

IntoDance

The Secret Garden

This year, London Children's Ballet will stage *The Secret Garden* with new choreography by Erico Montes, first artist of The Royal Ballet. He speaks to Zoë Anderson

Based on the book by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* tells the story of a cross, spoiled girl, Mary Lennox, who opens up to the world by helping to restore a neglected garden. The London Children's Ballet staging this month at the Peacock Theatre will be a big production, featuring many children: the company was created to give young dancers, aged between nine and 16, the chance to perform on stage in a production of professional standard.

How did Erico come to work on the project? "I was approached by them. I met up with Lucille Briance, the company's director, and she explained a little bit about how it worked. I said yes at once! She had never seen any of my choreography, but we just had such a good feeling about it that we were both willing to dive in.

"Creating a full-length story ballet is something every choreographer – well, most choreographers! – really want to do. It's not an opportunity that comes along very often. For me it was yes straight away – I don't think I even considered that I was choreographing for kids."

The cast was chosen over several rounds of auditions. On the very last day of auditions, Erico worked directly with the young dancers, "choreographing tiny bits of roles, just to see who had the right personality, the qualities I was after. That was really the first time I realised how much fun it was going to be.

"By the end of that day, I felt they had worked so hard, listened so carefully. I know, being a dancer myself, when you get a cast list and see that you're one of 12 flowers, it's a bit of a letdown. I'm a first artist with The Royal Ballet. I'm lucky, I do have bigger roles, but the bulk of my work is in groups – I'm one of ten, one of 20. My friend Gemma Pitchley-Gale, who is acting

as ballet mistress, is an artist with The Royal Ballet, so she's the same.

"I wanted to explain that to the parents, and especially to the kids. I got up and explained that Gemma and I are corps de ballet dancers, we know exactly how it feels to be part of a large group. We know that people in those groups are made to feel less important, and we know it's not true. It's how I approach my work as a dancer: every snowflake, every flower, is vital to the production. If that one person isn't there, the whole ballet suffers.

"So whatever the kids were playing, I would understand how special they are. I wanted them all to feel that they had been chosen. I really did pick each one of them because I wanted them. Nobody got in because we needed an extra – I didn't know how many people I needed in each number. I chose all the people I thought deserved the chance, were ready for it, had something I wanted to use.

"I knew some of the kids would get the cast list and think, oh. I had five girls playing the role of Mary Lennox – they're all going to go home and say, 'Oh mummy, I was playing Mary Lennox' – and they might not get the role. Before that happened, I wanted them all to know how important they are.

"It's all to do with my experience as a dancer, being part of a very big company. So often the corps de ballet dancers feel unimportant. That's not how I see it, so this was my chance to say that, to do it differently." ■

Isabel Summers and Marvin Edwards
as Mary and Dickon in *The Secret Garden*.

Photograph: Johan Persson.

