

Why the Nutcracker?

FAQs about my "Going to the Nutcracker", including those I often ask myself

Though I think of myself as a writer, this last year I spent the entire of my creative energy on a visual project, creating little slide-show "movies" of stories acted out by dolls. Mostly in a revisualization of the Nutcracker Ballet, as acted out by Barbie dolls.

So, you are a feminist lesbian writer. Why the Nutcracker?

A. The straightforward answer is: my fairy grandchildren and I were setting up Christmas in the dollhouse in my parlor. We were in the basement gathering Christmas things in 1:6 scale (Barbie-size) when I noticed the box of Nutcracker costumes and dolls. And the old cardboard Little Theater. An idea! After their Christmas party, the dolls could attend the Nutcracker Ballet! We carried everything upstairs.

It was as simple as that.

A lifetime of collecting and playing with these dolls.

And if I had bought a Nutcracker set, it presumably was with the thought of one day acting out The Nutcracker.

That evening the Madeline dolls had their tree-trimming party, and then attended a hastily-assembled performance of the ballet.

It went from there.

I had been photographing dolls for many years; and Athena (age 10 that year) and I had photographed together.

Before I could put it all away, the Nutcracker took on a life of its own. Open boxes of doll clothes soon littered the living room, collections of dolls, props, and costumes assembled themselves. Later a city grew in the corner where the Christmas tree had been.

It took all year to set up these scenes, and to photograph them, inventing as we went, Athena and I, playing on the traditional Nutcracker story. And then for me to create these slideshow movies from the photos we took. We got half way through the Ballet, completing Act One with The Waltz of the Snowflakes. Hopefully the rest is to come before next Christmas.

B. But there is another sort of answer to “Why the Nutcracker?”.

What made it call to me, perhaps, is that attending this ballet is something women and girls to do together at Christmastime: mothers and daughters, aunts and grandmothers, friends. There are some little boys; and some of them will become enchanted with dance. But the overwhelming majority of the audience is female.

In my family, and in many others, a love of ballet was passed on in the female line.

It would be perfectly in character for Pearl Clavel and the Madelines, who live in the dollhouse, and their friends, the two aunts, to attend this ballet.

Attending The Nutcracker as a Christmas tradition, as it turns out, dates from only the nineteen-fifties - but that was the decade when I became aware of such things: I thought it had always been that way. It has been that way since, with ballet companies always being able to count on large audiences when time for “The Nut” comes around again.

Why might this production of The Nutcracker be considered feminist? or matriarchal? or at least more pro-women than the traditional Nutcracker story?

Note the loving looks the camera catches between mothers and daughters, sisters, aunts, women friends, and lovers.

The scene with the Matryoshkya dolls is a celebration of matrilineage, of women’s amazing power to give birth, and of the fun of playing with dolls. In this sequence we descend yet another dimension, into a story enacted by dolls being played with by dolls.

Because these little “movies” affirm believing in magic.

Not everyone would agree that a love of believing in magic is feminist, but I think it *can* be.

That first touch between Clara and the Snowflake fairy, does it remind you of anything? Possibly by Michelangelo?

In our film version of the living room where the Nutcracker Ballet begins, above the mantelpiece hangs “The Green and Yellow Forest” by Natal’ia Goncharova, a Rayonist painter of the early 1900s. (Or rather, most of the painting. I had to crop it a bit to fit Mattel’s frame.)

It is a luminous work whose hidden forms only gradually become clear as one looks, an invocation of fairyland, it seems to me. So, a guest appearance for a woman painter who ought to be more remembered. That’s feminist.

What is the Nutcracker Ballet?

The Nutcracker Ballet was written by Tchaikovsky for an 1892 St.Petersburg audience, using the plot of a German story by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

The composer never considered it one of his great works, though through the years it has become his best known and most beloved.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nutcracker [livepage.apple.com](http://apple.com)

What is the plot of The Nutcracker Ballet? How does Our Version differ?

The ballet has a basic plot; but, judging from a lot of performances posted on video, there is room for variety within the traditional sequence. We chose to bend it in a woman-positive direction. And, of course, dolls can’t dance very well, so we’ve built on the things they *can* do, and the materials at hand.

In the Nutcracker Ballet’s story there is always an old-fashioned family, a Christmas tree, a dance by the parents. I have made them an imaginary avant-garde St. Petersburg family of about 1910.

Guests arrive. There’s a dance by the Grandfathers. (I used this music for other things.) There are presents for the children. One of the guests is an uncle and/or toymaker, often portrayed as a bit creepy; he gives Clara the present of a nutcracker.

It is a doll-like wooden figure painted in military regalia, with prominent teeth. To use it, a nut would have been placed in the Nutcracker’s opened mouth, and his teeth then levered or screwed together until the hull gave way. (I know there may be some who might consider this a feminist image, but I’m not going there.)

For unknown reasons the gift delights Clara. The best I can say is that perhaps she senses the thing’s magical potential.

In the course of the Christmas party the Nutcracker gets broken. Most versions attribute this to Clara’s little brother; but we chose to paint him more positively, and laid the blame on the mice, “later that night”.

This gives a good reason for the Battle between the Nutcracker, mended and come to life, and the Mouse King and his Army, a feature of every Nutcracker ballet. The Mouse King is about to triumph when Clara saves the day, usually by throwing her slipper at him. But our Clara's slipper was so soft it was not likely to be of help. Instead we had her bring the toy soldiers to life.

After the battle, the rather grotesque Nutcracker reveals himself to be/turns into a handsome young man, often called a Prince. In *our* story he is certainly personable, but is not, as in most versions, her Dream Lover.

He *is* Clara's friend, and the guide into an enchanted land; he is, in fact, an incarnation of the young toymaker who gave her the nutcracker in the first place.

After the battle with the mice is won, and the Nutcracker has turned handsome, either Clara and he grow smaller, or the world grows larger. They enter an enchanted land, to a piece of music called "Into the Christmas Trees", where many an idyllic *pas de deux* has been danced in a snowy forest.

I placed their dance before the transition to the magic land, and made the entrance be through the gate the children had built of toy blocks earlier. The gateway had been knocked down during the mouse-fight; and now these two nearly-grownups turn from their dancing to rebuild it. And then find themselves entering *through* that gate into the fairyland. To celebrate how when we play with toys we build little worlds - and enter them.

The print on the record label had been tiny: I misread this music's title as "Into the Christmas Tree", and told the story accordingly. But I like what we did.

The rest of the Nutcracker Ballet is really a series of set pieces, "dances" traditionally without a plot. We have photographed the first of these, The Waltz of the Snowflakes, which is the end of Act One, and this is as far as we have taken the project for now.

Is our Snowflake Waltz feminist? All I can say is, never underestimate the touch of a Snowflake Fairy.

Clara's experience or dream or whatever it is, will change her.

Usually this is thought of as: the girl on the edge of womanhood, and her first love for a man (dream or not) effecting the transition.

A theme not unheard-of before, the girl "becoming a woman" through (hetero) sexual initiation (dream or not).

In our version of this ballet, there is/will be a *series* of guides and illuminations,

and growings-up — rather like becoming a woman over and over again.

Why Barbie dolls?

Because they are there.

Amazingly, this great richness of miniatures exists.

I have as much trouble as the next person with the fashion-ridden stereotyped character who haunts Barbie's name, but the truth is that Mattel's doll offerings have ranged from ancient Egypt through many periods of history, have ranged the world, and in many cases have included furniture, props, and scenery as well as dolls.

The first Barbie and her friends were all white, and remained so for far too long, but by now there is no mass doll-maker who has as many kinds of skin color and face shape. [Unfortunately they all have skinny, tall bodies, so the clothes will be interchangeable.]

Also, Mattel has made dolls with the greatest variety of ages, on the young side of 30, that is. But there *are* even a few youthful "grandparents".

I'd love to see much more variety, but, still, for richness of materials from which to bring dolls alive, there is no doll line like the Barbies.

Not all the dolls in our film are by Mattel: we have supplemented with the sweet and wonderfully flexible girl dolls from the Only Hearts Club, and even Fashion Royalty (for the Josephine Baker doll in "Toys and Guests").

Did I make the costumes?

For the most part, no.

I could never make such detailed, finely-wrought clothing. If I'd had to make all the clothes, this performance could never have happened.

We did mix and match costumes. But some of the dolls, like the snowflake fairy, and the mother and aunts, are just as they came from the box.

The mice are another matter. Originally finger puppets with short pink flaps for arms and legs, they needed some changes before they could become swordsmice. I took them to Michelle Bashaw, a seamstress, who made them arms with gloves, legs with boots, and the king's cape, and sewed on their hats and crowns.

Any comments on the music?

One of the delights of doing these videos has been working so closely with Tchaikovsky's music. It had grown clichéd for me. I couldn't really hear it fresh, until I started working with it and began to know much more intimately its surprising rhythms and irresistible melodies.

I was amazed how often the sequence of photos worked out with the music, like the high squeaky music as the tiny mice approached the nutcracker, the trumpet when the little brother and the small Nutcracker both raised their trumpets.

Those just happened. A few were carefully worked out, like the sudden appearance of the Mouse King at the crack of the music.