

In Writers' Group once, I said I wished my work would get some serious critical attention. Here is a review my friend Hawk Madrone wrote in response - about Going to the Nutcracker, the doll photograph video series I posted on Youtube. Thank you so much, Madrone.

Tangren

Going to the Nutcracker:

A Review, by Hawk Madrone

author of Weeding at Dawn: A Lesbian Country Life as well as articles and stories appearing in many anthologies and periodicals. January 7, 2012

Dolls held no interest for me when I was a child. Oh, I had one or two, and I do remember at least one occasion when I pretended to be pretending with them. I was standing in front of a stuffed chair in the living room, the dolls resting on the seat, all in view of my mother who no doubt was pleased that I was acting like the little girl she so much wanted me to be. I think there were visitors, including another girl who apparently thought playing with dolls was just the thing. I could not have been older than early elementary school, and possibly younger, but I remember distinctly thinking, feeling, as I stood there and acted the part expected of me, that this was empty activity. It was lifeless. The dolls had no mystery to them. They did not do anything. That may be my last memory – indeed, right now my only memory – of “playing” with dolls. When a young teenager, I did adore a little stuffed animal which had been given to me by the camp

counselor I had a crush on. Not that I “played” with it, but looking at it reminded me of her, her smile, her soft and loving voice, so it had a special place atop the pillows on my bed.

But dolls? I could more easily *make believe* with the wooden fence a few blocks away where there was a cattle farm at our edge of town. I’d climb and straddle a wooden rail and was transformed into a cowgirl riding the range out west. I could stay there for a long time, inventing plots and scenarios. When I grew less absorbed in that, I’d climb the nearby big old oak tree where I could be cradled in a lap of intersecting branches. I do not remember making the tree into anything else; it was magical in itself, a great friend I could climb and nestle in.

I grew up with toys for active use. Some I was given: a bicycle, bow and arrows. And some I made, like that summer I hammered together a go-cart of sorts. The product did not hold up for long, but the endeavor was, well, the magic of construction, and I was proud.

No, not dolls. Playing with them was merely an unaspired-for imitation of who my mother was, and she did not seem to me to be all that happy in that role herself.

Tangren Alexander, 70, with her little friend Athena, 10, does, indeed, play with dolls. Small dolls, tiny dolls. She understands the world of dolls; she invites them out to play with her, a most loving and attentive playmate. She creates homes for them, one a cabin atop her refrigerator,

another which stands tall and wide with many floors against a parlor wall. The world of the miniature is celebrated here, and Tangren is a genius at assemblage, at story-telling with placement, with change, with transition.

Sometimes she gives the dolls new life with clothes she designs, hairstyles she alters, makes new dolls out of parts from others. She gives them biographies with photographs made to dissolve into each other on a DVD, synchronized perfectly with music, telling their story. This is playing-with-dolls raised to the level of art.

One such DVD creation is “*Going to the Nutcracker*”, a seven part enactment by the dolls of the classic story-ballet *The Nutcracker* set to music by Tchaikovsky. As the Prelude, “Dollhouse Christmas”, begins I peer through the window panes of a door and am transported into another world, one populated by all things needed in a well-appointed house. Then I am taken inside where there are furniture, children and adults, pets, the Christmas tree with gifts beneath it, a candelabra on the grand piano, paintings on the walls, pies ready for the eating, Santa and Kwan Yin on the mantle (a multicultural touch), along with an old-fashioned clock, and countless more details to make a complete home for dolls, all this in amazing miniature. Even the miniature is miniaturized! : A snowglobe waits for a hand to shake it. All this delightfully accompanied by lively Celtic music.

Because I am not well-acquainted with the story of *The Nutcracker*, it was not until my second viewing of this doll-sized rendition that I understood that as the overture plays and the dolls take their seats in the theater in the second part of the series, I, too, am invited to be in that same audience. Perhaps if the curtain on the stage had started to rise and the camera zoomed in onto the stage, I would have known the feature was beginning. So that when the next part, "Parents and Presents", opens, I would understand we are now watching *The Nutcracker*, the performance heralded by the poster on the outside of the theater. The poster, I later realize, displays the older child and the wooden nutcracker she receives for her Christmas gift. So I have been taken onto the stage, into a world within a world! And the story unfolds.

All manner of beings come forth to tell this story, from a variety of humans, including Afro-Americans and a Lesbian couple (though I wish they were not presented so stereotypically as butch and femme), to mice, cats and dogs, toy soldiers, fairies.... They schmooze, dance, play, fight, win and lose, celebrate ... enacting the magic of theater, the magic of pretend.

There are moments of sheer delight, as when the camera focuses on the face of the toy Nutcracker over the shoulder of the sleeping young woman, or the tiny mouse hole in the wall and one by one the three mice emerge onto the scene. Or when, in the scene of the battle between the mice and the toy soldiers, there is a loud

crack in the music just as the “life-size” Mouse King bursts through the wall.

In fact, all through the story the splendid music is so perfectly synchronized with the action, that it carries the story within its melodies, crescendos, repetitions.

I smile when the toy Nutcracker is suddenly transformed into a real man, a black man at that; my own feminist lesbian sensitivities are rewarded during the *pas de deux* performed by the young woman and the Snowflake Fairy Queen, not by the expected male and a female (though I do not know which would be loyal to the original.) It is a completely enchanting feat of doll-maneuvering when the young woman and her nutcracker-man enter the world of the Christmas tree, which has been in all the scenes with gifts beneath. They pass through the little wooden arch which had been constructed under the tree by the doll-children in an earlier scene, and enter the snow-covered world. Instantly they are transformed into the same small size as those gifts, no bigger than the decorative balls on the tree (how did she do that!?!), and I marvel with them at the world beneath the tree populated by wee elves and animals. If I had to suspend disbelief at all before, here I am completely taken in by cleverness, by realism, by magic..

My intellect reminds me that the persona of this presentation are dolls. This is a series of photographs and not a movie, these beings in many cases must be held up by stands, their arms, heads, legs have been adjusted to effect attitude, interrelationship. But Tangren and Athena

have flawlessly created dolls-as-living, so that as a member of the audience I am not aware of any of those mechanics.

The computer program used with still photos to create movement does sometimes seem to blur the image during a fast zoom, especially where fast action is wanted, as in the battle scene. But the effect is worth the temporary optic discomfort.

I have met these dolls in Tangren's parlor, so I know the small scale I am seeing on this DVD. I think a non-initiate into Tangren's world might be served by a photo, or even a series of them, showing her and Athena placing the dolls, setting a scene, so that the juxtaposition of their human bodies, their hands, with the dolls demonstrates the tiny-ness of what the viewer sees. It is surely a labor of love to place an entire roomful of wee beings and their possessions just so, to evoke this colorful, active life. I think showing a glimpse of this process in the beginning would enhance even greater appreciation.

Tangren has brought playing with dolls to my hesitant universe. Sitting in this audience is reminiscent of sitting so contentedly in the magical lap of my childhood's oak tree. I wish my no longer living mother could sit in this audience with me, play with me with these dolls, be as captivated, entertained, as am I.