

Kingdom of Sweets in every flavour



Photo Justin Slee/Guzelian

Ismene Brown takes two young ballet critics to the very different production of *The Nutcracker* on offer this season

THE first ballet experience that most people agree they had is a Christmas trip to *The Nutcracker*. But they might very well disagree about what they saw.

Unlike other great ballets, which are fixed and recognisable works of theatre, *The Nutcracker* comes in a bewildering variety of forms. Each version has in common Tchaikovsky's magical, unforgettable score and a Christmas party at which a young girl is given a Nutcracker doll by a guest called Dr Drosselmeyer.

Other stable elements are a growing Christmas tree, a fight between the Nutcracker and the King of the Rats (or Mice), and a journey through a snowstorm into the Kingdom of Sweets.

Yet within this simple framework choreographers have woven strongly individual tales, full of different metaphorical interpretations. Some versions tell of little-girl Clara, of Christmas presents and sweets; others of growing-adolescent Clara, of romantic fantasies and strange fears. Others introduce the Nutcracker himself as an imprisoned nephew to Dr Drosselmeyer, who may himself be Clara's godfather or a mysterious magician.

The reason for this curious malleability can be traced back to the original 1892 production at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Petipa wanted to produce the ballet himself, but illness forced him to hand the broken-backed libretto over to his protégé, Lev Ivanov. Now the only section of Ivanov's choreography to have survived complete and intact is the grand *pas de deux* for the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier, and sketches exist for the Snowflakes.

Add to this the fact that E T A Hoffmann's 1816 story *Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, on which the ballet was based, is considerably stranger and more disturbing than Petipa's gentle libretto, and you have provided choreographers and designers with endless scope to reinterpret - just as we the viewers have endless potential to dream the story in our own way.

In Britain this season we can see four *Nutcrackers*: from Scottish Ballet, Birmingham Royal, English National and the Kirov at the Coliseum. Each has its own particular flavour. Here is our young person's guide, with the help of Laura Harding, 11, and Jack Mikol, 8. We awarded marks for key aspects - the Christmas tree and the rats - as well as sweets for the quality of design and pointe shoes for the dancing. The star rating is for the production as a whole.

SCOTTISH BALLETT (seen at Hull)

IB The least sugary of all the British *Nutcrackers*, with a simple view of the story and virtuoso costume design in spots and stripes by Philip Prowse. His sets are less good, too obviously pared down for touring. In Peter Darrell's 1973 production the transformation scene from real to dream is no-nonsense, and the Kingdom of Sweets is a simple canopy of strung beads in liquorice allsort colours - attractive but lacking presence. Snowland, though, has the look of magnified snowflake structure, filigree and trellis shapes gleamingly lit - and polar bears attending the Snow Queen.

Clara is very young, an observer rather than participant, and the Nutcracker himself is seriously disappointing, wearing a white T-shirt and tights. Overall, refreshingly unfussy but lacking magic.

JACK The Christmas tree didn't really grow or look realistic. The Nutcracker should have looked more like a soldier instead of a guy. I liked the rats a lot, they were very funny in the battle, and the magician's tricks were excellent. The best bit was when at the end he pulled his cloak back and there was Clara, like magic.

LAURA The Christmas tree was sissy, it should have been bigger and grander. I preferred the adults' social dancing at the party to the ballet dancing, which wasn't that great. The snow scenery was lovely, like a mixture between snow and sugar, and I liked the polar bears. But the Nutcracker Prince looked like an Action Man, really silly.

SCOTTISH SCORE - Xmas trees 3, Rats 4, Sweets 3, Pointes 4. Overall ***

ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLETT (seen in Nottingham)

IB A child-oriented production (by Ben Stevenson in 1991) that goes straight for the sugar factor. Clara lives in something resembling a Disney dwarfs' house, with rickety furniture and a casual seasonal get-together of neighbours too busy chatting through Tchaikovsky's enchanting music to do any dancing. Act 1 is primarily about presents - a mountain of which sit under a well-candled tree - and some deft magic by old Drosselmeyer.

The marionettes are properly doll-like, King Rat has seven heads (as in Hoffmann), scarlet Nutcracker troops fight on horseback, and rats on ratback. Clara is ushered into Sweetieland by little flying pastry cooks stirring up dolly mixture.

The choreography is workaday, but designer Desmond Heeley's colours are pretty. I was lying down nauseous from the saccharine overdose when my colleagues awarded the marks.

JACK It was fantastic, the best. Then Birmingham, then the Kirov, then Scottish. The dancing dolls were very good, particularly the blue and red soldier doll. I got a headache from the cannon bang. In Act 2 the huge granny with all her little children (Mother Ginger) was sweet.

LAURA If they had the Birmingham Christmas tree, this one would be perfect. This Drosselmeyer had the best magic. I liked it so much when he pulled that stream of hankies out of the fat girl's mouth. I thought the Kingdom of Sweets was utterly amazing. The ending with the Nutcracker standing in Clara's bedroom saluting, as if he was real, was excellent.

ENB score Xmas trees 4, rats 5, sweets 5, pointes 3. Overall ****

BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET (Birmingham Hippodrome)

IB In the stunning *coup de théâtre* at the heart of Peter Wright's 1990 production Wright and his designer John Macfarlane transform Clara's world with a momentarily growing Christmas tree that appears to burst out through the theatre, shrinking not just Clara and her toys but the audience too. The battle next to the cavern of a fireplace is staged with fiery smoke and atmospheric engagements, unimprovably exciting.

Clara is 15, and attracted by her Byronic young godfather Drosselmeyer, who has fine magic skills and leads her through a faintly erotic journey in Act 2 that doesn't quite match the Act 1 thrills. Designs are romantically smudgy, and choreography is high-quality, with Ivanov's grand Sugar Plum Fairy-Nutcracker duets.

JACK This is really, really good. The Christmas tree was fantastic, great scenery, lovely music, fantastic clothing, glorious dancing. The battle was really exciting, so was the magic, and I loved Clara.

LAURA The tree was sensational. It was kind of creepy when it extended and the mist came down, very moving. You really felt you were getting smaller. The Nutcracker doll was a proper working nutcracker here - you could see its mouth open. I liked the formal Buckingham Palace soldiers, and the rats were superb. I didn't mind not having sweets in Act 2, because it had a fixed visual theme which it stuck to.

BRB SCORE - Xmas trees 5, rats 5, sweets 4, pointes 4. Overall ****

PARIS OPERA BALLET (Paris)

IB My fellow critics were unable to attend, but I suspect they would agree that this is a *Nutcracker* for the child-free balletomane who prefers chic to magic. Rudolf Nureyev's 1985 production shows *The Nutcracker* as a teenage journey through reality and dream, a realisation that external ugliness may hide an interior of rich imaginary possibilities.

Clara doubles the Sugar Plum Fairy and Drosselmeyer the Nutcracker Prince, but with less erotic charge than you might anticipate. In her dream she imagines her family as menacing bats, then, with Drosselmeyer's therapeutic help, reimagines them as the national dances, with herself as the princess of a golden ball - safe, rich, beloved. She wakes, to discover outside her front door the noisy urchins of the real world.

The convoluted narrative rather plods through its symbolic duties, and the tricky, staccato choreography often feels at odds with Tchaikovsky. But the Nutcracker Prince's part evokes Nureyev in every step and Nicholas Georgiadis's sets and costumes bathe the eyes in poetic splendour and elegance.

PARIS SCORE - Xmas trees 2, rats 1, sweets 4, pointes 4. Overall ***

KIROV (London Coliseum from Dec 17)

IB If you like pink chiffon you'll love this *Nutcracker*, which we watched on video in advance of its arrival in London. In this 1934 production by Vassily Vainonen, Clara is called Masha, and is danced by a young girl and a ballerina as her two selves, child and woman.

Pink designs aside, the scenario makes little attempt to glue the fantasy elements together. The Transformation and Battle scenes - often the strongest parts of British productions - are puny, filling time before the production's high points, the formal classical dance numbers, in which the Kirov ballerinas will shine.

But even allowing for the flattening effects of video, this was the least enjoyable production in our survey. Not enough magic, fun or elegance.

JACK I liked two of the dolls at the party, the jumping jack and the warrior doll - they were the best thing. But the rats were just sad.

LAURA I really hated that Christmas tree. It was pathetic, small and plastic. The party was much too formal, and the magician didn't do any magic. The dancing was really the only good thing about it.

KIROV SCORE - *Xmas trees 1, rats 1, sweets 2, pointes 5. Overall ***