

## Catch this cracker while you can

Ismene Brown reviews The Nutcracker performed by the Birmingham Royal Ballet at the Birmingham Hippodrome

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**By Ismene Brown**

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DAVID BINTLEY, director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, is thinking the unthinkable. Last week he admitted to toying with the idea of replacing the company's marvellous Nutcracker.

It would be odd, to say the least, since The Nutcracker is its cash-cow, and BRB has just revealed that the past two years have been financially disastrous. Losing its home theatre, the Birmingham Hippodrome, while it underwent a £30million redevelopment, cost the company more than £1 million in lost box-office and extra touring expenses. The innovative artistic policy also proved costly. Tours to London and the United States added further heavy losses.

The company, subsidised with £5.6million this year, faces another blow with the ending next March of its longtime sponsorship by Powergen. The emphasis will be on "retrenchment" for the next two years, with no new creations planned.

However, talking this week, Bintley insisted that he was upbeat. The Hippodrome, now with a unique world-class centre for dance injuries, and a new workshop theatre, was increasing BRB's creative opportunities and its attraction to dancers.

Financial restoration now depends on revivals of Bintley's popular Hobson's Choice and Far from the Madding Crowd next year. However, a new Christmas project is on the cards for 2003-4, which may alternate with, or even replace BRB's spectacular and much-loved Nutcracker, produced by Bintley's predecessor Peter Wright in 1990.

Familiar as it is, The Nutcracker's hold shows no sign of wavering. No Nutcracker that I have seen marries the visual and the dramatic so perfectly, and Wright and his miracle-working designer, John F McFarlane, take their cue from the mystery and passion in Tchaikovsky's music. The result is an exalting yet tender experience.

Here is a 15-year-old Clara, from a happy, plush, disciplined Victorian home, and with a romantic godfather who conjures up her dreams. These are not of sweets and toys, but fantasies from that trembling brink between childhood and adulthood: voluptuous flowers, dances with snowflakes, a flight on a swan, a romantic soldier-prince.

The show's high point, of course, is the staggering Christmas tree transformation. Other trees in other Nutcrackers grow upwards - this one seems to invade the theatre, dwarf the audience, and match Tchaikovsky's music exactly in spine-tingling scale.

A vivid performance by dancers and musicians - Michael O'Hare a dashing Drosselmeyer with a Byronic pigtail, Robert Parker an ideal Nutcracker Prince, clearly danced, breezily attractive - make this a theatrical treat worth a large detour to see.

- Until next Sat. Tickets: 0870 730 1234

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