

The Nutcracker: It's all going nuts at the ballet

You expect to see The Nutcracker staged at Christmas – but this year's snowstorm of productions is overwhelming. The trouble is there's not much else to take its place, says Jessica Duchen

You expect The Nutcracker at Christmas, but this year the family ballet favourite isn't just ubiquitous; it's carpet-bombing the country with sugar plums. Whenever I spot a poster for The Nutcracker, it seems to be advertising yet another production. It's unbelievable. They're all at it.

At the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden, it's The Nutcracker. At Birmingham Royal Ballet, it's The Nutcracker – with a run, too, at the O2. English National Ballet is bringing Wayne Eagling's staging back to the London Coliseum. Matthew Bourne's Nutcracker!, the choreographer's rethinking for his company, New Adventures, is on tour and will be at Sadler's Wells next week. Northern Ballet has already started its Nutcracker run. This is nuts. Why can't we just get away from it and find a snazzy new ballet to enjoy in the festive season?

The easy answer is that in cash-strapped times, a surefire money-spinner is required, and The Nutcracker does nothing if not sell tickets. Besides, The Nutcracker is the type of ballet that proves a company and a choreographer's worth: everyone wants to proffer a personal take on it.

Still, it's not as if nobody has tried to create new ballets, or reworkings of other old ones, for appropriately seasonal family entertainment. Some work better than others.

Cinderella, with its sweet-and-sour score by Prokofiev, is chief runner-up in the Christmas ballet race. Last year I fell madly in love with Matthew Bourne's adaptation, set in London during the Blitz, with an RAF pilot instead of a prince, an angel instead of a fairy godmother, and the central ballroom scene taking place at the Café de Paris on the night it was bombed. Drawing on classic films such as *A Matter of Life and Death* and *Brief Encounter*, it is a complete joy for anyone who, like me, is a sucker for old movies; and the era of the story matches that of the music. A Christmas treat? Yes – but for adults only. If you are taking kids out to their first Christmas ballet, most of it will go clean over their heads.

More insidiously, traditional versions of Cinderella have fallen victim to that most modern of hazards: political correctness. We're not really supposed to have "ugly sisters" any more. Last Christmas the choreographer David Bintley unveiled a brand new Cinderella for his Birmingham Royal Ballet. It's poetic at times, with wonderful designs, and kids can enjoy the animal costumes. But the stepsisters are a shadow of their former selves, compared to the Frederick Ashton classic from Covent Garden.

See, if you dare, the DVD of Ashton's version, filmed in the 1960s. Ashton himself and Robert Helpmann steal the show as the Ugly Sisters in drag. It's a priceless performance as they compete with vicious glee for the biggest oranges at the ball and at one glorious moment work out that the very short man with whom

Ashton is obliged to dance is possibly Napoleon. But Ashton and Helpmann are no longer with us, and when this account is staged today the double-act tends to be sadly watered down. It matters because, ironically, the pantomime aspect of the Ugly Sisters was Cinderella's only actual connection with Christmas.

Speaking of animal costumes, here *The Tales of Beatrix Potter* takes the Christmas cake. Again, it's an Ashton classic, created for film in 1971 and transferred cleverly to the Covent Garden stage about two decades later. It's a pretty affair with keenly detailed characterisation and a tuneful John Lanchbery score, but I might not pick it for a family treat for a child older than about six. It's a bit long for a one-acter and kids become restive, especially now that they're used to computer games instead of... well, do they even know Beatrix Potter's stories? Meanwhile the adults can't help wondering what temperature it must be underneath those weighty mouse heads, or whether the dancing pigs can see where they're going.

Absent from this year's Christmas schedules are several adaptations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The Royal Ballet's new full-length one, choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon, was one of the big dance events of 2011 and featured special effects galore, a specially commissioned score by Joby Talbot, a tap-dancing Mad Hatter and a great deal else. Scottish Ballet has an *Alice* choreographed by Ashley Page; English National Ballet has a version involving one of *The Nutcracker's* magic ingredients, Tchaikovsky – though perhaps *Alice* is a little too English for such very Russian music.

But as a Christmas ballet any *Alice* has a problem: it's simply not Christmassy. One of the great charms of Lewis Carroll's book is its irrationality, that dreamlike sense of incipient insanity. The gory scene starring Simon Russell Beale as the Duchess surrounded by blood and carcasses is probably enough to ensure Wheeldon's *Alice* stays away from Christmas for good.

Across the Atlantic, New York City Ballet unveiled a new family show in September. Sir Paul McCartney provided the music for *Ocean's Kingdom*, choreographed by Peter Martins. It involves an underwater princess who is kidnapped by the evil King Terra and the Terra Punks. Hopes ran high, but critical responses were broadly dismal; one even called it, "Twenty million dollars under the sea". The story was weak and involved a spot of environmental preaching too far; the choreography was roundly slammed as dull. Christmas? No, it's only returning in January. Until then, they're doing, er, *The Nutcracker*.

What's really the secret of *The Nutcracker's* success? It's not only Tchaikovsky. Most adults today, taking their kids to their first Christmas *Nutcracker*, were once taken to see it by their own parents. One light tap of Tchaikovsky plunges us straight back into our childhoods. Lost innocence returns for a couple of hours; sometimes there can be tears. You can't manufacture the effect of memory.

Just one other ballet could press similar mental buttons: that great "anytime" favourite, *The Sleeping Beauty*. This year, only Scottish Ballet has picked it for its chief Christmas production. You can also catch it at Covent Garden, plus a cinecast, but only until 15 December. Meanwhile, Bourne has promised a new version in time for next Christmas. In his characteristic reworking, Princess Aurora is born in 1890, the year of the ballet's premiere, falls asleep in 1911 and wakes up round about now. Just in time, perhaps, to wonder why everyone's doing *The Nutcracker*.