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New twist on Christmas tale in 'Clara's Dream'

BRIAN J. HOWARD
THE STAR

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There are a number of ways to put a fresh spin on an old theme, and the Paramount Center for the Arts' Christmas spectacular proves Executive Director Jon Yanofsky is intent upon exploring all of them.

The Paramount's presentation of "Clara's Dream: A Jazz Nutcracker" hits the Brown Street stage Dec. 10 and 11 with an arts-in-education workshop the afternoon of the opening performance. Patrons anticipating the holiday classic, however, will see Tchaikovsky's vision adopt a Duke Ellington flair with plenty of cool moves on tap.

"I think what's interesting about it is it's something familiar, but with a new context, a new configuration," Yanofsky said of MaD Theatricals' interpretation of the familiar fairy tale ballet. "That's what's great about old stories with a new twist. You can follow the narrative because you're familiar with it."

Tap dance takes center stage in this rendition, accompanied by a live jazz sextet. Artistic Director Drika Overton was inspired to create "Clara's Dream" after hearing Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's 1960 jazz interpretation of "The Nutcracker."

At 30 minutes, the Ellington-Strayhorn compositions provided only a foundation for what Overton envisioned as a vehicle to highlight tap dance and jazz as collaborative means of artistic expression. Overton brought the idea to others, including composer, arranger and music director Paul Arslanian, who wrote all but two pieces performed in "Clara's Dream."

Two years later, in 2000, the show opened to great acclaim. And it has been seen across the Northeast each holiday season since. Overton said Yanofsky first contacted her while she was at a performance last December. At first, she wasn't sure the show's elaborate sets and jazz sextet would fit the old Peekskill theater.

"And he was just like, 'We'll make it work. Let's make it work,' " Overton said. "I love his spirit. It's really quite something."

Aside from the mostly original musical and dance arrangements, the story has been updated a bit as well. Clara is an adolescent who seeks to come into her own as a dancer despite her parents' classical influence and direction. Through the magic of jazz — and the gift of a zoot-suited nutcracker — she is able to transcend the tradition of her parents and discover her place in the world.

More than a coming-of-age story, Overton said the story is one of transformation that applies to any age. It's a personal story for her, too, she said, as it relates to the passion for jazz she found — in the midst of a career in modern dance — after seeing an Arslanian-directed performance.

"Clara's Dream" has allowed her to come full circle, Overton said, working side by side with artists who inspired her, like Arslanian and choreographer Brenda Bufalino.

FYI: For Your Information

If you go ...

Who: Portsmouth, N.H.-based MaD Theatricals.

What: "Clara's Dream: A Jazz Nutcracker."

When: 7 p.m. Dec. 10 and 2 p.m. Dec. 11.

Where: The Paramount Center for the Arts, 1008 Brown St., Peekskill.

Admission: \$25 for adults, \$15 for children.

Also on tap: Judy Collins performs her Holiday Concert at 8 p.m. Dec. 18. Tickets are range from \$40

and \$50 for adults.

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"So I really feel like that's where I started to understand myself," Overton said. "It was really through jazz that I started to understand my creative impulses. So when we were generating ideas for the story it all came out. And I really wasn't aware of it until everybody was like, 'You're telling your story.' "

Performing the show for five years now has revived her enjoyment of the holidays, Overton said. The 15-member cast has become something of a family.

She has since visited the Paramount and speaks fondly of the old theater. Perhaps that's because the company's home base is in another historic theater, the Music Hall in Portsmouth, N.H.

For his part, Yanofsky explained that he simply wanted to try something different this year from the usual presentation of Handel's "Messiah." Not that it is easy to eschew the tried and true for a relative unknown.

"There is a risk for everything we do in this business," Yanofsky said. "There are no guarantees, and that's something I learned very early in this business. And that's good because that makes you hungry."

If past response is any indication, it is audiences in Peekskill who'll realize the payoff.

"It's really been amazing," Overton said. "People come out of curiosity. They come because they love jazz. They come because they love dance. It's also a theatrical piece. It's got so many elements. We've got such a diverse audience that we don't normally get for concerts."

