International

The Nutcracker

CHRISTOPHER WHEELDON’S WONDERFUL NEW Nutcracker for Joffrey Ballet was created especially for the city of Chicago, in which the company now has a secure and well-established home and school. It’s stage, the beautiful Auditorium Theatre, is a masterpiece in a city renowned for its contributions to 20th century architecture, and its beautifully framed proscenium stage is incorporated effectively into the ballet itself.

Ashley Wheater, Joffrey’s artistic director, aims for his company to be a peer institution amongst Chicago’s cultural jewels, and while Joffrey is still a relative newcomer to the Chicago arts scene, this Nutcracker is a big step forward. Wheeldon was asked to create a Nutcracker with which Chicagoans can identify, and he has succeeded admirably in giving this landmark ballet a distinctively hometown flavour while retaining its universality and appeal for any audience. At the same time, as we shall see, recent political events in the US have made this Nutcracker more relevant than Wheeldon ever dreamed.

“We have so many kids who come to see The Nutcracker either with their parents or as part of a programme for the Chicago Public Schools, whose first exposure to ballet this is,” says Wheater. “They come from all parts of the city. I want them to identify with the children on stage. I want to connect with something that is part of their heritage.”

Chicago audiences are diverse. Like all of the US, Chicago has been a city of immigrants, who came there from all over the globe to escape persecution, poverty and restrictions of caste and class. Immigrants have made the city great. Like its population, Chicago is also a city of contrasts: rich and poor, magnificent homes and skyscrapers alongside tiny, decaying flats. One of the most diverse areas is Chicago’s South Side, where Barack Obama began his career in public service as a community organiser, courted his wife, raised his family and where his Presidential Library and Study Center will now be established – and home, too, to the University of Chicago, where Obama taught constitutional law. The university enclave exists cheek by jowl with one of the most segregated and dangerous areas in a city where gang warfare has resulted in a frighteningly high murder rate.

The Wheeldon Nutcracker is set smack in the lakefront edge of the area I just described – not in the present but at the Chicago World Fair of 1893, a year after The Nutcracker’s premiere in St Petersburg. The Fair marked the cultural blossoming of the city. Illuminated by “new-fangled” electric lights, the grand neo-classical buildings of the White City, as it was called, were reflected in a mile long artificial lagoon where gondolas floated visitors from one national pavilion to another – each filled with exotic treasures and performances by native dancers and musicians from all over the world. It put the city on the international map and entered Chicago’s mythology immediately.

The footprint of the White City remains and, even if they don’t know about the Fair, just about every Chicago school child has visited it as the Museum of Science and Industry, which took over the

Fair’s magisterial central exhibition hall. The lagoon has been transformed into green esplanades on which students and community members have picnics, play Frisbee and stroll with baby carriages. Obama’s presidential library will be built on former fair grounds, now a park, where a model of the Fair’s famous Statue of the Republic stands.

The family at the heart of Wheeldon’s Nutcracker lives at the edge of the fairground, six months before its opening. Marie, her brother and her widowed mother are newly arrived immigrants. Marie and her mother are Polish, among the many people hired to work on the fair – not only labourers, but also engineers, artists and artisans: sculptors, masons, painters and others hired to design and decorate the exhibition’s buildings, fountains and walkways. Dominating the fair was the Statue of the Republic, which became Chicago’s own Statue of Liberty, and it turns out that Marie’s mother is its

Photograph: CHERYL MANN.
sculptress. Her makeshift one-room house on the edge of the site comes from a period photograph of the fairgrounds in preparation. It is a far cry from the comfortable family home of the first Nutcracker with its sparkling tree and children spiffed up in party dresses. This is a working-class celebration with peasant roots, home-made decorations and a sparsely decorated last-minute tree in a pot – which makes its eventual transformation all the more spectacular. The [party?] dances are just as much fun: Wheeldon brings them closer into Eastern and European folk dances than the more genteel originals, and relishes the intertwining linear and circular formations and stamping feet.

As Act I demonstrates, Marie lives in a community that has very little materially, but in which love and laughter abound despite hard times. “Instead of an emphasis on the material elements of The Nutcracker – the many gifts, the candies and treats,” explains Wheater, “we wanted to show them that you can have very little and use your imagination to make something wonderful.” Wheeldon and his team make this very clear. The admirably disgusting rats of puppeteer Basil Twist are day-time, as well as night-time citizens of Marie’s neighbourhood. They are introduced early in the first act as Marie walks home on the edge of the fairgrounds – scuttling with impunity between the feet of passers-by, battling on fence tops, and jumping repulsively into the shirt top of Marie’s brother. Wheeldon skillfully packs the opening scenes with vivid movement portraits, almost Dickensian in detail, of the crowded citizens of Chicago streets and the contrast of wealth and poverty, class and caste.

By contrast the dream world of the Fair is glittering and gorgeous. As in Wheeldon’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and, more recently, his An American in Paris on Broadway, digital imagery, rhythmically co-ordinated with Tchaikovsky’s marvellous score, is used cinematically: montages of fair photographs, posters and postcards, newspaper articles and headlines introduce each act and encourage the smooth flow from one scene to another: the billowing clouds of the skies revealed by the flat landscape of this city on the great plains are used to great effect, and colours and patterns change kaleidoscopically to fit with new dances. They spill as well into the areas on either side of the proscenium arch, creating patterned frames that fit with the costumes and visual motifs of each of Wheeldon’s well-crafted, tightly paced, and witty divertissements, drawn from the various countries represented at the fair – but not forgetting Buffalo Bill, whose wild west show was one of the fair’s feature attraction. (He twirls a lariat accompanied by a posse of showgirls.)

At the heart of The Nutcracker, through large and small incidents, you are made aware of Marie’s (and every immigrants) longing to make a secure home in her new world. As Brian Selznick, who devised the scenario, says: “Marie’s dream journey through the World’s Fair will illuminate what is special about all holiday stories… the value of love, the need for hope and the comfort of family, no matter where you’re from or what type of family you have. This seems like a dream worth remembering.”

Accordingly Marie’s mother, a harried single parent, emerges transformed from behind her own sculpture, the golden Statue of the Grand Republic, and replaces the Sugar Plum Fairy to preside over all the festivities as Queen of the Fair. She dances with the Great Impresario of the Fair, who replaces Drosselmeyer as Marie’s protector and guide. Their mutual attraction, established in Act I, is developed in the Grand pas de deux in Act II which, in the coda, turns into a pas de quatre as they are joined by Marie and the impresario’s young assistant, Peter. A family is formed in dance.

The ballet closes with a brief and touching mime scene that suggests that the hope for love and family happiness expressed in this dance might turn into a reality. It is a hope that, through force of circumstance, has now become more relevant than at any other time in the recent history of the US. Chicago has declared itself a “sanctuary city” – one of many in North America who have made it clear to the new president that they are determined to continue to protect the dream that immigrants like Marie and her family came to Chicago for. This Nutcracker will continue to remind us of that dream in music and dance for many years to come.

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