

## Review: 'Casse Noisette' @ Bridge Street, 11/11/18

By [Steve Barnes](#)

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Photo: Kelly Thompson, Bridge Street Theatre  
Jason Guy and Serena Vesper in "Casse Noisette" at Bridge Street Theatre.

### *Catskill*

A running joke among theater reviewers and publicists is that a critic's favorite words to hear about new plays are "90 minutes, no intermission." That's often the case – sometimes we hear the even more blessed "75 minutes, no intermission" – and it usually signals a play set in the present day that has a small cast and sharp focus, often on a contemporary issue.

Philadelphia playwright Michael Whistler is aiming bigger with "Casse Noisette: A Fairy Ballet," an ambitious, long and grandly imagined play. Getting an impressive world premiere at Bridge Street Theatre, "Casse Noisette" pairs the life of a closeted American high school science teacher of the recent past with that of the composer Pyotr Illych Tchaikovsky in Russia and Europe in the 1890s. In the way it incorporates fantastical scenes and historical speculation into a story about personal and societal struggles with homosexuality, "Casse Noisette" is closer in spirit to "Angels in America" than "The Cake," a new comedic drama about same-sex marriage that ran at Barrington Stage Company this past summer, though Whistler's play lasts about two and a half hours, not the combined seven for both parts of "Angels."

In Whistler's vision, some of the difficulties faced by Tchaikovsky 120 years ago are the same for Joe Jessup, an earth-science teacher in Spokane, Wash., in 2005. A prim, fastidious man – he always wears a bowtie – Joe eats the same lunch in the same prim, fastidious way in the faculty room, engaging in pleasant if not warm or deep conversations with Nancy, an English teacher, and more warily with Marc, a macho gym teacher. At night, middle-aged Joe spends hours on a gay phone-sex line, silently absorbing the breathy seductions of an obviously much younger man while classical music plays.

Meanwhile, in Russia, Tchaikovsky is the star of the classical world, embraced by royalty and recently commissioned, based on the success of "Swan Lake" and "Sleeping Beauty," to compose a third ballet. It would be lucrative, but Tchaikovsky hates the source material, about a mouse king, a nutcracker ("Casse Noisette" in

French) in the shape of a soldier and far too many dancing confections, worst among them a sugarplum fairy. ("It's a boiled sweet!" Tchaikovsky fumes.)

The scenes with Joe, his colleagues and with Blaine, the teen from the chat line who turns out to be a runaway willing to trade sex for support, have texture and resonance, but the richest, most satisfying parts of Whistler's play involve Tchaikovsky and the people around him, including his brother/business manager, Modeste, a couple of ballerinas and his adored, 21-year-old nephew, who tolerates and perhaps encourages and enjoys attentions from Tchaikovsky that aren't entirely avuncular.

Bridge Street co-founder John Sowle, whose direction is always reliably clear-eyed and astute, here seems inspired by "Casse Noisette," bringing lyricism and generous sensitivity to what ultimately is a tragic story. He leads a five-member cast, who play a total of 11 roles, to significant success despite a script that, after deserved attention from a ruthlessly redlining dramaturge, could be 20 minutes shorter. (The actors deserve much credit for their handling of the wordy dialogue.)

One of the hallmarks of a Bridge Street production is smart casting. Jason Guy plays Joe and Tchaikovsky, carefully delineating the repressed teacher from the tempestuous composer but finding parallels between the two. Nancy O. Graham brings compassion and sadness to the English teacher and great humor to an extravagant ballerina; Jason Kellerman does expert work in three roles (his wig and facial expressions as the Sugarplum Fairy's consort are hilarious); Serena Vesper is effective as Tchaikovsky's sister and the Sugarplum fairy; and Bradley Levine finds the individual humanity of the nephew and Blaine, giving full personalities and independent agency to two young men who could have been merely passive objects of desire.

Sowle, who also designed the show, keeps the action moving over two acts and about two dozen scenes, several of which overlap stories and centuries. Carmen Borgia's sound is absolutely essential to a story largely about classical music, and Jennifer Anderson's costumes further realize times and places.

A bold-faced note on the program thanks the production's two underwriters, Duke Dang and Charles Rosen, for a "generous donation," and they get a mention in the preshow curtain speech. Such acknowledgements are standard at bigger-name companies, of course, but my guess is Dang and Rosen were even more fundamental to Bridge Street being able to present "Casse Noisette." Given how well it works in the world premiere, it's easy to imagine the play's potential if backed by the resources of Barrington Stage or even Broadway. That the world premiere of a quality play likely due for future acclaim would happen in a two-year-old, 84-seat theater in Catskill ought to be a source of pride for the company, the village and our region.

*sbarnes@timesunion.com • 518-454-5489 • [blog.timesunion.com/tablehopping](http://blog.timesunion.com/tablehopping) • @Tablehopping*