

Watching *Coppélia* While White

The stages of life are not marked, as the Sphinx thought, by how many feet you have, but by what sort of public rituals you spend your time attending. And these move in generational waves. In your early twenties, for instance, you are always going to weddings; in your early fifties you are always going to weddings again. There are waves of funerals, waves of graduations, waves of baby showers. Today we ushered in what is doubtless the beginning of such an era: other people's children's performances. In this case, a production of *Coppélia* by the local children's ballet troupe.

Our friends are Mexicans, and the ballet (and thus the audience) was about 15% people of color—in Vermont, this is the equivalent of an all-black crowd. It was one of the most racially diverse groups I've ever seen in our state. Susannah had to ask for toilet paper in French; we were talking in Spanish, the troupe included kids who were African immigrants, African-American, Chinese, Korean, Mexican, and from somewhere in the Arab-speaking world; there was also a considerable delegation from Indochina, but I am too ignorant to distinguish between the various nationalities therein. And maybe Russians? Anyway, it was diverse to a degree that almost nothing in Vermont is diverse.

Neil Steinberg writes wonderfully about the spelling bee as a traditional American gatekeeping ritual for immigrant families. Part of its beauty is that it is so very arbitrary; the demands of English orthography make no sense, add nothing to our understanding of the wider world. We can learn a simple rule, such as the fact that *i* comes before *e*, except if it comes after *c*, or in a plural noun whose singular ends in “*cy*,” or when the vowels are sounded as “*ay*,” or in recent loanwords, or various other exceptions like *deity*, *eight*, *neither*, *sovereign*, *weird*, and so on. But we will never reach back to this learning as an adult as a useful analogy for something else life throws at us. It is a dead end.

These qualities are precisely what make arbitrary sets of rules so useful as a gatekeeping mechanism. *Any arbitrary set of rules will do*. Richard Mulcaster, the English educator who was signally responsible for standardizing English spelling, was also one of the major lawmakers for football. He demanded that students develop a competency both in orthography and in football, two distinct sets of arbitrary exercises which he had, in their details, invented from whole cloth. His list of over 8,500 “difficult words,” spelled to his taste but *not defined(!)*, set the telling priorities for all spelling bees since the 1500s. And as David Crystal points out, he was probably the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Holofernes*.

Ballet follows a similar pattern. For children, in particular, the choreography and performance of a ballet are not apt to have exceptional production value; nor are they likely to contribute much to the narrative of the ballet. *Coppélia* is a story about a maker of magical automatons, and a girl who breaks into his lair, replacing the clockwork girl he has some erotic fixation with. He doesn't notice; she is full of remorse; et cetera. Having a train of four-year-olds skip around the stage in a circle really doesn't add to this story, but it does form a public trial, an arbitrary exercise with differential levels of success or failures. It does hold out a particular brass ring of excellence in that most sophisticated and white and upper-class genre, the ballet. And, in this case, it does much more than that.

The major fin-de-siecle ballets, are, with few exceptions, racist and Orientalist in aesthetic: *Coppélia*, *La Bayadère*, *Cléopâtre*, *Schéhérazaade*, the *Nutcracker*, etc. Race “science” was at its apex in this era, and ballet reflects that as well as any other medium. *Coppélia*, which for all its humor is in a sense a very dark narrative, combines that racialism with an interrogation of science and the boundary between humanity and mechanism. It stands somewhere between *Frankenstein* and *The War With The Newts*, though it is hardly the masterpiece that either of those works is. But *Coppélia* also joins the *Nutcracker Suite* in presenting a series of dances based on racial stereotypes. (Both ballets, incidentally, are based on E.T.A. Hoffman stories.)

To use an 1870s rendering of race as the basis for a ritual performance aimed at achieving white privilege presents....decisions. Should the “Chinese Doll” roles be performed by Asian children, or white children made up to appear Chinese, or perhaps black children? If an Arab child is type-cast as

the “Arabian Doll,” will it seem incongruous for a Vietnamese child to be playing the role of a white person? The troupe had to resolve these questions with a superabundance of budding ballerinas of color—they made some effort to ensure that the “Chinese Dolls” looked Chinese—at least to an audience that can't visually distinguish Han from Hmong. But the Tyrolean corset girls who are the local equivalent of “white” are cast in all races.

I watched this show with all the tragedy of looking back at the authors of the 1870s looking forward on modernity in horror; and all the comedy that a children's ballet necessarily entails. I was sitting beside my good friends, who are Mexican immigrants. They love America so much more viscerally than I do, and for them—and the many other families of color there—this ballet and all its racial insanity was surely a rung on the ladder towards acceptance as white, as bourgeois, as members of the club. And in that striving, it was I, and the other whites, who were the immediate beneficiaries and judges of the fact that the Chinese Dolls were played by Vietnamese kids rather than Burkinabé kids or Italian-Irish kids. Yet I have a notion that this trial-by-insanity attitude would not have been much different if it were entirely immigrants in the audience. I was strongly reminded of Genet's stage directions for *The Blacks, A Clown Show*:

This play, written, I repeat, by a white man, is intended for a white audience, but if, which is unlikely, it is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizer of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume and lead him to his seat, preferably in the first row of the orchestra. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon this symbolic white throughout the performance. But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used.