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# NANNY MCFEET!

### BALLET EVENT

Now Emma Thompson's *Nanny McPhee* is a children's ballet... and it's all thanks to her daughter and an amazing night out

BY ANDREW PRESTON

her: 'I'd like to think they were encouraging, but personally I found it exploitative. I feel angry that it's OK to put on fat children trying to do ballet, but not children from every class of society with their hearts on their sleeve and desperate to perform. We should be trying to fight apathy and get children off the sofa and away from staring at screens. I've nothing against curling, either, but why is it OK to support that but not ballet?'

The £500,000 the charity now spends each year goes not just on its showpiece spring production, but also on summer courses, masterclasses and an outreach programme to schools. And Briance is an avowed champion of ballet as a sport.

'I'm not a dancer, I'm a tennis player,' she says, 'so to me, and to children under 16, ballet is an intense sport. But ballet dancers are also the most beautiful physical specimens in the world. Gymnasts may have every muscle perfectly balanced, but ballet dancers have to be gymnasts with musicality, grace, acting ability and soul. They have to be able to move an audience to tears with no words, but have all the physical talent of David Beckham. Their feet have to move like the wind, their lungs have to be enormous, the boys have to catch girls in mid-air and have them land on their shoulders as if they're a piece of thistle-down and keep smiling as they run off the stage.'

Many of her dancers have carried on their training. Last autumn, Anna Rose O'Sullivan, who performed with the London Children's Ballet when she was nine, danced alongside Carlos Acosta for the Royal Ballet in *Don Quixote*. But for Briance and her team, such stories are a happy by-product. It's more about teaching the culture of ballet - teamwork, discipline, hard work, sacrifice, patience and how to deal with disappointment - as well as catching a potential new audience young. 'Once you've seen one of our ballets as an 11-year-old, you're not going to be a 25-year-old who'll have that knee-jerk reaction of "Oh no, I don't like ballet".'

You quickly learn that about two minutes is the maximum a nine-year-old is going to want to watch fairies dancing in lines or patterns. I make sure we have good, strong stories so that children sit on the edge of their seats, riveted.'

Emma Thompson's story provides the latest gripping narrative. And Briance and her team hope she'll add some Hollywood glamour next month when they invite her and her daughter to return as guests at *Nanny McPhee's* opening night. *Nanny McPhee* is at The Peacock Theatre, London, April 24-27

**O**n May 18, 2006, Emma Thompson and her then seven-year-old daughter Gaia slipped in unannounced to see the London Children's Ballet production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* at the Peacock theatre in London. Eight years on, their visit is transforming the lives of budding young dancers.

'We spoke after the show and she said her daughter loved it,' says Lucille Briance, founder and artistic director of the company. 'She felt inspired by the project and said if there was ever anything she could do to help we should let her know.' Briance jokingly asked for Thompson's pledge in writing. Two days later, a handwritten letter duly arrived.

So when it came to planning the company's 20th anniversary production, Briance got back in touch with Thompson and told her she wanted to do an adaptation of *Nanny McPhee*. True to her word, Thompson, who wrote and starred in the smash-hit Hollywood film, gave Briance permission to use the story.

Since January, a company of nine to 15-year-olds from all backgrounds have gathered in London every Sunday to receive free tuition and rehearse the show, which is choreographed by dancers from the Royal Ballet. Some trek all the way in from as far as Suffolk, Chester, Wales and Devon. 'It shows what parents are willing to do to help their child follow a dream,' says Briance. 'They may not be excelling at anything else and perhaps feel invisible at school. One single mother told me her nine-year-old girl would say to her every day, "I am rubbish." But at the end of our season she said, "I can do it, I can dance." It transformed her life and, aged 15, she's won a ballet scholarship to Glasgow. She comes from a family with no advantages and she's the most beautiful dancer, but she didn't know it. Her mother was so grateful she now volunteers for us on Sundays.'

I hear many more inspiring stories of children from the *Nanny McPhee* cast who have gained

confidence and a new direction in life from the company. Ruby Spicer, nine, was admitted to hospital 20 times before the age of five and still suffers with asthma. Mukeni Nel, 15, abandoned as a baby in Kenya, who lost the sight in one eye through malnourishment, has gone on to dance with the English Youth Ballet Company. Sasha Abrahams, 14, battled juvenile arthritis and is one of this year's soloists, despite taking up ballet only two-and-a-half years ago. The company of 60 are selected from 600 who come from ballet schools to open auditions each year, with six girls chosen from each year group (from ages nine to 15), and the remainder are boys. Although there are inevitably children with wealthy parents, there are many from less privileged backgrounds, including a couple of real-life Billy Elliots, one from a family of stone-quarriers. Last year only four in the company came from fee-paying schools, while 75 per cent of parents admitted they wouldn't have considered bringing their children to auditions if the whole process had not been free.

'The most talented are not the richest,' adds American-born Briance. 'From the very start 20 years ago my ambition was to sell out every show, and we have done that. That wouldn't have happened if it was only upper-middle-class people who liked ballet.'

A former journalist and photographer, Briance started out as a frustrated parent unable to find a ballet company for her daughter to join. 'But I never gave up,' she says, even though her daughter proved not to have the knees and feet for ballet - 'she had about as much chance of joining the Royal Ballet as of flying to the Moon but at least she found out for herself and enjoyed trying'.

The company receives no state funding or Lottery money, and they fight hard to pull in private donations. Briance says having one of their shows on TV could transform the company's fortunes. She has lost count of the number of times producers have told her that the Children's Ballet would make a superb TV show, only to 'come back with their tail between their legs saying there's no interest in ballet.'

Mention of Wayne Sleep's series *Big Ballet* on Channel 4 enrages▶

From top: Joeley Gibson, 12, in the new show; Emma Thompson with her daughter Gaia; Royal Ballet's Erico Montes rehearses with the cast at the Royal Opera House; Emma Thompson in the film *Nanny McPhee*

