They shall go to the ballet

They're not only the most hideous characters in the classical repertory – they're also among the most challenging. Ismene Brown meets Wayne Sleep and Anthony Dowell preparing to follow in the footsteps of Helpmann and Ashton as the Ugly Sisters

Ismene Brown

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The rubber for the noses is being melted, the powder and rouge prepared, the skirt hoops double-checked, and two of Britain's best-loved ballet dancers are feeling very scared. The prince of princes, Sir Anthony Dowell, and the prince of jesters, Wayne Sleep, are about to make their debuts as the Ugly Sisters at Covent Garden's major new production of Cinderella.

But in the Royal Opera House, two ghosts are stirring. They are there on the film the Royal Ballet made of Cinderella in 1969, when the young Dowell was the Prince. Two elderly, termagant monsters - yet oddly touching: soft, silly Sir Frederick Ashton, a-flutter in pink chiffon, and the gargoyle-faced Sir Robert Helpmann, going nuclear in mustard, both upstaging everything that moved, laying down the definitive ballet Ugly Sisters.

At Christmas 1948, when making his first full-length ballet at Covent Garden, Ashton set himself two mountains: to match the formal brilliance of Russian classical ballet and to entertain in the comic tradition of British pantomime. And when he cast himself and Helpmann as the Sisters, it was a stroke of sheer genius - because he couldn't stand the other man.

Both were jealously convinced they were the prize asset of the blossoming Sadler's Wells Ballet, Ashton as its chief choreographer, Helpmann as its leading dancer. They had a lifelong relationship of resentful, vicious one-upmanship, which Ashton cannily put into the Ugly Sisters. Bossy, vain Helpmann and dithery, disingenuous Ashton – "Bobby is a wasp, Fred is a bee," thought the film director Michael Powell. They played the parts for 20 years, daunting all who followed in their footsteps.

Three pairs of Ugly Sisters will be seen in this run, none feeling more daunted than the most celebrated of them, Dowell and Sleep. "Because we're following in legends' footsteps – those who shall not be named," explains Sir Anthony.

"We're resigned to those names being brought up," adds Sleep.

"What's so weird," says Dowell, "is that when I was the Prince, I'd share a dressing-room with Sir Fred and Bobby. I didn't go on until the second act so when I'd come in they'd be sitting there in costume and made-up."

"Do you remember them?" Sleep asks curiously. "Not much chat. But quite a bit of smoke." He pulls a face of acidulous disdain.

As they talk, Dowell, 60, and Sleep, 55, have fallen into the beginnings of a comic double act. This is appetising casting, not least because it's topsy-turvy characterwise. Sleep – a 5ft 2in ball of mischievous, gossipy amusement – is playing the "shy" Ashton sister. The more reserved, statelier Dowell, the Royal Ballet's former artistic director,

tackles the Helpmann gorgon.

"The offer has come my way before," he says, "but I've always said no because I felt it's hallowed ground. Because of the ghosts. I said, maybe the ideal opportunity would be for a new production, when one can put one's own mark on it. One thing we've changed is the noses. Because Bobby was always the retroussé, stick-up piggy nose, and Fred the long thin one, we've swapped."

"Hot liquid rubber," grimaces Sleep, "they pour it over your face and take a mask of you, and then model the nose on to that."

"In the old days," says Dowell, "the noses were hard plastic and would fall off. Now it's flexible rubber, a new nose every night."

When it came to the all-important dress style, Sleep wanted "flighty and feathery", he says. Dowell went "nautical. Not sailor-type," he adds quickly. "Starfishy." "Venus rising out of the sea!" chortles Sleep.

The little guy is feeling equally spooked. For in the 1969 film of Cinderella, the minute Napoleon with whom Ashton's Sister gets fobbed off at the Ball is the 21-year-old Sleep. "That part was what got me into the company because I was too small otherwise. For

the 1965 production Bobby said, 'we've got to get someone really small, that'll make it funnier'. And Fred said, 'well, there's this little student'. And Bobby looked at me and said, 'Far too tall.' But I got it."

A career as a "character" looked all set, as long as Sleep didn't drop Sir Fred, who was not only his ballerina but his boss. "I just used to heave him up. Had to, because he didn't jump at all - he'd just stop dead, and I'd go oooooff, and heave him into the air. He'd be talking through the whole thing as he was performing it. He'd be going [dithery voice], 'ooh, but I don't want to go over there…'. The mime was more like a dialogue, not going through motions like the Russians do."

The two men's anecdotes make entertaining listening, but they insist that this is as serious a challenge as playing Swan Lake. "People come up to us and say, 'ooh, what are you going to do with it to make us laugh?'" says Sleep, a seasoned panto performer. "Well, we can't. It all bubbles out of the scene. Also 1948 humour was very much more understated than now."

The steps are set in stone, so everything depends on pitching the Sisters' characters. Dowell thinks of his two maiden aunts who lived together all their lives, bickering but

fond. For Sleep there's a pathos in the Sisters' ugliness: "These noses - maybe secretly they know they're deformed. They're jealous of Cinderella because she's so pretty. Keep her in the kitchen in case anybody comes!"

"The comedy angle's the hardest thing," says Dowell. "If you'd like to hear a laugh or a titter, and realise that there isn't going to be one…"

"It's almost like Shakespeare, isn't it?" Sleep agrees. "It's not about what we can invent – it's about making something that's already there work again. I've been a panto dame three times, but you can't bring that into this ballet because a panto dame is a man, and you speak the words as you. Whereas this is more feminine, more ethereal in a way - they're men being women. It's more in older pantomime tradition, like Dan Leno - when they wanted to be beautiful they tried to be beautiful. And when they were ugly, they were ugly. There would be a Transformation Scene. But in today's pantos they try to look glamorous all the way through, like a drag queen, which is totally wrong for Ashton's Cinderella."

I have a rush of sympathy for them as Sleep expounds all the pitfalls. To not be a drag queen, to be a panto dame - but not a modern panto dame. To make people laugh without vulgarly camping about. To glue the audience's affections to them – but still be bitter and twisted. At the end, after all, there lies Ashton's sweet-sour final scene, when that tiny slipper doesn't fit their gnarled feet. "We're desperate!" sniffles Sleep.

"When the shoe goes on her foot, and it's shock-horror and we have to kneel at her feet and be forgiven," says Dowell, "do you really want her forgiveness - or are you doing it because secretly you're making sure you've got the East Wing of the palace?"

"Yes, I think we want the East Wing!" crows Sleep. They cackle at each other.

- 'Cinderella' opens Dec 23, and runs to Jan 10; tickets 020 7304 4000

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