

BRECON FESTIVAL BALLET'S "CHRISTMAS TREATS FROM THE NUTCRACKER" 2021

SHOW REPORT



As the curtain came down on the sixth and final performance of "Christmas Treats from the Nutcracker" on December 19th, the overwhelming feeling among the cast, crew, children and administrative team was relief! Relief that we had negotiated countless obstacles to bring live ballet back to the Theatr Brycheiniog main stage again after a 2-year Covid – enforced absence. And just in time, as one week later, new Welsh government regulations were introduced that effectively closed all theatrical performances in Wales!

Rehearsals throughout 2021 were challenging enough, with a steady stream of positive Covid cases among the children's corps de ballet and among the professionals, which meant that most of our rehearsals took place without all the performers present and therefore much precious rehearsal time was spent helping dancers catch up on missed choreography, rather than polishing and perfecting their performance.

And then the actual performance week saw a positive Covid case from one of our professionals on day one, meaning they had to drop out of the performances and two other professional dancers that had shared a car with her had to isolate for 2 days taking PCR tests until they had received 2 negative results. This meant we didn't have all the professional dancers together in the studio until the day before our first show! Added to this we had several injuries within the cast – an occupational hazard

for dancers, as it is for athletes, but the likelihood of injury in 2021 was increased due to the backdrop of less work (and therefore reduced fitness) in the previous 18 months. Added to this we negotiated a mid-performance lighting desk failure and the collapse of an audience member! The most eventful production week any of us have ever experienced, with all the Covid cases and injuries resulting in daily cast changes, rehearsal changes, programme changes etc...

But we did it! As the famous saying goes: "The Show Must Go On" – and so it did.

All the dancers – from the youngest 8-year-old to the most experienced professional – were absolutely thrilled to be back onstage once again, entertaining and delighting the audience. We didn't have full houses as we did in 2019, understandably, but the half full auditorium was enthusiastic and grateful to be back witnessing live professional dance and community participation once again. We have been humbled and heartened by the countless emails, messages and comments we have received from our audience and some of those comments are listed at the end of this report.

What a journey it has been to get back onstage: Following the disappointment of our cancelled performances in December 2020 (a huge disappointment after the success of our inaugural year in 2019), Brecon Festival Ballet decided to use the early months of 2021 to achieve two things:

- Firstly, to achieve charitable status for BFB, bringing together a committed group of trustees to help drive this process forward.
- Secondly to make wise decisions about how best to use our limited budget to achieve our aim of keeping high quality professional live dance going in rural mid-Wales, involving the community in our work, while navigating ever-changing Covid restrictions.

BFB became a registered charity in June 2021, and the newly appointed board deliberated carefully over the summer months before deciding that the wisest course of action to ensure we achieved our aims in 2021 was not to attempt the full-scale Nutcracker production of 2019, but to create a smaller-scale show that would be less likely to fall foul of Covid restrictions or be cancelled because of a Covid outbreak. This led to our gala evening entitled "Christmas Treats from the Nutcracker", which had a run of six performances from December 16th – 19th at Theatr Brycheiniog. Once again, the theatre provided rehearsal space and technical support, without which BFB could not have afforded to go ahead.

The two biggest financial challenges we faced in 2021 were:

- Lack of revenue generated from fundraising activities, such as sponsored events, bucket collections and bag-packing, all of which raised a lot of money in 2019 but were banned during most of 2020 and 2021 due to Covid restrictions.
- Reduced tickets sales, due to the understandable cautiousness of audiences returning to live events, coupled with the arrival of the Omicron variant in the UK 3 weeks before opening night.

For both reasons, BFB was unable to generate as much income as in our inaugural year. We were prudent throughout the year in anticipation of this outcome. We put a lot of effort into publicity to spread the word of our return to the stage, with good "footfall" on our social media platforms and the publication of articles about BFB in both the regional and National press. We also put a lot of time into grant applications and were delighted to receive funding from local grant giving bodies, some of whom that had supported us in 2019, including Brecon Beacons National Park Authority's Sustainable Development Fund, Brecon Town Council, Rotary Club of Brecon, The Arts Society

Brecknock and the Gwendoline and Margaret Davies charity. It's great to know that these organisations recognise the value of our work to the people of Brecon and the surrounding area and the additional income and interest our productions bring to our town.

We were also supported once again in 2021 by generous donations from individuals, many of whom also joined our supporters' group, the "Friends of Brecon Festival Ballet".

And with so much uncertainty around our plans for live performances, we engaged a film company to record our short ballet, "Plea", so that we would have an online offering if we couldn't perform live. (We hope to stream this film early in 2022.)

Brecon Festival Ballet can be proud that, at the end of almost 2 years of negotiating the pandemic, when so many other arts organisations have gone out of business, we managed to get our shows onstage and finished our year on a stable financial footing, with some of the costs of our production in 2022 already met.

The Production:

Despite the disappointment of not being able to mount the full-scale Nutcracker, with the live orchestra in 2021, we were determined that our "Christmas Treats" gala performances should not feel like a "second best" performance. So, we created a show with a narrative, with 2 comperes telling the story (in English and Welsh) of Brecon Festival Ballet, how we give opportunities to young local, talented dancers, following their journey through full time training and into the profession. We showed the audience video clips of our full-scale production in 2019 and of interviews with some of our children, in which the children expressed how much it meant to them to be involved in a live production again, especially after lockdown. The children emphasised how inspiring it is for them to be working alongside professional dancers and it was plain to see the joy on the children's faces as they took to the stage in a variety of dance pieces.

The professional dancers also performed in a wide variety of dance pieces, including famous and traditional classical ballet highlights from The Nutcracker, such as the Russian Dance, the dance of the Mirlitons and the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. There were solos from other well-known ballets such as Swan Lake and Coppelia and show-stopping highlights, such as the Don Quixote pas de deux, danced by the exceptional full-time ballet student Poppy Downing, partnered with fantastic Cuban dancer Yasset Roldan and a display of fast and feisty Flamenco footwork from professional dancer Josie La Galesa, one of five professional dancers originally from Brecon.

Perhaps most importantly in 2021, we told the story of Covid. An artistic organisation such as Brecon Festival Ballet has a role, in that "Art reflects life and life reflects Art".

The lockdowns of 2020 put a stop to all theatrical performances. But in August 2020, Theatr Brycheiniog kindly hosted our professional dancers for one week, during which artistic director, Katy Sinnadurai, created a new short ballet, entitled "Plea", as an expression of the isolation and frustration of lockdown.

BFB was pleased to have the opportunity to bring this ballet to the stage in 2021 and heartened to hear from audience members that "Plea" really struck a chord with them. Many audience members were seen wiping away tears as the lights came up at the end of the piece. Below are a couple of photographs of Plea" (courtesy of professional photographer Sian Trenberth).



Messages and social media comments from the audience:

We wanted to write to say how brilliant the whole experience of "Christmas Treats from the Nutcracker" was. We saw it twice and thought it was truly magical.

It was wonderful to see your dance Plea again. You completely captured the emotions of many of us over the pandemic. Sometimes loneliness and despair; a feeling of isolation yet closeness; sharing a space while keeping apart

Thank you for all you do to help provide some light in these dark days.

Saw the opening night last night, it was amazing

It was a wonderful show

Thanks for working so hard and giving us another fabulous show

What a triumph!

Well, what an absolute treat. A fabulous uplifting evening watching such talented dancers. Thank you, Brecon Festival Ballet.

It was fantastic, thank you to you all

What a triumph I don't know where to start and knowing the challenges and the problem solving you've had to do - I'm in awe!! I particularly liked the way you programmed the evening, I felt so proud of Brecon Festival Ballet

We enjoyed it so much, just what we needed to feel Christmassy! Niamh was engrossed in it. The 'Plea' performance was amazing

Comments about the children's involvement

Thank you so much for giving the children this amazing experience. I also loved helping backstage and getting to know all the wonderful children and the amazing team of ladies

Thank you, Katy, for giving Ella this incredible opportunity and experience. She has loved every second of every rehearsal and every show and has not stopped smiling since September. It was absolutely AMAZING. We are so proud of Ella and of all the children. Thank you for making it happen, especially in these times. It's meant the absolute world to Ella, to us and to her grandparents.

Congratulations on a fantastic show that Mia loved being a part of! What do we do now it's all over??!

Thank you! Nia loved this experience training & performing with you all and we both had great fun backstage!

Thank you so much for everything you have done for the group. Cerys absolutely loved it and said last night that she will miss it and miss seeing everyone. She has made some lovely friendships. Thank you and well done. Great job

What an incredible feat to manage 6 performances in a constantly changing situation. Thank you for the opportunities you and the whole team provide for our children. Brava!

Thank you, Katy, for giving the children such a fantastic opportunity to dance in the show. They enjoyed every minute of the rehearsals and shows. Happy Christmas!

Great shows thank you, Seren has loved being part of it

So proud that Hannah was able to be part of such an incredible experience, she is beaming from ear to ear, thank you

Thank you for giving Tyler the opportunity to be part of the show. He has absolutely loved it

Thank you so much to everyone... Phoebe has loved every minute

Review by former professional dancer, Sue Carlton-Jones:

Covid versus Christmas preparations last year was a challenge for all of us one way or another. Those of us who look forward to the magical experiences on offer in normal circumstances, such as a trip to the theatre, were possibly stultified at the thought of trying to book for a festive show of any kind. When Brecon Festival Ballet announced their intention to put on excerpts from their highly successful production of The Nutcracker first performed in its entirety in 2019, I did wonder how on earth they would go about acquiring the necessary guest principal artists alongside their own dancers from Mid Wales Dance Academy and other local dance schools. Scheduling rehearsals against threats of possible lockdown and maintaining the exacting standards necessary for the best known and hugely loved ballet that Christmas promises each year would be daunting. Stage management, technicians, lighting designers, box office staff and in house personnel, wardrobe fittings and publicity to organise and put into practice. All this vying with the daily announcements of cancelled outings, events, and hospitality venues, reduced numbers in larger spaces and travel disruptions. How could a full-length show be organised against such odds?

Well - that was exactly what was achieved by the dedicated expertise of Katy Sinnadurai and Lesley Walker - the director and the secretary of Brecon Festival Ballet, supported by a huge team of dedicated volunteers - and how well they did it too!

I attended the 3rd of 6 performances between December 16th and the 19th at Theatr Brycheiniog and was overcome with admiration from curtain up and throughout the performance. Nutcracker excerpts looked sparkingly fresh, well-rehearsed and brightly and enthusiastically performed. 'PLEA'- a new work choreographed by Katy Sinnadurai (music by Shostakovich) depicted the struggle with the pandemic and was created with great empathy, beautifully executed and deeply felt by the dancers and superbly lit. This work will most certainly endure for the archives and for our dance history.

All that remains for me to say is that I wish all the participants of this delightful pre-Christmas return treat to our splendid theatre in Brecon, a Very Happy New Year, continued success in all their ventures and to say thank you for all efforts to keep the ballet alive and thriving. Stay safe, healthy and ready to bring us more performances in the future.

Sue Carlton-Jones.

Ex Royal Ballet, Ex Ballet Mistress Scottish Ballet.

Summary:

In December 2021 Brecon Festival Ballet presented six live performances at Theatr Brycheiniog, featuring 15 professional dancers (10 based in Wales and 5 originally from Brecon), 4 apprentice dancers and 27 local children. A dedicated team of supporters, chaperones, backstage crew, costume and scenery makers gave generously of their time and expertise to enable this production to happen. Theatr Brycheiniog donated studio space and technical support and almost 1000 tickets were sold. Given the challenges of the pandemic in the previous 20 months, this can be seen as a great achievement. Brecon Festival Ballet believes that it is crucial to people's well-being to keep the arts alive, and this was clearly illustrated by how many people turned to the arts during the lockdowns. In 2021, we persisted with our mission of bringing high quality live ballet to Brecon, involving local people and producing work that resonates with the audience and is relevant for our times, despite the many challenges involved.

Below is the final image from "Christmas Treats from the Nutcracker", just as the curtain was coming down.



Katy Sinnadurai BEM

Artistic Director, Brecon Festival Ballet