

'There is much joy and magic in this Nutcracker'

Elena Katz-Chernin

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PLAY ME A STORY...

The Nutcracker

Adapted by Esmeralda Tintner
Illustrations by Lisa Stewart

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Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House

In this month's 'Tempo', we interview violinist, composer and educator, Esmeralda Tintner, about the work she has written for children - 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker'. This very special adaptation of the famous Nutcracker tale has sold out at theatres and chamber music festivals around Australia. Following on from this success, Esmeralda is now making a film based on the live theatre production, which is returning to the Sydney Opera House this December. The performers (including violinist Lisa Stewart, a former Guest Concertmaster of the London Philharmonic and currently leader of the acclaimed Acaia Quartet) are some of Australia's most gifted musicians. 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker' has been especially created for young children and their families.

Esmeralda Tintner, can you tell me how you came to write 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker'?

I have very wonderful memories of listening to music with my mother when I was very young. I think I have always been seeking to replicate those experiences in my life as a professional musician - so powerful are those memories.

My dream has always been to play chamber music with beautiful artists whom I connect to musically, and whom I also love personally. Actually that is what we do with 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker'. Lisa Stewart, my partner in the duo (two violins) is also my best friend. My daughter Carmela is playing as well. It is my ideal. Very very special.

What was it about listening to music with your mother that was so special for you as a child?

My mother is a musician and a deeply musical person. I felt her emotional response to the music and I rode that wave together with her. I can't say if it is a learned response, to respond to music in that way, or if it worked that way because I too was so musical. But we experienced this great emotion together. And it was the stronger for that.

Even now, if my mother is with me when I hear beautiful music, I experience it more deeply. Knowing that the other person understands what you are feeling, and is feeling that too. Feeling it together. It is very powerful. Very validating as well.

What about your father? He was a musician as well wasn't he? Your father was the conductor, Georg Tintner.

Yes, he was a wonderfully sensitive and gifted conductor. He was really a great talent. A genius really... I think you could say that.

How did your father's musical practice influence you?

Very pervasive. I think the devotion to music almost as a religion. If music were a religion, I would be a nun.

My father was an Opera Conductor. He trained with the Vienna Boys Choir, and at 19, he was the youngest ever appointed conductor at the Vienna Volksoper. I love the Opera too. The Opera and the Ballet. The Theatre. It is my world. I was practically born into the wings. My father was conducting at Covent Garden at the time. I remember the singers coming to the house to rehearse with my father at the piano. I work like that with my students as well.

From the piano?

Yes. And of course we were at the theatre a lot. I remember certain works as well, made an enormous impression on me.

Which works?

The Magic Flute (by Mozart). Particularly Papageno, when he sings that he wishes he were a little mouse, so that he could hide! And Papageno and Papagena singing together. 'Pa, pa, pa, pa...' It's so gorgeous.

And the very beginning, when the dragon comes on stage! I remember a particular Covent Garden production. I remember that Dragon very vividly. It was a slightly comical, cardboard sort of dragon! And I remember that the red velvet seats were a bit scratchy on the backs of my legs. I was about 4.

What else?

Fidelio. (Fidelio, Beethoven's masterpiece - his only opera.) I remember Fidelio. I remember one scene so vividly. The heroine, Leonore, is disguised as a man, so that she can see her husband in prison. He is a political prisoner and has been locked away in the dungeons for many years. Leonore pretends to be a man, so that she can get a job at the prison. It is the only way to see him. And when they are alone, she takes off her beret...and all this gorgeous long red hair cascades out...it is a woman - it is his dear wife... an incredibly dramatic moment. That red hair made such an impression on me! That was a bit later - I was 6 then, I think.

And now you are creating theatre for a new generation of children. Is that because you want to share what has been so meaningful for you?

Yes absolutely. I do think children belong in the theatre and at concerts and should be welcomed there. Plenty of adults make more noise coughing than a few tiny whispers from a child.

Do you mean at formal, 'adult' concerts?

Absolutely I do. Although there is a way to prepare them for that experience. You need to build up to it.

I would like to know how you do prepare them!

Yes - it is something of an art! But it is worth it. With my little group of violin students, we all go to concerts together. We prepare beforehand in my group class. And of course I took my own daughter to many, many concerts. Going to concerts is so important for a young musician.

But in your production - it is especially for children - how do you welcome the children to your own show?

Yes - a good question - 'welcome' is the right word. My 'Nutcracker' is very gentle - we nurture the children. But that does not mean that they can run around and talk while we are performing. I guide and support the children with learning how to sit quietly and listen. And they are able to do that. They do it so beautifully. I have had performances (of 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker') where you could have heard a pin drop, from start to finish. It's quite an amazing feeling, when it's like that. Actually, it's quite unusual to have such a level of engagement and involvement throughout with an adult audience!

It is a very special experience, as a performing artist, to feel such a connection with the audience.

So you have them eating out of your hand?

Chuckle...yes, I think I do...! I have learnt though, by performing this work.

One thing I have learnt, is not to have children seated on the floor. It is too tempting for them to move around. I make sure they are all seated on a chair, or on a lap. Sometimes I invite them to find the person they want to be next to, before we start. There is a slight kerfuffle then, as they rearrange themselves! And then I say - 'and now - you need to stay sitting there, until the show is finished - can you do that?!?!' And they always say 'Yes!' And they do!

But you also involve the children, don't you?

Yes. That is very important. After we have finished the performance, I compliment them on their beautiful listening. And then I invite them up to the stage area where we have a miniature dance workshop with them, led by Flamenco dancer Ana Interiano, who dances the role of 'Chocolate' in the show. Ana is very experienced in working with young children and she does this so beautifully.

We have actually expanded this part of the show into a real little workshop. Because we could see how much the children loved it. They have the opportunity to express themselves then, which is very important. I love watching them. It is beautiful.

What do you think the benefits are, for the children, of being involved in something like this?

I can't quantify it scientifically (although I know research is being done by Dr Peter Whiteman at Macquarie University which does indeed show that musical play enhances the bond between parent and child).

From my own lived experience, as a child who was lucky enough to grow up in a richly musical environment, as a parent, and as an educator - I see that there are many benefits of engaging with your child through music. The most important thing I think is that it is a bonding experience for parents and their children. Sharing an experience like 'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker' with a parent, or a grandparent, is very meaningful. It is a shared emotional journey. Cuddling up together, listening to beautiful music together - it is a bonding experience. I call it the loving listening experience.

I guide my families to cuddle and listen together in my group violin classes. I watch them all as they listen. It brings tears for me, actually, it is so beautiful to watch.

Can you describe it, the loving listening experience, as you call it?

The quality of the loving listening experience is one of tenderness, of closeness, of nurture, of connection. This experience of connection with a loving adult is what children crave - and what they need. It's what all human beings need, actually. The music brings us together. The love is what makes it special.

Esmeralda Tintner - I am so looking forward to coming to see the show! Thank you so much for speaking to me, and thank you for sharing your music with all of us.
Thank you.

'Play me a Story...The Nutcracker' will play at the Sydney Opera House for 4 performances only on 23 and 24 December, 2017.

Bookings via the Sydney Opera House website or box office. And if you would like to go - do book early as this show always sells out very quickly!

BOOK NOW Sydney Opera House Box Office: 02 9250 7777 or www.sydneyoperahouse.com