is an historic gem, with Artur Rodzinski conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1955.

"You've got a very quiet man doing his best to just get through life. This huge loud romantic music invites him to decode his life in a different way," says Whistler. "He's trying to get access to the world inside him, where there is life, passion and an explosive imagination."

As for the other story, the actors playing Joe and Blaine also play Tchaikovsky and his nephew, Vladimir "Bob" Davydov.

"The play keeps teetering back and forth between stories," says Whistler. "Sometimes it's a line to line flip over, which requires real theatrical imagination."

The idea of juxtaposing the worlds of the 19th century and today came to Whistler during a visit to Philadelphia's ornate and richly appointed Academy of Music. "I thought, what if this big voluptuous red curtain had a mundane set behind it, a faculty lounge at a high school with fluorescent lights?"

The cast numbers five actors in all, with every performer having a different character in each time frame. Serena Vesper, who was trained in ballet, dances en pointe as the Sugar Plum Fairy, which should add an authentic touch to the Victorian scenes.

Directing the production is John Sowle, the artistic and managing director of Bridge Street Theatre. Sowle first came into contact with Whistler at the now-defunct StageWorks Hudson, where Sowle was part of the artistic team. His duties included running the new works festival, known as Play By Play. In 2012, Whistler had a script produced in that series. The following year, Sowle and Steven Patterson, co-founder of Bridge, attended a workshop production of "Casse Noisette" at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

Though "Casse Noisette" was first seen in Greenwich Village, it seems appropriate that its fully staged debut takes place in a small town like Catskill.

"I don't want to write for the people in the gay ghettos but for civil service workers in the suburbs. That's why Joe lives in Spokane, Washington," says Whistler. "And God bless Joe for going out into the world to be who he is. That takes guts."

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