

A preschooler's Nutcracker is sweet

When Leo brought home a permission slip to go to the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall with his Pre-K class today, I was a bit taken aback. Attending a symphony concert hasn't been high on our list of places to go as a family. In fact, if you had asked me, I might have said we'd take our boys there when they reached their mid-20s.

Leo's teachers told me, though, that the children would see a modified and age-appropriate version of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite. In fact, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra—with dancers from the Baltimore School for the Arts—is offering four of these Tiny Tots performances this week.



I signed up to go as a chaperone, and it struck me this morning that I've never even seen live ballet myself. In fact, for much of my life, I believed there were words to the music of "The Nutcracker Suite," thanks to Captain Kangaroo.

A truly wonderful, super-prepared mother might have read her son the story in advance—but I wasn't sure how the story would be abridged, and Leo might have been disappointed if the performance and the story didn't match.

I just told Leo that there would be music and dancing and we would sit in a big room on soft seats.

By the time we found our red velvety seats, Leo and his classmates were ready for the show to begin. He had a lot of questions, wondering why they turned the lights out, why the music was so loud, and why we couldn't sit in a balcony.



Then it began. And Leo's eyes never left the stage as he whispered to me again and again.

"Mama, where is the nutcracker? Can we see him again?"

“Yes, he’ll be back. He is the star of the show.”

“Mama, do you think the princess went to put on a new dress?”

“Maybe. We’ll have to look when she comes back.”



“Mama, this is not really dancing.”

“Well, it’s a different kind of dancing. It’s not Irish dancing—or the kind of dancing Aunt Treasa and Uncle George do.”

“Mama, why did the lady say these people are coffee? They do not look like coffee.”

“We’re pretending they are coffee.”

When the Chinese tea dancers came out spinning their umbrellas, Leo watched in fascination, especially when each dancer set her umbrella down and danced away from it.

“Mama, how will they get the right umbrella back?”

“Just watch and see,” I told him. And they did—or at least I think they did. I may not have been watching closely enough. But everyone had an umbrella as the dancers left the stage. And it occurred to me that Leo had asked exactly the question that the choreographer wanted him to ask.

The whole performance, which was beautifully narrated and just the right length for our 5-year-old, lasted about 40 minutes.

As we walked outside, Leo turned to me and said, “Why did the Mouse King fight with the Nutcracker Prince?”

Already my son is asking me questions I cannot answer.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe the Mouse King wanted to be more important?”

He considered that. Then we talked about why our nutcracker at home—a stainless

steel model—looked nothing like the nutcrackers in the Meyerhoff lobby.



I tried to explain how the soldier models crack nuts, though I'm not entirely sure they work as well as the one we use.

Together Leo and I climbed back onto the bus. I was feeling good about this cultural experience our son had had at such an early age, how caught up in the performance he had been, and I was glad—as I always am—that I had taken the time to spend the morning with him.

Then Leo turned to me.

"Mama," he said, and he sounded a bit put out. "This Nutcracker stuff took all our play time and craft time today."

"Yes, that's true," I said. "You do like making crafts. But you'll have time to play after your nap this afternoon."

He seemed satisfied. But maybe next time we should pack some sugar plums in Mama's purse.