

AUTHENTICITY IN THE NUTCRACKER

I interviewed Peter Wright about his two Nutcracker productions for the RB and BRB in December 2000: here is his original commentary unedited. For clarity, he talks of the Covent Garden one as if it were two, the original 1984 one, and his revision of it in 1999, which is seen on the DVD. The 1990 BRB one is quite different as he makes clear.

QUOTED FROM PW (*my questions/notes/elisions italicised in brackets*)

(...) The original scenario which Ivanov did was rather unsatisfactorily constructed, like two separate ballets almost, with hardly any link. And I was longing to work out a way to make it a complete entity. Which I did really first of all through referring back to the Hoffmann story, Nutcracker and the Mouse King - and based the Covent Garden production very much on that one. And then with a lot of research I did, with the help of Professor Roland John Wiley, I evolved this one (*the revision*). I think it worked, and I was very pleased when it came back last year, 15 years on, to have another look at it.

When I first did it, though, I was very much... I can't say, bogged down, but I did want to get it as authentically correct as I could, with all my research, the Snowflakes and everything. I wanted to use everything in existence, if I could. And I did, not always totally successfully - everyone was full of praise for the Snowflakes which I based on the floor pattern in the Stepanov notations. But actually I had to change it so much to do it for 24 dancers instead of 61 dancers as they had in St Petersburg. I don't know how they had 61, such an odd number. But it's written clearly on some of the notes. And it was all just patterns, no steps at all, just balancés, endless balancés. Their calves must have been agony by the end of it. It was formation dancing, in a way, something to be seen from high up so you could see the patterns. There's a lot of that original stuff in it now, though it isn't as it was. But what I did definitely want to do was to involve Clara and the nephew much more. And so I've changed it so that they actually dance much much more.

So the approach of my first one (*1984*) was to be true to the original creation as far as I could be; but when I got to Birmingham (*1990*) I was on such a high with the move to Birmingham, having successfully got everyone up there, that I wanted to free myself from everything that had gone before, in a way, and so I completely redid the Snow Scene and I changed Drosselmeyer's character. (...) There's very little of the original Nutcracker remaining (*in the RB production*).

(What is there?)

The grand pas de deux.

(And Sugar Plum Fairy solo?)

Yes, with a few modifications that Margot showed me, which Karsavina had showed her. Only small things. Karsavina coached Margot years and years ago, just little little things. And then also in the solo I've put back the proper ending, which is usually cut, the manege around the stage, which I put back.

I'm not too sure about the man's variation, where that's really come from. The Chinese dance is very much based on what Sergeyev taught the Sadler's Wells Ballet before the war. Harlequin and Columbine in the Covent Garden one was taught, I got Joy Newton to teach that, because she remembered it from the old Sadler's Wells production, so that was also what Sergeyev taught them.

(So in total about 10 minutes out of the 80 or so?)

At most. Now the PATTERNS of the Snowflakes are original, but I juggled around

with them. I can't say more than that.(...)

From the description of the original, the second act must have been quite fantastic, a real spectacle. A showpiece, bearing little relation to the story.

(So there's no point in trying to return to that first version?)

No, thank you very much. And I don't know what there is of it in the Stepanov notation anyway. Professor Wiley was only able to come up with the Snowflakes patterns for me. Which I found fascinating to do. But one must remember that in those days the corps de ballet were probably very limited in their capabilities, and with 60 girls on stage it would have been very very simple. Like the Kirov (*reconstructed*) Sleeping Beauty which I found very interesting, but the original Garland Dance, quite frankly, was boring; because you just had lots and lots of couples all doing the same thing, and the children doing the same thing. And I think our eyes are used to a bit more nowadays, and one has to move along a bit with the times, I think. I couldn't any more have the Snowflakes doing nothing but *balancés* for ever - it's a long piece.

(What about the Waltz of the Flowers? That's another major musical number.)

There's some of that about. Which I used, and which Pamela May helped me when I first did it at Covent Garden. And I remember being in a production at Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, which Frederick Ashton did, which was just the Snowflakes scene and Act 2, which we toured America with in 1952. That was based on what Sergeyev brought from Russia, and some of the version I did here was based quite a lot on that. But I found that (*Valse des Fleurs*) unsatisfactory, and so I changed it. For me personally, I find again it's a long piece of music, and one needs quite a bit of change going on. In the original it was all rather on one level. I think one can overdo this thing of authenticity. I mean, who would ever dream of changing the Rose Adage of Sleeping Beauty? But one must remember that Nutcracker didn't have Petipa's stamp on it, it was Ivanov who choreographed it, who also did Swan Lake, the most beautiful choreography and very unrecognised for what he did. But it shows very much, I think, in that old *Valse des Fleurs*, which I used from the Theatre Ballet, as much as I could, that it didn't have the stamp of a master.

(There's a device you used in the Covent Garden version which imitates something the Balanchine one does in the SPF pas de deux, when she poises herself on the cavalier's cloak. Balanchine does it with a little wheeled trolley, like a skateboard, which I think looks ghastly.)

Oh. I wish I'd managed to make that work better. I nearly got it to work here, nearly. The Prince puts down a piece of beautiful cloth and she steps onto it, and he pulls her along which she balances in arabesque.

(But it's not possible, surely?)

I don't think it would be possible for any ballerina to balance in arabesque unsupported and be pulled along. We tried it in several ways here, and it did work if she wasn't in arabesque and was in fifth position - but even that was so awkward. Because it was done so that a section of the stage could be slid from the side of the stage, but she'd be poised and then suddenly there's that awful moment when it starts sliding and you are absolutely bound to lose your balance. In the pictures of the original Nutcracker she's standing on the cloak.

I remember seeing the International Ballet, Mona Inglesby's company, which Sergeyev also put on Sleeping Beauty for them, and they too used this rose thing, which she stepped into, balanced, and it travelled. But Mona.... (*laughs*) she was a beast really, because she wouldn't allow anyone else to use this. Claudie Algeranov, who was a brilliant dancer, had to balance without anything. Anyway I imagine that all those awful things, like trundling Aurora on in the shell with her asleep and everything, was done because they hadn't any other way to do it.

other way to do it.