

Queen of the desert

One woman's journey across the Australian outback with four camels and a dog

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WARTS AND ALL

London Children's Ballet gives young dancers a chance to shine irrespective of background or body shape. Sally Williams goes behind the scenes as the company prepares to perform *Nanny McPhee* in the West End. Photographs by Kitty Gale

On a cold day in October Isabella Kook, 14, was one of 500 children assembled in a studio in west London to audition for the London Children's Ballet's latest production, *Nanny McPhee - The Ballet*. Although it is called the London Children's Ballet, children from anywhere in the country may audition. Isabella lives in Tonaw, Devon. She came to ballet when she was six, and it became her life. She dances whenever she could: five times a week by the age of nine. Her performance as the Sugar Plum Fairy in her school's end-of-year show was remarkable. "She led the little group, was totally focused, remembered all her steps, looked straight out at the audience," her mother Gabi, a nurse, remembers.

But the top ranks of classical ballet require a certain body type: "Small head, long neck, narrow hips, long arms, legs proportionally longer than your body." Gabi runs through the criteria. There is also the matter of "line", the arrangement of the head, arms, body, legs and feet in a pose or movement. Good line is critical. "You accept it," Gabi says. "If you want to be a runway model, you have to be fit and tall. It's no good if you're 5ft 6. It's no good wishing you were fit, you're not." But Isabella's dream was to dance for a large audience. She worked hard, but there was no opportunity. Until they came upon London Children's Ballet.

London Children's Ballet was founded as a charity in 1994 by Lucille Briance, 61 (she remains artistic director), the mother of a ballet-sad daughter who desperately wanted to be a ballerina but did not have the "right" feet or knees. "Her knees hurt now and they hurt then," Briance says of Zoe, then 10. "She wouldn't have had the slightest chance of getting into the Royal Ballet School." Briance looked for an outlet for Zoe's passion that would allow her to dance more seriously but carry on at school. There was no such place, so Briance created it. She wrote a ballet (adapted from Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*), hired a choreographer, found a studio and advertised auditions for a new ballet to be performed entirely by children.

LCB is now in its 20th year and is celebrating with

"It's not necessarily about technique," LCB's founder, Lucille Briance, says. "It's about children who can twinkle"

Marina Fraser (front) during rehearsal for London Children's Ballet, which take place every Sunday



a ballet based on Emma Thompson's *Nanny McPhee* film, about a stern governess who uses magic to restore order to a household with seven children. Thompson, who also plays Nanny McPhee in the film, wrote the script based on Christiana Brand's *Nurse Matilda* books.

It isn't hard to see why LCB is such a success. Every year it mounts a ballet at a West End theatre using talented nine- to 16-year-olds from dance schools across the country. It does not discriminate on grounds of height, shape or income (it costs the company £3,600 for each child to do the ballet; families pay £45). Children are judged solely on their ability. "People who select for vocational training schools are absolutely right: if you are going to train for the long haul, you need a body that is not going to break down," Briance says. "But it comes to it as a parent, and if you have a child who is passionate and willing to work hard, you have to offer them the opportunity to go as far as you can."

Each production, created from scratch, has an original score ("There's an orchestra! Not music coming out of a speaker!" one child enthused

sets, costumes and top choreography. Briance adds to the pressure by writing the ballets herself because "we need to do something that hasn't been done before and done better." She has written 17 so far, all adapted from classic works of literature such as *The Canterville Ghost*, *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*. *Nanny McPhee* is her first to be based on a contemporary film.

The idea is not talent-spotting, though LCB has changed lives. Anna Rose O'Sullivan, who played the lead role in *A Little Princess* in 2004, for example, was heading for a future in musical theatre until LCB highlighted her raw ballet talent. She is now an artist with the Royal Ballet. But the hope is to teach children the transferable skills of discipline, patience and teamwork.

"LCB demonstrates year after year that even a modest amount of talent, when properly directed and imaginatively deployed, can produce quality dance theatre," Louise Levene, the Sunday Telegraph's dance critic, says. "The performers change every year, but that potent combination of amateur enthusiasm and professional production values

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clockwise from top left: Isabella Lambert (front) and Poppy Frankel; Arrabelle Adey (centre); Nanny McPhee, 14, with co-stars; Holly Answorth-Ledwich (left) and Charlene Tai



guarantees an enjoyable show. The consistency has been astonishing."

The London Children's Ballet calendar starts in October, with the first auditions (there are three rounds in all). Rehearsals are every Sunday from January until the performance, in April (with two intensive weeks over the Easter holiday). Today is November 17, the final round of auditions. One hundred hopefuls are assembled at Dance Arts, a rehearsal studio in west London, to compete for 62 places. The children have been told to wait in a "holding room," a small studio that is now a mess of ballet bags, clothes and lunch boxes. The mood is tense. Some dancers stretch their legs at the barre. Some stand still, hands on hips. Others compulsively adjust their leotards. There are Fartyputs and Thimfers, leotards in pink, sky blue and white, and hair is parted down and pinned at the back – the importance of ballet buns having been drilled in by teachers with names such as "Miss Heidi" and "Miss Nisa" at dance schools back home.

Some come from ordinary-personal ballet lessons,

and others are cr me de la cr me Royal Ballet School junior and senior associates who dance in special classes on Saturdays. But being a junior associate will not necessarily make you a member of LCB. Far from it. "It's not necessarily about technique," Briance points out. "It's about children who can twinkle."

Camron Nolan, 10, a sweet-faced boy with red hair, is here because, for some reason, when he was seven he started walking on his tiptoes. "Sometimes I'd do it to stretch, sometimes to make myself feel a bit taller. I'd do it naturally," he says. "Friends would joke that I should do ballet, and I thought, 'Maybe I should.'" He was drawn in by the *Billy Elliot* effect. He now goes to lessons near his home in Banstead, Surrey, where his mother is an estate agent and his father a rugby coach, and still plays rugby every Sunday. "Ballet has helped my rugby," he says. "It's improved my balance." He uses chalet turns – fast turns along a diagonal line – to dodge tackles.

Ruby Spence, from Sidcup, has cherubically curly hair and at nine is the youngest at today's auditions. She suffers from chronic asthma and severe allergies, and her consultant suggested dance as a way to

build stamina and confidence. "She was in and out of hospital so many times she missed a lot of school," says Ruby's mother, who works in social services, her father a psychologist. Ruby started ballet at the age of three and does three classes a week. Her favourite position is the splits.

Mulani Nd, 16, had a dramatic start in life. As a newborn he was abandoned in a village just outside Nairobi, Kenya, and he was abandoned again in the hospital he was taken to after being found. They left me to die, he says. An untreated eye infection has left him blind in one eye. At seven months old he was taken to an orphanage, from where he was adopted by his British father and Kenyan mother. "My mum couldn't have children and she wanted to adopt a girl, and of course I wouldn't have been adopted by anyone because I'm not the perfect child. But my dad said, 'If you're going to adopt anyone, you have to adopt this one' – looking at me – "because you can really make a difference to his life." His name means "forever happy" in his mother's native language. He now lives in Windsor and started ballet aged five because he was friends with the girls and it was what they did. Dancing is not affected by his impaired sight, unlike throwing and catching in PE. "I have the worst hand-eye coordination ever." He now wants to make ballet his career. "When I dance I just feel more free and happy. I go to that special place, somewhere light and fun, he says. "I have really long legs and long arms. I just need to gain some strength."

The auditions are held in a large room with a piano and a mirrored wall. The judging panel comprises Briance, Fiona Chadwick, a former principal ballerina at the Royal Ballet who is clever at spotting technique; Erko Montes, 28, the choreographer, and Gemma Pritchley-Gale, 26, the LCB ballet mistress – both dancers at the Royal Ballet. They sit at a table with sheets of paper and post ticks or crosses under two headings: charm and choreography. Sandwiches, fruit and fondant cakes have been placed nearby for their lunch.

The children are led in 10 at a time and form a line in front of the judge. Nicya Tranah warms them up and says things such as "Big Christmas lights. Put them out" to get them to smile.

Some get crosses. "Weight back all the time," "Jumping on straight legs," "So unimmaculal it was horrendous." Mulani gets ticks, as do Camron ("So boyish" the judges say, Isabella (Adorable!) and Ruby ("Quick learner, great head on the turn").

"I when the letter arrived, I jumped up and down and phoned my husband at work – "She's in, she's in!" Ruby ("Quick learner, great head on the turn"). They celebrated with dinner at Café Rouge. "I couldn't open it quickly enough," says Arrabelle Adey, 14, from Epson, Surrey, who plays Nanny McPhee and is an LCB veteran, having appeared in *Snow White* and *A Little Princess*. "And there it was: "Congratulations! We are delighted to offer you a place." Her mother and father were clapping. "I was crying, she says, "and I screamed because I was so happy."

"People say, 'It's an elitist thing, no one is interested in ballet!'" Briance cries. "It's so ignorant!"

Flight Master Hat (left), 16, and co-stars rehearse as others watch. Below: Cameron Nolan (top), 10, and Ruby Spence (far left), nine, chat with others during a break

much is given, much is expected," she says. After graduating from Smith College, Massachusetts, where she read political science, she worked in publishing in New York. She moved to London in 1980, after marrying Richard Briance, who is the head of a merchant bank (and son of Prudential Briance, the founder of the National Childbirth Trust). After a spell at Poppe as managing editor and then merchandising editor, Briance gave up work to be a stay-at-home mother. She has four children: Zoe, 31, is the executive director of LCB; Henry, 29, works in private equity in New York; Clement, 26, is a social worker and Freddie, 24, works in retail.

"I certainly didn't expect to be running this, Briance says. "I thought I'd have an idea and hand it on to a mentor in the ballet world." In fact she devotes 11 months a year to LCB (August is spent with her 94-year-old mother in Nantucket). She searches for stories to adapt (like met Emma Thompson after the actress came to a show), free off letters, meets agents who recommended costume and set designers, sets up supporters and organises fundraising events (for example, dinner with Emma Thompson and 250 friends at Bata), driven by a belief in the transformative effect of hand work and children from all backgrounds feeling stretched and important."

She also takes great pleasure in ballet. "We do London, the ritual is to run through her steps in her head as she walks down Fulham Broadway towards the studio." She'll be talking, naming her steps, and her arms will be twirling. "You get close," her mother says. While Isabella is rehearsing, her mother spends time with friends or goes shopping. If Isabella finishes early, they can catch the 4.30pm coach back to Devon. But normally it is the 7.30. "So we get home after midnight," her mother explains.

"The other day we were on the coach," she continues, "and I felt like such a long journey home and I was feeling a bit nervous but then I saw something. This Isabella turned to me and said, 'Mum, I'm so glad we're doing this.'"

Nanny McPhee is at Sadler's Wells Theatre from Thursday to Sunday. For tickets, go to londonchildrensballet.com or saddlewells.com. To support LCB's 20th-anniversary appeal, visit LCB20 £1 to 1000. To pre-order *Nanny McPhee - The Ballet*, call 020-8969 1555



actually go – and rails against those who say it is too highbrow. Various producers have tried and failed to get LCB on television over the years. "Basically they [commissioning editors] say, 'No, it's an elitist thing, no one is interested in ballet!'" she cries. "It's so ignorant!" One of the things she is determined to protect is that the cost of LCB to parents is so minimal. "Seventy-eight per cent of our parents said they would not be able to participate if it wasn't," she says. But keeping that way is getting harder. About 70 per cent of my work is fundraising, and in my opinion it's a waste of time. If the government would give us an allowance we could slash our costs."