

## Nanny McPhee

London Children's Ballet will celebrate its 20th anniversary with a new ballet, *Nanny McPhee*. Zoë Anderson speaks to its choreographer, Erico Montes



**R**oyal Ballet first artist Erico Montes has made a speedy return to London Children's Ballet [LCB], having choreographed *The Secret Garden* last year. "The last *Secret Garden* show was on a Sunday; the following Thursday I was with Lucille [Briance, LCB's director], working on the scenario for *Nanny McPhee*. We didn't really stop!" The new production, which marks LCB's 20th anniversary, is based on Emma Thompson's much-loved 2005 movie. It tells the story of a father with seven unruly children, who have driven away

every nanny in the village, until the mysterious Nanny McPhee arrives to transform their lives. When I spoke to Erico, he had been working on one of the film's most famous scenes, when the children play tricks on their nannies. "In the film, it's incredible, because they're throwing everything around and jumping up and down on tables. You have to be creative, think of things that will work on stage. After a while, I think you have to forget about the film and hold on to the story, to what captures you. It's finding the essence of the story, rather than trying to follow

every detail of the movie." "I watched the film many, many times, to really get the story, to get the point that Emma Thompson was putting across with the film. It's hard to transform it into a ballet, because they're such different media. Obviously, we don't have a Hollywood budget and we don't have grown-ups, they're all children. So we had to come up with ideas that were true to the story, that still worked and gave opportunities to all the children."

**E**rico is particularly excited by Tim Hammond's new score. "That was a great privilege.

*Above from left to right Cameron Nolan, Annabelle Adey, Jodely Gibson, Amelie Meaden and James Lovell.*

So many choreographers never get to have a score commissioned specially, tailor-made to their ideas.

"We've got some really nice magic dance music. *Nanny McPhee* has a group of magic dust girls who follow her round. It was tricky, because it's not a fairy tale – she's not a fairy, not a witch. It's magical but it's mysterious."

In the film, Emma Thompson wears "ugly" makeup to play McPhee. It's built into the character, but that troubled Erico. "I

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Photograph: Johan Persson



*Above Erico Montes, and in rehearsal with London Children's Ballet.*

struggled with that. I didn't want to make one of the children feel ugly on stage. As a dancer, I hate roles that require you to wear ugly make-up. I wanted to do ballet for all the beautiful things about it. It's not until much later that you realise how much reality there is in ballet – when you're a child, you want tutus and tiaras and things that sparkle. I'm grown up, I've been a professional for ten years, and I still just want to do things that are beautiful. So that was tricky:

not completely changing her image from the film, but not making someone feel ugly and unhappy!" Last year, LCB staff were impressed by Erico's concern for all the child dancers, making sure that every member of the cast felt special. "I think your worries are things that concern you in other areas. It's the same thing; because I don't like playing ugly roles, I didn't want to do it to somebody else! I want to try to avoid the children being hurt by something that might have hurt me. I think it's very important that they have an amazing time."

This year, LCB had an unusually large number of boys. "They've never had so many! And you know, I'm a boy, I want them to have good opportunities: good roles, good dancing. I know what it's like: in *Susan Lake*, the boys do two acts, the girls do four; in *Giselle*, the boys do one act, the girls do two! Working on the story, there were many roles where I kept saying, 'Those will be boys', and Lucille kept thinking 'There won't be enough boys.' It turns out we do have enough! "I think it's great: if the boys experience, from an early stage, how the male

dancer is just as important as the female, they can carry that through their careers. In rehearsals, I always tell them, 'The girls are so good because they take it so seriously. We have to do the same. If we want to be taken seriously, we have to take it as seriously as the girls.' It's great that they might become dancers who really know the value of male dancers. Not only the stars, but in the corps de ballet as well." ●

*Nanny McPhee* is at the Peacock Theatre from April 24 to 27. See Calendar for details.