

A midsummer ice dream

 By Eugene Yiga 26 Jan 2012

What would it be like if the world was covered in ice and we skated around without car troubles traffic jams? Well, until climate change takes inspiration from Michael Bay, we'll have to leave that question to our imaginations. And nowhere is it more wonderfully imagined than in *The Nutcracker On Ice*, showing at the Artscape, Cape Town until 12 February, 2012, after playing 1 sold-out audiences in Joburg last year.



Creating this fantasy world takes lot of hard work. It all starts with the set, the design of which takes up to a year. But, judging by the audience applause at the sight of gently falling snow, it was clearly a year well spent! From the frozen streets of St. Petersburg, to the welcoming warmth of the Pavlov home, to the can colours in The Land of Sweets, every detail comes alive with a range of lighting and special effects. It's the same with the costumes. They're so beautifully made that a part of me wished that I could live somewhere colder, just so I could wrap myself up in such cosy coats!

Quite literally, the best

And then there was the skating. [The Imperial Ice Stars](#) are, quite literally, the best in the world. (Some of the moves are so complex that they've never been attempted and are yet to be named.) The group was formed in 2003 and contains around two dozen members, some of whom have been perfecting their craft from the tender age of three. With over 250 competition medals between them, it's no wonder that almost three million people across five continents have been blown away by their unbelievable skill.

As they'd already performed *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* was an obvious next choice. "The fact that it is one of [Tchaikovsky's] most popular pieces, combined with the huge number of requests I have received, both from members of the audience and from theatres around the world, made my co-producer James Cundall and myself settle on the idea quite easily," said artistic director Tony Mercer.

The show was created over seven weeks and involved rehearsing for up to 11 hours a day (not to mention three hours before each performance). Obviously, there were some costs, including damaged muscles and broken bones. But, as Mercer said, "it all goes with the territory of pushing the boundaries and seeking something new that will bring audiences to the edge of their seats". Simply put, this is excellence at its very best. The lifts, jumps, and spins are performed with such effortless grace that all you can do is sit in awe.

Try your best to take it all in



I left the show feeling something strange and couldn't quite make sense of why. At first I thought it was because the performance was too good. (I told you it was strange, so please hear me out.) It was as though my eyes had feasted so much that my ears still felt a little peckish. In other words, a part of me felt that the music had faded into the background while the skating took centre stage.

What if the performance was simplified so the music was given more prominence (and the audience had less reason to interrupt with incessant applause)? Perhaps that would work. But while some of my favourite parts were those with fewer people on stage (that wonderful pas de deux comes to mind), trying to create a minimalist adaptation would dilute things too much. You simply have to accept that there are some scenes which so much is going on that you don't know where to look. All you can do is try your best to take it all in, even though it's clear you won't.

And what if the skating was more meshed with the music? Perhaps that would work too. But while the sense of balance and integration fit really well in the second act divertissements (the Chinese Tea Dance was perfectly choreographed to the beat), sticking too closely to musical structure would be stifling. The performers need room to breathe so that they can create a performance as dynamic as they are.

What could be different?

So, what could have been done differently? The more I think about it, the more I realise that the answer is nothing. The strange feeling that I had was simply my coming to terms with what *The Nutcracker* actually is. I've always thought of it as a fixed work that's meant to be performed in a fixed way. And yet it's so much more than that. This is a living creation that has evolved over the last 200 years and is still evolving today.

Take the story. It came a long way from ETA Hoffman's bleak original in 1816 to the happier adaptation by Alexandre Dumas a few decades after that. And it's still changing. In some versions, Marie (who's sometimes called Clara) and The Prince are crowned rulers of The Land of Sweets; in other versions, she

simply wakes up and realises that it was all a dream. In other words, there's more than one way to tell this tale.

The same goes for the music. Even though Tchaikovsky struggled to write within the strict parameters imposed by the Russian Imperial Ballet, he ironically created an incredibly versatile piece. That's why it can be adapted so well from one version to the next (and why it's enjoyed as much during Christmas as it is throughout the year).

A new perspective



Ultimately, The Imperial Ice stars have taken The Nutcracker and made it their own. That's how they're able to surprise you with feelings you never expected. And that's why you must see it.

My own epiphany came in the Coffee Arabian Dance. It's one of my favourite parts of the ballet and still gives me chills, even though I've heard it countless times before. And yet I've never experienced it quite like this, with those amazing acrobatics and flights through the air. Yes, I still feel something of a preference for the "old way" that I know, but that doesn't matter. I now have a new perspective, which adds depth to my appreciation of the work. That's what matters most.

So, if you've seen The Nutcracker before, prepare to say hello to an old friend. Even though time may have passed and things may have changed, you can still pick up right where you left off because all the reasons you were so close in the first place are still there. And if you're seeing this work for the first time, prepare to fall in love as audiences have done for over a century and will continue doing so for many years to come.

The Nutcracker on Ice is showing at The Artscape, Cape Town until 12 February, 2012. Tickets start at R100 and can be purchased from www.computicket.com. Bring the kids and anyone else who thinks they don't like classical music or ballet. You'll all leave with smiles on your faces and perhaps even some spring in your step.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow [@eugeneyiga](https://twitter.com/eugeneyiga) on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello. View my profile and articles...

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