Cracking jokes, but no real emotion

DANCE
Mark Morris/The Hard Nut
Festival Theatre

THE PAST two years have surely seen the greatest number of sightings of *The Nutcracker* in Great Britain since records began. Indigenous species include the great encrusted at the Royal Ballet, the sweet-toothed from English National, the Freudian from Birmingham, and Matthew Bourne's Dickensian japes. Two migrants have blown into Edinburgh this year, Balanchine from Miami and now Mark Morris with his comic strip.

After the affected smiles of the Miami lot, it's a joy to wallow in Morris's childlike sense of mischief. The cartoonist Charles Burns inspired the setting, a black-and-white Sixties comic strip, where instead of Sugar Plums and Christmas pies round the fire, we get bubblegum kids and an apple-pie Mom, and the fire is an image on the TV set.

Morris and his madcap dancers fill this comic sitcom house with hilarious party guests and a spookily thin maid. The choreography is on the skimpy side, but characters are so exactly drawn through gesture and costume that you can almost see speech bubbles.

Little Marie, dressed like June Allyson and given dolls for Christmas, envies older sister Louise, dressed like Jean Shrimpton and given boys. Mom, in late-period Shelley Winters décolletage, naturally favours Marie, and as her little girl journeys through the ballet searching for her grown-up future, Mom has a tearful trip of her own back to her adolescence (the Waltz of the Flowers is memorably, ridiculously, recast in this vein). There are many less subtle pleasures: a hippy-hippy-shake to one of Tchaikovsky's more pompous party dances; delicious unisex Snowflakes among whom it's the men on pointe; an outrageously camp *houri* in the Arabian Dance who is, unmistakable even under piles of veils, Mark Morris himself.

But all these bonbons do not prevent *The Hard Nut* from being a bit of a disappointment. The core of the story is, as Alastair Macaulay beautifully puts it in the programme, "a child, holding a doll, poised on the edge of adult experience".

Adult experience is where Morris comes a cropper. The story, the music, demand two climactic *pas de deux*. Faced with Tchaikovsky's most passionate music, Morris stages diversions. Get a crowd doing fouettés, have Drosselmeier dance inconclusively with his nephew, get some chorus line to hold Marie and her young man in the air like paper darts — anything to avoid putting a man and a woman in love on stage together to explore it.

Giddy, witty, fresh as so much of *The Hard Nut* is, inside its candy-crisp shell Morris doesn't put much of an emotional kernel. *The Nutcracker* is a harder nut to crack than it seems.

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