

British Theatre Guide

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Nutcracker!

Music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Choreography by Matthew Bourne

New Victoria Theatre, Woking, and touring
(2008)

Matthew Bourne caused a sensation when he took the well-known and well-loved ballet *Swan Lake* and transferred it into something erotic, slightly sinister and yet much closer to a kind of reality than the original ethereal version. The characters were more modern, totally believable and, to the horror of some, the waiflike swans of the original were danced by men and became characters in their own right – strong, wild and sometimes savage.

He has re-created *Nutcracker* in a similar fashion – not by changing gender, but by taking the glittery, showy fairytale of a young girl's blossoming sexuality and dreams of love into a more realistic version, emphasising the contrast between her reality and her dreams by putting her into an orphanage for waifs and strays. This is a very Dickensian style of establishment – the walls are cracked from top to bottom, the children are dressed in drab brown clothes, and the place is run by a cane-wielding Dr. Dross (Scott Ambler), with the assistance of his severe wife (Mami Tomotami), and the children suffer from their smug and spiteful offspring Fritz and Sugar.

The delightful opening has the audience laughing from the beginning as the orphans enter one by one, front of curtain, to gaze in awe at all the people watching, each one displaying a different character by their reactions. Then, in one swift movement, they turn and whip down the curtain to reveal the dismal, restrictive cruelty of their daily life as they are set to work cleaning, sweeping, and polishing the iron bedsteads.

It is Christmas and the governors are coming, so the children are given colourful paper crowns. Paper chains and a couple of miserable balloons adorn the walls and a dejected excuse for a Christmas tree is placed in the room. The governors have brought sweets for the children, but as soon as they have departed all vestiges of Christmas are whisked away into a locked cupboard, including the Nutcracker doll which orphan Clara had claimed for her own, but which Sugar and Fritz had broken. These two had also eaten, and made themselves sick, with the sweets meant for the orphans – no wonder young Clara's dream takes her into Sweetie Land where everything tastes good.

A more realistic interpretation maybe, but there is magic aplenty as violent bolts of lightning split the walls apart, a life-size Nutcracker lunges from the cupboard, and the scene changes to a beautiful blue and white snowscape with white-clad skaters dancing on the ice. Nutcracker whips off his mask, then his jacket and shirt, and Clara is instantly in love. Pyjama-clad cupids sail across the sky to disappear among the blue, but all is not sweetness and light. Sugar (Michela Meazza) is now Princess Sugar, looking demure and beautiful, but her nature hasn't changed and she contrives to steal the love of Clara's life for a second time, aided by Fritz (Shaun Walters) who is now Prince Bon-Bon.

In the dream the people from Claras life become sweets. There are the pink and fluffy Marshmallow girls, three rough and ready biker Gobstoppers jostle and fight each other, and a sinuous Knickerbocker Glory (Ashley Bain) appears to have paedophilic tendencies. They are all invited to the wedding of Princess Sugar and Nutcracker but poor Clara (a very expressive and enchanting Kerry Biggin) is shut out.

Anthony Wards sets are amazing from the drab orphanage to the magical snow scene. Sweetieland has a huge open mouth for the sweets to enter, and there is a massive wedding cake, the tiers adorned by most of the cast. The whole is danced and performed superbly by the entire company (ages range from around eighteen to forty seven), and whose mixed dance styles blend perfectly with every character telling a story.

Usually it is Bourne who takes to the stage after the show for a question and answer session, but he had been called away for work on his next project. Shh we are sworn to secrecy but it will be part of the Edinburgh Festival this year. (But the BTG already knows and [announced](#) it yesterday - it's *Dorian Gray*). It was Associate Director Scott Ambler who still wiping away the sweat took over and gave some very comprehensive answers to the many questions fired at him.

Even for those who profess not to like ballet, this is a show not to be missed. Get a ticket ---- if you can!

Touring to Plymouth, Cardiff, Belfast, Bromley, Southampton and Bradford.

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)