

Taking a magical journey into adulthood

The Nutcracker: A Play

presented by Playmakers Repertory Co.

Saturday, Dec. 1 through
Saturday, Dec. 22

8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday
2 p.m. Sunday

Paul Green Theatre

For ticket information, call 962-1121

David Hammond is the artistic Director of Playmakers Repertory Company. He wrote *The Nutcracker: A Play*, produced for the first time by PRC last season. He directed last year's production and is directing this year's reprisal. This interview took place the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

Omnibus: What other plays that you have written have been produced and where have they been produced?

Hammond: I wrote several adaptations of Moliere for the Lincoln Center Student Program in the 1970s. They were produced and toured around New York. One of them played for two years at Lincoln Center. I've done a lot of translating from Russian and German.

Recently, I have a version of *Tom Jones* that's been playing summer stock — it played California last summer. Three years ago it did a summer stock tour, and then last summer another company did it in California. My adaptation of *The Marriage of Figaro* is going into rehearsal in Hong Kong right now, and I can't go.

GREG MILLER

Theater

Q: After its big success last year, is your version of *The Nutcracker* being produced in other places?

A: Yes. It's being done this Christmas at the Hope Repertory Theatre in Michigan, and it's being done next year at a theater in California.

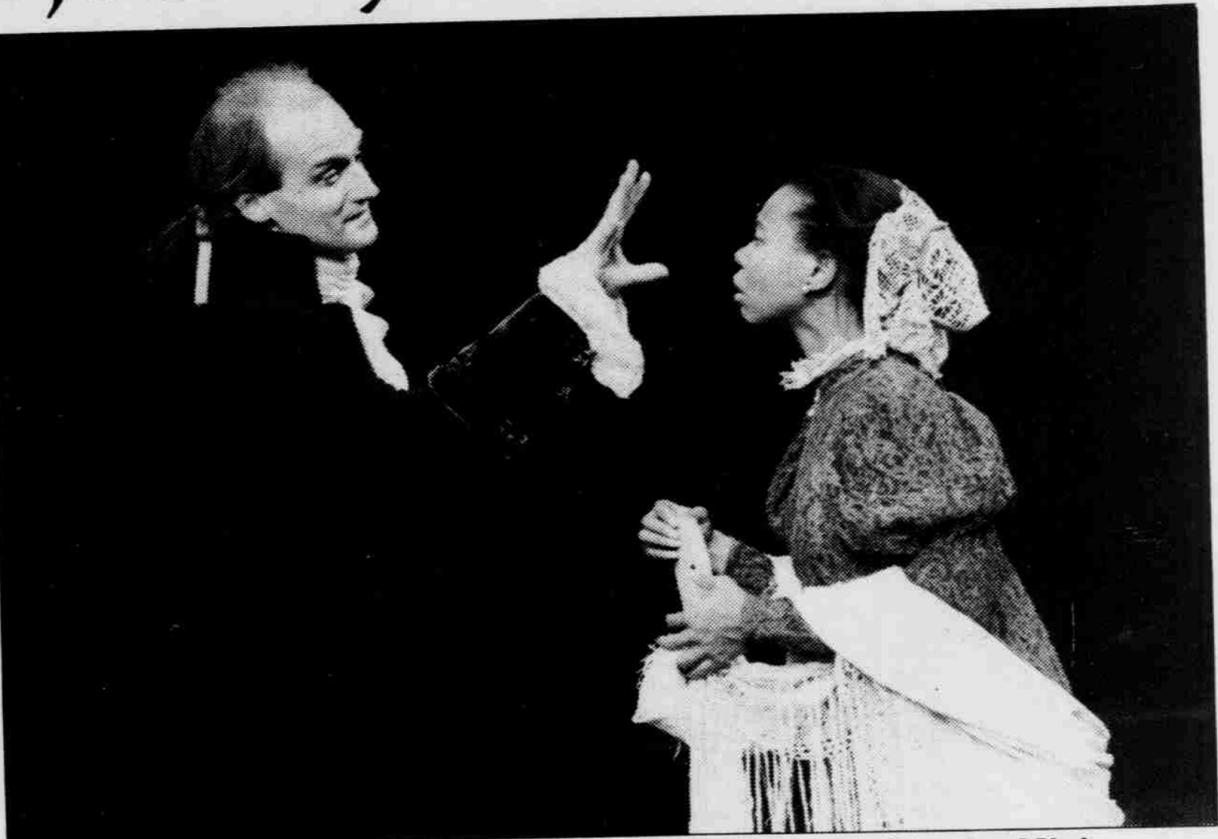
Q: How does it feel to you personally to have "your baby" come to life under your own hand?

A: It's just like any other play (chuckle). As a quote-unquote playwright, and I do use quotes, I write specifically to a task. I'm not a conceiver. I don't originate a tale that I'm dying to tell on a stage. I figure out how to tell a tale that exists. I conceive the theatrical telling of the story. I do a lot of adapting and I'm concerned really with the "how" of telling it. And I sort of separate functions. I consider myself a theater craftsman more than a playwright. It's the same work as working a scene in rehearsal except I also add the words.

It's exactly the same work, and I do that work and I hear the people talk, and then I write down the lines. And then when it's finally written down and I've seen them talking and I've heard them talking, I edit the scenes, and then I put it away. Then when I direct it, I treat it just like it was written by someone else, except that the re-writes are faster and the author never complains.

Q: Most people know only about the ballet. What is the source material for your play?

A: The original book by E.T.A.



Ray Dooley and Pilar Herrera as Drosselmeier and Aunt Clara in 'The Nutcracker: A Play'

Hoffman. It was written in 1823 in Germany. It's called *Nutcracker and Mouse-king*, and it's a book-length Christmas tale, rather episodic. The ballet is based on a French version that Alexandre Dumas wrote, called *The Nutcracker of Nuremberg*, which only tells the beginning of the story and then takes the trip to Candyland which is the basis of the ballet.

In the actual book the trip to Candyland is like the last chapter after rather more complicated adventures. In the ballet you never know why in the world this person is a nutcracker, and that is really the heart of the book, what that curse is. So the basic impulse came from his book, and then I used several other stories of his to sort of flesh out themes that are in the book that I had to find a way to dramatize.

Q: Is there a particular theme in the story that drove you to adapt it? I mean, what really attracted you to the story?

A: Well ... what really attracted me was that we needed a good family play for Christmas, and we had looked at several classic stories that might be able to be adapted: *David Copperfield*, *Little Women*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*. After I did the *Marriage of Figaro* adaptation, McKay Coble (PRC costume designer) said, "Why don't you make a play out of *The Nutcracker*?" and I said yeah, sure, that'd be good.

Then when I read it, I was kind of appalled because it rambles all over the place. But it had the great line that a classic fairy tale has, which is the green world journey of the classic romance where the young couple goes into an enchanted place where they undergo trial, and then they emerge from the enchanted place better informed, better equipped to deal with the real world. Once you see that line in it then it's got a classic theatrical structure. It's the structure of *As You Like It*.

So then the question becomes, how do I build this line, how do I theatricalize it? In the novel the major conflict takes place offstage. She locks herself in her bedroom and the nutcracker killed the mouse-prince in the next room and she just hears the battle. So how do we actually bring the two worlds together, the nice-world and the people-world?

And then when I found that, it became a journey play, a journey tale, the magical journey, the journey of knowledge. And once that was structured theatrically, it's a classic fairy tale, it's a Bruno Bettelheim education-of-the-child fairy tale. The archetypes are in the tale, and I'm just adding human detail. It was an enormously satisfying place to exist for a few months.

Q: Can you give me a brief synopsis of the story as you wrote it, without giving anything away?

A: A young girl on the threshold of adulthood has a magical experience that results in a journey into adulthood for herself — that's one half of the story — and the other half is a young man, a young boy on the threshold of adulthood, is interrupted in his development by this terrible curse and has to go on a journey that

prepares him for adulthood. They are able to do the journey because they find each other and help each other to prepare for the life ahead.

It's really about growing up and how the most successful progression into adulthood involves the assimilation of certain very basic things that children have that many of us give up as we move into adulthood, but the most successful adult is the one who carries a certain kind of innocence and a certain kind of purity and a certain naivete into adulthood — in a changed form of course — but one does not divorce oneself from one's child-life, one makes an alliance with the child and brings some of the child's viewpoints into adulthood.

Hammond said he found that one of the most attractive things about Hoffman's writing was his ability to capture the true innocence of childhood, when emotions are full-blown and one at a time. He feels that Stephen King is capable of capturing this child-essence, he said. In many of King's stories, a truly innocent child is presented to the audience, and then the monster eats it. This is perhaps the most horrifying scenario. But in the story of the *Nutcracker*, Hoffman at least implies that the pure of heart can overcome the evil. Ditto for Hammond's play.

Last year's production of *The Nutcracker: A Play* was a tremendous success that broke many PRC box-office records. I left feeling like I was seven years old, remembering what Christmas really feels like, experiencing the magic. If this year's reprisal can match last year's debut, it is well worth the evening and the ticket price. Take your family or take your love. I can't wait.

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