

SEVEN

DANCE

Ballet for tots

Louise Levene

The overture begins and a steady kick starts up on the back of your seat. "Sit still, darling," whispers Mummy. Fat chance. Once upon a time, regular churchgoing and face-front classrooms inured even the tiniest children to sitting quietly for long periods and equipped them with a surprisingly high boredom threshold. Today's tots have less experience of keeping still – as any matinée-goer will testify.

Practically every dancer and dance-lover I've ever met can trace their passion to a performance seen in early childhood. Pick the right ballet – and the right child – and the infection

will take hold; get it wrong and you could easily confer lifelong immunity.

Over the coming months, an array of child-friendly ballet is coming our way, yet my advice to parents is: don't be in too much of a hurry. Party dresses are cutest in the very small sizes, it's true, but those organza ruffles don't look so pretty charging up and down the aisle demanding another Cornetto. Your little darling might know the plot points of *The Nutcracker* or *Coppelia*, but are they ready for the great swaths of classical dancing in between? If not, wait a year (or three). Ballet will still be there.

Under-10s tend to be happiest at performances



FIRST STEPS 'Nanny McPhee'

designed specially for them – for which, look no further than London Children's Ballet, offering a winning combination of amateur talent and professional production values. This year's project, featuring young students from across the home counties, is a version of the movie *Nanny McPhee* by Royal Ballet's Erico Montes (Peacock Theatre, London WC2, April 24-27).

The major national

companies are keen to tap into this market for kindergarten classics, too. Northern Ballet's Short Ballets for Small People initiative is currently touring a 30-minute *Three Little Pigs* (to May 30, northernballet.com), while English National Ballet's My First series continues with *My First Coppelia* (to May 25, enb.org.uk). The company websites are all packed with informative fun and games to familiarise their new audience with the material, but ENB still feels the need to blight its charming productions with a narrator who bustles around the obvious. Toddlers might find this helpful, but any well-briefed seven-year-old will probably prefer ENB's grown-up version of *Coppelia* (London Coliseum, July 23-27).

Even the child-friendliest productions can miss their mark. My own resolutely ballet-proof children spent the whole of *The Snowman* asleep on the floor of the stalls, and ballets that sound like nursery fodder are often nothing of the sort. Seen through a child's eyes *The Sleeping Beauty* is a boring tutu-fest briefly enlivened by the Red Riding Hood duet and the bad fairy's go-kart. Canny parents might like to test the water with one of Covent Garden's live relays. Sadly, this Wednesday evening's screening of *Beauty* won't end until long past bedtime.

Choose wisely and do your homework, yet it can still end in tears. After my daughter's first proper ballet I asked her what she had liked best. She didn't hesitate: "The curtains." God knows I tried.

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