



Dancing QUEEN

Tooting-based choreographer Nicole Tongue is working with the London Children's Ballet to bring *Jane Eyre* to life on stage. VICKY SMITH met her

NEXT MONTH, THE LONDON CHILDREN'S ballet will wow crowds with a stage adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The production will be the result of months of painstakingly hard work, from both cast and staff, and will showcase the talents of some of the UK's most promising dancers. SW17's Nicole Tongue has been given the task of choreographing the cast of 9-to-15-year-olds, many of whom will be performing on stage for the very first time.

It's a huge step up from the performances Nicole used to stage, when she first realised her love of dancing, as a child. "As I was walking I was dancing, and as I was dancing I was choreographing. It was my way of expressing myself, and I would get local kids round, boss them about and get my parents to watch the routines," she tells us.

So how does one make the move from backyard shows to the London Children's Ballet? "I was fortunate as I didn't have pushy parents, so I was able to pursue my

love of dance, which started with local ballet lessons," explains Nicole. Aged ten, Nicole moved on from weekly lessons to attend The Hammond, a vocational dance school in Cheshire, and also studied with the Royal Ballet. Whilst there she was given the chance to cultivate her choreographic talents, winning the prestigious Ursula Moreton Choreographic Competition and bringing performances to venues such as the Holland Park open air theatre – all whilst in her teens.

Joining the Birmingham Royal Ballet at 18, Tongue then went on to perform in over 32 ballets nationally and internationally. But, after leaving Birmingham, Nicole sustained an injury and she was forced to put her feet up – allowing her the time to re-asses her situation. “When something like that happens, you have to stop, pause and reflect. I had always thought about acting, so I did an acting course, and got into the Bristol Old Vic theatre school. The training there incorporated dancing and, at first, I thought ‘Oh no I’ve been doing that for the past ten years!’ but it wasn’t purely focused on ballet,” says Nicole.

Nicole’s time at the Old Vic has proved essential in projects she’s been involved in further down the line: “We studied period dancing, mime, voice – even stage combat, which luckily came in useful on a ballet I was working on in Philadelphia, where I had to choreograph a battle scene with lots of fight sequences.”

The London Children’s Ballet work with a different choreographer every year, and it was suggested to Nicole that she should get involved with the 2008 production.

As choreographer her tasks include auditioning over 600 children (as Nicole likened to a “military operation”), teaching the successful candidates dances and preparing them for what will be, for many, their first experience of dancing in front of such a large audience. “It’s such a great opportunity for children who might not get



Left: SW17’s Nicole Tongue. Above: Performers from the London Children’s Ballet

the chance to be involved in a big production. When you go to a vocational dance school, performances are geared into the curriculum, but for these kids it isn’t.”

“Working with adults brings an ego, but with children comes a sense of anticipation and excitement. However, children do lack experience, and I’m trying to nurture them through the creative process – it’s not just about the ballet in this production, the kids have got to have personality and I have to

give them the acting skills to deal with the mature subjects in the novel. ‘Get into contact with the story, whether you read the book or watch the film,’ was the first thing I said to them,” explains Nicole.

The weekly rehearsals take place at the Dance Attic in Fulham, which is familiar territory for Nicole, who has resided in south-west London for the past seven years and owns a property in SW17: “I remember buying it and celebrating the moment with champagne and local fish and chips. I only had a hideous plastic table and a blow-up bed but I was the proudest home owner there was!” As well as the fish and chips, Nicole’s a fan of the local curry houses, and cites the common – and the benefit of owning a home with a garden – as major reasons for moving into Tooting.

As soon as *Jane Eyre* is completed, Nicole will be moving on to choreograph a modern-day version of Handel’s *Sampson*, which will be performed at the Buxton Festival. She is also contemplating a move to the US – where her other half lives. “My end goal is to work on massive productions on a highly creative level, so I can utilise all my skills. My ideal project would involve working with Baz Luhrmann or Anthony Minghella who did an amazing production of *Madame Butterfly*”. If the US does beckon, Nicole, Tooting will be sad to see you go. ●

***Jane Eyre* at the Peacock Theatre, Portugal Street, WC2A 2HT from 15-18 May. Tickets range from £14-£50. Box office 0870 737 0337**

FACT FILE: *London Children’s Ballet*

Set up in 1994, the London Children’s Ballet is a non-profit organisation that aims to give young dancers the opportunity to perform as part of a professional ballet production.

As many as 600 children aged 9-14 from over 150 ballet schools attend the open auditions each November in order to secure one of 50 places in the company.

Every year, the London Children’s Ballet creates new narrative ballets – they select a story, commission a composer to write an original score and then hire a choreographer to set the story to dance.

The seven month experience with the London Children’s Ballet is free, save a small contribution towards costumes. Children remain in school, and attend rehearsals every Sunday.

Eight performances take place each May, with audiences reaching 8000 people.

Ballet for £1 is an initiative that was established by the London Children’s Ballet to give a wider audience chance to appreciate ballet. People from over 60 charities and 1,000 children from selective inner-city schools are charged just £1 for special matinee performances (with the remaining £14 paid by the LCB and grants from foundations and trusts).

**London Children’s Ballet, 73 St Charles Square, London W10 6EJ; 020 8969 1555
www.londonchildrensballet.com**