

By Sadie Nicholas

AS the lights in the theatre dimmed, most of the audience were unaware of the A-list face within their midst. Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson and her daughter Gaia, now 14, had slipped discreetly into their seats to watch *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by the London Children's Ballet (LCB), a charity whose aim is to give youngsters from all backgrounds the chance to dance.

So impressed was Thompson by the production that she approached Lucille Briance, who founded LCB 20 years ago, and offered to help in any way she could. That was seven years ago but she was true to her word. This week she will attend the premiere of LCB's dance performance of her hit 2005 movie *Nanny McPhee*.

If it weren't for Thompson's generosity the dancers wouldn't be performing *Nanny McPhee* at all. The charity couldn't afford to buy the stage rights so Thompson – who wrote the scripts and appeared in the movie and its 2010 sequel as *Nanny McPhee* – got the backing of Universal Studios for the production to go ahead regardless.

"Emma is a fantastic mother and I think that's why she loves what we do," says Lucille, whose background is in journalism and publishing. "Ballet has often been criticised for being elitist but Emma could see we make it accessible to children from across the country and all walks of life."

Nanny McPhee was a massive hit on the big screen with Thompson brilliant as the snaggle-toothed lead character who could tame even the most unruly children with a tap of her magic walking stick. The story follows *Nanny McPhee* as she is hired to bring to heel the bratty brood of recently widowed Mr Brown, played by Colin Firth in the movies, who then secretly falls in love with his scullery maid Evangeline.

Now under Lucille's direction the story has come to life as a children's ballet.

She realised the benefits ballet could bring when her daughter Zoe, now 30, was a shy little girl. "When Zoe started ballet classes as a five-year-old my husband and I noticed she was at her happiest and most confident when she danced. It wasn't an immediate transformation but over a couple of years she came to life in the dance studio and made lots of friends."

Lucille approached the Royal Ballet to ask why there wasn't a children's ballet company. With its help she set up LCB in 1993 and put on the first stage production a year later. "Although it's called the London Children's Ballet we have youngsters from as far away as Cumbria and Dorset taking part," says Lucille.

In two decades she has had 800 children aged nine-15 pirouetting on the stage. Thousands have auditioned and those who win a part must be dedicated as rehearsals take place in London every Sunday for five months before a production.

LUCILLE recalls: "Three years ago we had two sisters from Chester audition and I thought they lived too far away for them to commit to rehearsals but their parents said, 'Well we thought you were offering opportunities to all children not just those from London, so if you don't mind we'll come down every weekend and stay with family so the girls can take part.' The hardest part is fundraising to keep LCB going. Ballet is perceived as an upper middle-class pursuit which often alienates people. Last year only four out of the 58 children in the production were from fee-paying schools and we have many who are with carers because their parents aren't able to look after them. The common denominator is that they all come alive on stage and love to dance."

None more so than 15-year-old Mukeni Nel from Winchester. He is dancing the part of the butler in *Nanny McPhee* and was adopted by Martin, 46, a civil servant, and Dorothy, 49, who runs a small cleaning business, after being abandoned in a sewer in Kenya as a baby. Martin says: "Mukeni is black and blind in one eye and is stared at

Nanny McPhee works her magic again



DEDICATED: James Lovell, Lucille Briance, Sasha Abraham, Mukeni Nel

The blockbuster movie is now making its transition from screen to stage in a new ballet adaptation... and it's all thanks to the film's star Emma Thompson

a lot in the street but ballet has given him confidence to deal with that. When younger he couldn't focus on anything and it was Dorothy's idea to take him to dance classes after someone suggested it might help. The downside is the door frames and floorboards in our house are falling to pieces because Mukeni never stops dancing, even when he's brushing his teeth."

Mukeni says: "I love how you can be someone else when you dance. It's given me flexibility, strength, mental focus and confidence."

He recalls watching *Nanny McPhee* at the cinema and thinking it would be "cool" to appear in a production of it. "There's a little bit of me in the butler because he appears strong on the outside while quivering inside some of the time."

One of his co-stars is James Lovell, 14, who lives in Dorset with his parents Tanya and Allen, both in their 40s, who have a business selling machinery, and siblings Emily, 11, and Freddie, eight. James is dancing the part of Simon, the eldest of the Brown brood, and begged his parents to take him to ballet classes when he was three-and-a-half. "Dad wasn't too keen because he's into football but mum thought the discipline would be good," says James, who has since danced at the Royal Opera House and with the English National Ballet.

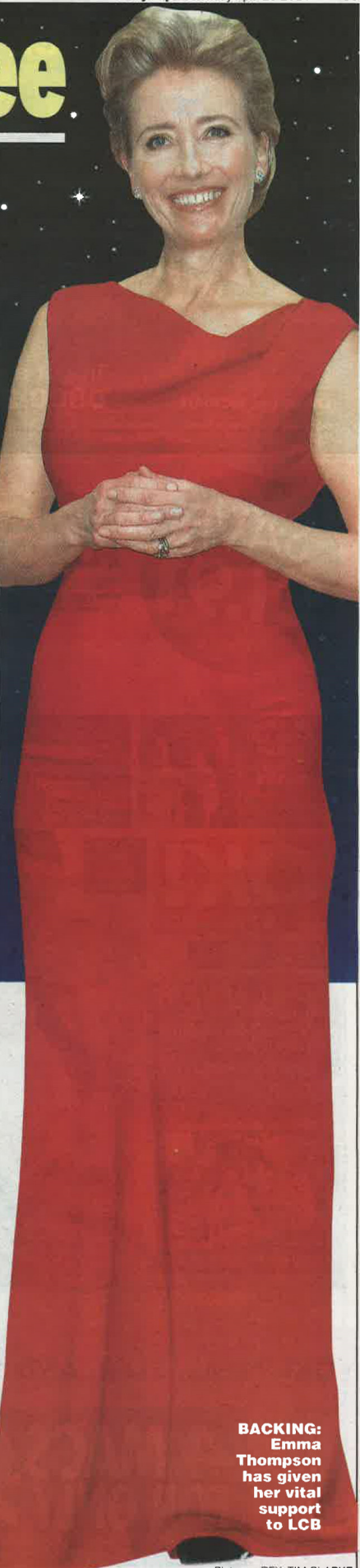
Also busy in rehearsals is Sasha Abraham who lives in west London with her parents and sister Amber, 15. She is playing

Evangeline, the maid with whom Mr Brown falls in love. She only started dancing two years ago aged 12 and was diagnosed with arthritis in her ankles, knees, hips and wrists soon afterwards.

SHE says: "You need to be strong to be a ballet dancer but my joints were so painful and I had to take steroid tablets for about six months. I didn't get into LCB the first time I auditioned in 2012 but I was so determined that I got a new ballet teacher who does more stretching to help my joints, and attended more classes after school and at weekends. It's challenging to play Evangeline because she's a grown woman so I have to be more mature than I really am. Every time we rehearse the scene where Evangeline marries Mr Brown I can't stop laughing because it's funny wearing a wedding dress at 14 years old."

Like the other children Sasha will be nervous to see Emma Thompson in the audience on opening night. Perhaps, given how busy she is, Thompson will then feel that her work is done. As *Nanny McPhee*'s catchphrase goes: "When you need me but do not want me, then I must stay. When you want me but no longer need me, then I have to go."

London Children's Ballet's production of *Nanny McPhee* is at the Sadler's Wells Peacock Theatre until Sunday. To support LCB's 20th Anniversary Appeal, text LCB20 £3 to 70070. www.londonchildrensballet.com



BACKING: Emma Thompson has given her vital support to LCB