

Berkshire Bright Focus...

...On Theatre, on the Berkshires and its expanded region in New York State, Vermont and Connecticut!

Casse Noisette: A Fairy Ballet, by Michael Whistler.

Directed by John Sowle. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

"Love awakened . . . "

There are days when viewing remarkable theater is exactly what you need. Or at least it's what I need. On Saturday November 10 I had just that sort of day.

In the afternoon it was the Metropolitan Opera's HD broadcast to theaters of Nico Muhly's world premiere opera, "Marnie." In the evening it was Bridge Street Theatre's world premiere of Michael Whistler's play "Casse Noisette." Both were memorable and extraordinary; both were clearly high budget productions for their theaters. Each in its own way was highly effective and moving. It was a great day of world class, world premiere, shows. It was one hell of a day!

The title quote for this review is from the first act of the new play, but it applies to both shows equally, separately and differently. For the main characters of Whistler's play, both Joe Jessup and Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky, love awakens in them in their parallel stories and in both cases their lives and careers are deeply affected by this awakening. The latter is the 19th century composer of hit ballets, symphonies, songs and operas; the former is a school teacher with a passion for the music of the Russian musician. They each harbor strong almost all-encompassing love for another person that cannot be revealed without consequences. Both men are played, simultaneously, by Jason Guy.

Tchaikovsky adores his sister, Sasha, the results of whose illness has been kept from him by his brother Modeste. He equally adores his nephew Vladimir, called "Bob" who, after Sasha's death, becomes the obsessive love of the composer. Joe, afraid of love and its outcomes, falls for a phone-whore who comes into his life at a time of serious reconsideration of Joe's goals, a young man named Blaine. Blaine and Bob are both played by Bradley Levine, a very talented young actor who has the strength to never mix up his characters and keeps the instantly identifiable. Bob is intelligent and wholesome and handsome and supportive. Blaine is corrupt and a failure at lying about it, a hustler who comes very close to ruining an unique opportunity for himself. Levine plays both boys with brittle intelligence and an engaging manner. I liked him very much.

Sasha is sweetly, affectionately portrayed by Serena Vesper who also plays the unique vision of the Sugar Plum Fairy, from Tchaikovsky's ballet "The Nutcracker" which translated is "Casse Noisette." Vesper does fragility due to ill health beautifully. She is moving in her sisterly affections for her brother and it is clear from Guy's work in this particular scene how important Pyotr's love for Sasha has been and how inspiring. The two work beautifully together in this tender, almost painful, scene. When Vesper transforms into the Ballet Fairy, however, her sweetness is transformed into the inspirational. If Tchaikovsky was inspired by his sister in creating this role musically, that can be both seen and heard in Vesper's lovely portrayal of this role. She uses humor, grace and charm in equal measure here and it pays off in spades.

As the life of Tchaikovsky spins out of control it is his creation and her relationship with him, his brother and his nephew that steadies the composer in his work. Vesper plays much of this role in point shoes and stands high in them, supported by Jason Kellerman as Her Consort. Kellerman plays three different roles in this play, the ballet dancer who partners the Sugar Plum Fair, another teacher in Joe's school - Marc Maynes - and Pyotr's brother Modeste Illyich Tchaikovsky.

As Modeste he is bossy: conservative, considerate and controlling as well as being completely devoted to his brother's talent. He never shows any resentment, only a compelling need to keep Pyotr on the right track if possible. Kellerman handles all of this extremely well.

As Marc he plays a judgmental and occasionally unpleasant human being, whose only seeming concern is for himself. Again, the role is well-suited to the talents of Kellerman. In the role of the ballet partner/consort is his funny, sweet and almost deliberately comic and it is very refreshing to have him play his role in this way. This is clearly a talented actor for he, like Guy and the others, has to transform himself from one persona to another on stage with suddenness and rapidity and he handles it very well, indeed.

For of the good work done by these three, it is Jason Guy who has the hardest job of all in this show. He has to move seamlessly between Joe and Pyotr merging the two men into flip sides of the same single coin minted for him. These two

men have much in common and yet are so different that it must not be possible to confuse them. Using a long coat to distinguish his two characters he is often playing one while the coat is, literally, on the wrong hanger. Guy has the brilliance of voice and posture with which to make us see the right character at each moment of the play in spite of the costume's visibility or lack of same. He gives a strong performance in both parts. Joe's morality and conflicts are all his and Pyotr's self-indulgent sensibility gets equal weight. There are moments when the change of personality is swift and sudden, and it works every time thanks to Guy's performance skills. In this, I am certain, the hand of director John Sowle may also be seen for there is never a single moment of confusion on the Bridge Street stage.

In fact, the tenderness that comes into Pyotr's in his moments with Sasha, played softly by Vesper, is only in evidence in that character and in this moment of the play (although he approaches it in Pyotr's scene with his nephew on a picnic). The only time that this sort of playing is seen in the character of Joe is after dinner with his teaching partner Nancy Klein.

Nancy is played by Nancy O. Graham. She displays a fine grasp of acerbic wit in most of her early scenes and a compassion that is hard to resist in the middle of the plays. However, it is her demeanor at the dinner scene in her home and in the morning after sequence that Graham gets to shine, take the stage over and deliver the hard knocks that perpetuate the drama in Joe's lost life. Graham is wonderful playing all the sides of her principal character and she comes into her comic own as ballerina Antonietta Dell'Era, a diva readying herself for the Sugar Plum Fairy, a plum role in anyone's career. Her adoration of the composer is hysterically funny and at the same time rather touching, especially in light of what follows for Nancy and Joe. Here the parallel intensities make for a marvelous contrast in tone.

John Sowle has sown his seeds of dissent and discourse beautifully for these five fine actors. He uses Tchaikovsky's music for both scene changes, mood shifters and storytelling strengths keeping the show alive and active and intense. His stage picture, people with people and people alone, are just what the moments require and there is a lovely fluidity to the piece from start to finish. The play may be a comedy, but death still rears back and kicks up more than once, but in a shot of optimism the play ends with fact and fiction blending into a far-reaching premise that is both satisfying and sad. Whether through death or departure of another sort, Whistler's play takes many characters out of the scene without hurting the optimism of the piece, and the depression of harsh judgement is never quite replaced by the resolution of inner and outer conflicts.

Jennifer Anderson's costumes are either just right, or delicious depending on the moment and John Sowle's clever sets and effective lighting help the play through a very involved production. The opera company's production of "Marnie" was equally successful in manipulating time and space in a complicated production and like Sowle's work in this play the opera house was tested in the mechanics of the show.

Two rarely seen theatrical events that I would happily see again, and maybe again after that, "Casse Noisette" wins my heart in this case because the people are perfectly who they are intended to be thanks to five fine actors, an intensely visionary director and a superbly talented playwright.

11/11/18

Casse Noisette: A Fairy Ballet plays at the Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through November 18. For information and tickets go to www.BridgeSt.org or call 518-943-3818.