

Director Will is a dream maker

JO CAIRD meets the man behind the Almeida Theatre's Christmas show

A STEEPLY-RAKED stage criss-crossed with coloured gaffer tape occupies practically the entire rehearsal room of Marianne Dreams, the Almeida Theatre's new family Christmas show.

As director and choreographer Will Tuckett finishes up a couple of notes at the piano with composer Paul Groothuis, a technician fiddles with the wheels of a small single bed to secure it to the temporary stage.

On a props table stand an old-fashioned doctor's bag, a wrapped present and some bottles of medicine along with various other items. Elsewhere in the room is a model box of Anthony Ward's design for the show. It is only the third day of rehearsal here at the Almeida but the cast and creative team of Marianne Dreams are well on their way.

Will Tuckett is tall and slender, with an intelligent face and a head of gently greying yet still childish curls. Twenty-two years with the Royal Ballet have left their mark; his posture and mannerisms are unmistakably those of a dancer: straight back, legs gracefully crossed, every movement considered.

But Marianne Dreams, Tuckett's latest venture into direction and choreography following such recent family successes as Pinocchio, Wind in the Willows and The Canterville Ghost, will not be a dance show. It will be a show with "dance seeping quietly through it and infecting the audience with a sense of movement". Tuckett is aware that "a lot of kids are really put off by dance" and regards this as a challenge; the Almeida's first ever Christmas family show will be much more than your average Nutcracker.

The story of Marianne Dreams will be familiar to many. Catherine Storr's 1958 children's novel is about a girl confined to bed by a serious illness who finds herself living in a dream world of pictures she has drawn.

It has gone through many editions and those who have not read the book may have watched the 1972 children's television series Escape into Night or seen Paperhouse, a 1988 film adaptation. This new version has been adapted by Moira Buffini, a playwright best known for her Olivier Award-nominated comedy, Dinner, which was performed at the National Theatre and then in the West End in 2002.



■ **WRITER** Moira Buffini



■ **WILL Tuckett and Selina Chilton in rehearsals for Marianne Dreams**

Tuckett regards Buffini as a "brilliant" writer.

Marianne Dreams was chosen (out of the "hundreds of books" that Tuckett read in the search for a "non-kiddie" show for the Almeida) because it is a story whose "ideas have stuck" in the minds of its readers. The book "catches a girl in a beautiful moment when she realises what she is, what she can affect and what she can't". For

Tuckett it is also the story's darker elements that have made it such an enduring success. He says: "You want to come back to it because you want that slightly prickly, creepy thing."

It is this aspect that Tuckett is so keen to explore; but rather than approach the story literally, he and his team have decided to make the audience make a work a little harder. He explains his motives for doing this. "If one is making a film or a TV series, you're not allowed to play much and you have to give it to the audience. I think in theatre you have to meet the audience half-way. You have involvement from an audience, catch them and reel them in

towards you. I like making shows that are like playing with the box the toy came in."

Adapting Marianne Dreams for the stage has brought Tuckett and his team a number of challenges, not the least of which is the continuous back and forth between real world and dream world in the novel. This is where dance comes into its own as an evocative storytelling device, the scenes of Marianne's dream life taking place purely through dance. Tuckett is eager to point out though that dance's role in the show is a very specific one.

"It has to take you from one emotional place to another. My intention is always that people coming out don't talk about the dancing because I think then it's served its purpose. It's not about serving my vision, it's about serving the show."

"Dance is such an appropriate format for Marianne Dreams because it is a book about ideas and feelings rather than action and dance is very good at describing how you feel... doing those non-specific things." It is "the smell of the book" rather than any "intricate plot" that Tuckett wants to get across to his audience.

Of the Almeida, the theatre that is taking a chance with its first ever family Christmas show and giving him this opportunity, Tuckett says. "The fact that I'm here now is such a lovely thing."

And with that he goes back to rehearsal to continue drawing his own little dreamworld.