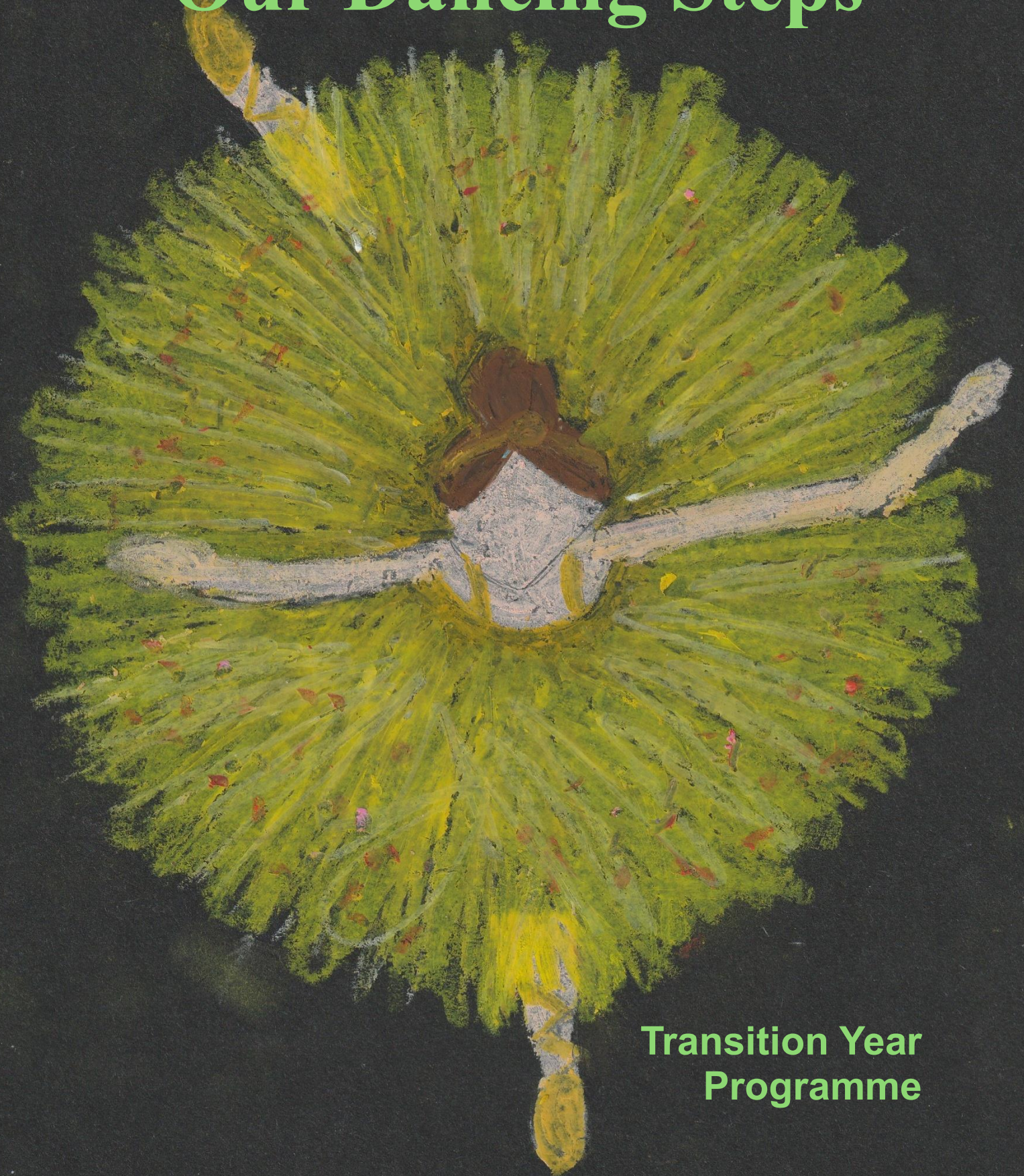


INYB

Irish National Youth Ballet

Our Dancing Steps



Transition Year
Programme

Our Dancing Steps

Introduction

Ballet is a highly effective introduction to the world of theatre arts. It is a composite artform, and seamlessly integrates many strands of artistic expression. Classical ballet utilises dance and music, enriched by elements of mime and drama, décor and costume. Its enduring appeal lies in the blend of graceful gesture and intricate technique, with deep-rooted traditions cultivated over many centuries. Ballet may appear simple and effortless in performance, but this belies the rigorous training and relentless dedication required of every aspiring young dancer.

Our Dancing Steps is a performance demonstration presented by young dancers of the **Irish National Youth Ballet** for primary school pupils. The dancers, each in their transition year at school, have compiled a programme for their younger colleagues which examines the difficulties of training for ballet, explaining the dedication and discipline, but also expressing the joy it brings. They share personal stories and experiences that highlight the transformative power of dance, from their first tentative steps into a dance studio, to the exhilaration of performing on stage.

These young dancers discuss the physical and emotional challenges they face, including the rigorous training schedules, the importance of maintaining physical fitness, and the mental resilience required to overcome setbacks and injuries. They also explain the technical aspects of ballet, such as the purpose and execution of ‘turn-out’, the various positions, and the significance of mime in conveying stories and emotions without words.

They explore the broader impact of ballet on their lives, including how it has enhanced their creativity, and also their academic and social pursuits. They express their aspirations and the steps they are taking to achieve their dreams of becoming professional dancers, whilst also considering alternative paths if they were unable to dance. The dancers explore and explain their art, their passion, and their journey, through the medium of a performance presented ***by young people for young people.***



Artwork: Charlette, 2nd Class, St Attracta's,

Exposure to the arts opens doors to a rich world of ideas, a world filled with creativity and expression, articulated through dance, and through music, the visual arts and drama.

We believe that an immersive encounter with the arts – through both practice and performance – is an elemental experience and an indispensable component in every child's educational journey.

The arts empower young people to comprehend and navigate the rapidly evolving cultures and environments that shape all our lives.

Our Dancing Steps and Education

Through *Our Dancing Steps*, Transition Year (TY) students from the Irish National Youth Ballet design, lead and deliver structured dance workshops for younger primary school pupils. The programme responds directly to the Department of Education's vision for TY as a space where students can exercise autonomy, explore personal interests, and take active responsibility for their own learning, while at the same time contributing meaningfully to the wider community.

At the core of the initiative is a peer-to-peer teaching model. The dancers, aged around 15 or 16 years, develop and present age-appropriate workshops that introduce primary pupils to movement, creativity, and collaboration. The emphasis is not only on sharing technical aspects of dance, but also on cultivating confidence, imagination and enjoyment among younger children. For the TY students, the process requires planning, communication, leadership and adaptability—key elements that help them *develop a greater capacity to respond to uncertainty, manage complexity, nurture personal interests and become agents of positive, ethical change in society*.¹

The programme also demonstrates how the TY framework can be flexibly adapted to enable students to engage in meaningful, experiential learning. By positioning young people as facilitators and role models, it fosters discovery and creativity while also nurturing the adaptability, competence and empathy that the Department has identified as essential outcomes of TY. In doing so, it strengthens links between schools and cultural organisations such as Irish National Youth Ballet, showing how partnerships can enhance both artistic and educational development.

For participating primary schools, the workshops bring the additional benefit of exposing pupils to high-quality arts engagement led by motivated peers. The sessions can inspire creativity, support wellbeing, and provide younger children with positive role models who demonstrate commitment, discipline and joy in their art form. Teachers and principals can therefore view the programme not only as an enrichment activity, but also as a meaningful contribution to the holistic development of their pupils.

Ultimately, this collaboration between TY students of the Irish National Youth Ballet and participating schools embodies the spirit of the TY Programme Statement. It is inclusive, community-oriented and grounded in the belief that students can make a meaningful contribution to their own education and to the lives of others. As such, it demonstrates how the arts can be a powerful vehicle for both personal growth and educational innovation, enriching the experiences of TY students and primary pupils alike.

¹ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2024). *Transition Year Programme Statement*, p.7. GOI, Department of Education

The Performance Demonstration

Each of the dancers will briefly introduce themselves as the demonstration begins, before continuing with some simple ballet exercises at **the barre**, explaining the importance and purpose of each combination. They then progress to more complex steps and movements, such as **pirouettes** and **jetés**, which professional dancers need to practice every day.

The language of dancing, and ballet in particular, is usually described in French. This is because it was dancing masters, employed by the French king, **Louis XIV**, who were the first to organise the steps and movements of 'academic dance'.

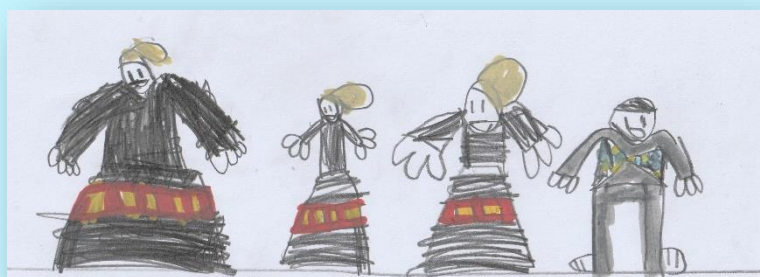
Academic dance later developed (over 350 years) into what modern audiences would now understand as 'Ballet'.

Additionally, the student dancers will demonstrate a little **pointework**, which is the technique of dancing on the tips of the toes. Usually recognised as an integral part of 'ballet', pointework is normally only performed by female dancers. The technique, which requires enormous strength in the ankles, calves and torso, as well as very supple, strong feet, is extremely taxing, and is only taught to dancers after several years of training.

Danseuses have performed **en pointe** for about two hundred years, and the technique has developed alongside adaptations in the design of the special 'pointe-shoe'.

Following this, and any questions the children at the host school might have, our dancers will perform excerpts from a ballet called **The Nutcracker**. This ballet is familiar to audiences all around the world and was first performed during the Christmas season in St Petersburg, in Russia, more than 130 years ago.

The Nutcracker tells the story of a young girl, usually named Clara, or sometimes Marie, who receives a gift of an elegant Nutcracker doll, dressed as a soldier. When she falls asleep after the excitement of the Christmas party, she dreams that the Nutcracker soldier comes to life and brings her on adventures through different lands, including the Land of the Sweets where the Sugar Plum Fairy lives.



Spanish Dance: Oisín, 2nd Class, St Attracta's,

In the Land of the Sweets, dancers are dressed in colourful costumes and perform for Clara. The dances are inspired by traditions from many different countries and our dancers will perform a dance arranged with movements and rhythms derived from **Spanish** dancing. Many of the Spanish dancing styles, and **Flamenco** in particular, are in turn derived from older Arabian influences.

In the ballet, the Spanish dance represents dark chocolate, which is often served as a warm, thick drink, as part of breakfast in many regions of Spain.

One of our dancers will also perform the ***Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy***. 'Sugar Plums' were actually hard sugar sweets in the shapes of small plums, and were a very expensive treat. This is because a century ago, when the ballet was first performed, sweets took a long time to make; confectioners would slowly cover small fruits or nuts in layer after layer of liquid sugar, waiting for each layer to harden. They could take days, or even weeks, to make.

The ***tutu***, which is a traditional costume for the lead dancer, or ***ballerina***, is also created from layers and layers of tulle (a thin, transparent netting), a very lengthy process. Hence tutus are also very expensive to make.

The dancers will also demonstrate some mime. Mime is where a performer tells a story without speaking, using their bodies and facial expression to suggest a narrative. The mime we will look at is from an extremely old ballet first performed almost 240 years ago! The girl in the story is called Lise, and she has been locked inside the house by her mother. See if you can work out how Lise feels, and what she is thinking about, by watching her mime.

To complete the demonstration workshop, the dancers will share the floor with some of the children from the host school. Together, we will learn some of the dances which the children in the story of *The Nutcracker* are invited to perform at Clara's Christmas party. *The Nutcracker* is one of very few ballets which has traditionally included very young dancers performing for the audience. Originally the performances took place in the theatre very close to midnight, well past the usual time for bed, and well into the part of the night when magic happens...



Dancers: 5th Class pupils, St Patrick's,

Many elements combine to make ballet. In addition to specialised training in dancing, there are several other important things that make a ballet performance. Here are some to consider:

Music

Almost all dancing is performed to music. The music for ballet comes from many different places, and isn't always played by an orchestra, though both of the examples of ballet we are looking at today are:

The Nutcracker music is written especially for the ballet, and is the work of a famous Russian composer, Pyotr (Peter) Ilyich **Tchaikovsky**. In addition to *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky wrote music for two other famous ballets, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Other pieces written by him have also been used to accompany ballet and his music is considered very danceable.

Tchaikovsky also wrote symphonies, concertos, chamber music and opera.

Costume

Costumes for ballet can be extremely colourful and elaborate. Many are inspired by 'national costumes', from many countries, but have been freely adapted (changed to suit) the ballet, and have to be made especially to be danced in. This is one of the reasons why the female dancers wear very short skirts, and the male dancers wear thin leggings. Gymnastics, cycling and swimming are examples of other physical activities that require special clothing. Can you think of others?

The costumes for the *ballerina*, frequently the *tutu*, also come in many different styles and shapes, some long, some short, and represent the story, or mood of the ballet. The original costumes for the men, a couple of hundred years ago, were similar, and were like the tunics Roman warriors wore to battle. Battle-dress was also designed for ease of movement.

Scenery

The stage sets, or scenery, used for ballet have to allow plenty of space for dancing while also suggesting the location, setting, or mood of the performance. Scene designers have to consider, for example, creating the inside of a palace, with its grand staircases and pillars, or the countryside, or a forest setting. The surrounding set must give something to the story, a backdrop, without becoming too intrusive (distracting) or too large, making the dancers appear too small in comparison. Many famous painters, such as **Picasso**, **Chagall** or **Matisse**, have designed for the ballet.

There are also specialised wig-makers, make-up artists, prop makers, jewellers, and of course specialised shoe (and boot) makers. Dancers have a variety of shoes for different types of dancing, with small hard heels, or high heels, soft satin slippers, or hard riding boots.

Many dancing studios have pianos, and specially trained pianists accompany training and rehearsals. There are also people who read notation, which is dance writing, and looks a little like written music, that work with dancers.

Choreography

Choreography is the word used to describe the making of dances. The men and women who create dance works from scratch, sometimes compiling story and music and costume ideas, are called choreographers. They will often team up with other specialised professionals, people who can direct the drama, or stage fighting (several ballets contain sequences of sword-fighting), or even composers working alongside to create original music. The choreographer is often the 'boss', though there is usually a director who is in charge of either, or both, the theatre and the ballet company.

One of the most famous ballet directors was Irish. Almost 100 years ago she started her own ballet company which has grown into the world-renowned Royal Ballet, based in London, UK. Her professional name was **Dame Ninette de Valois**.

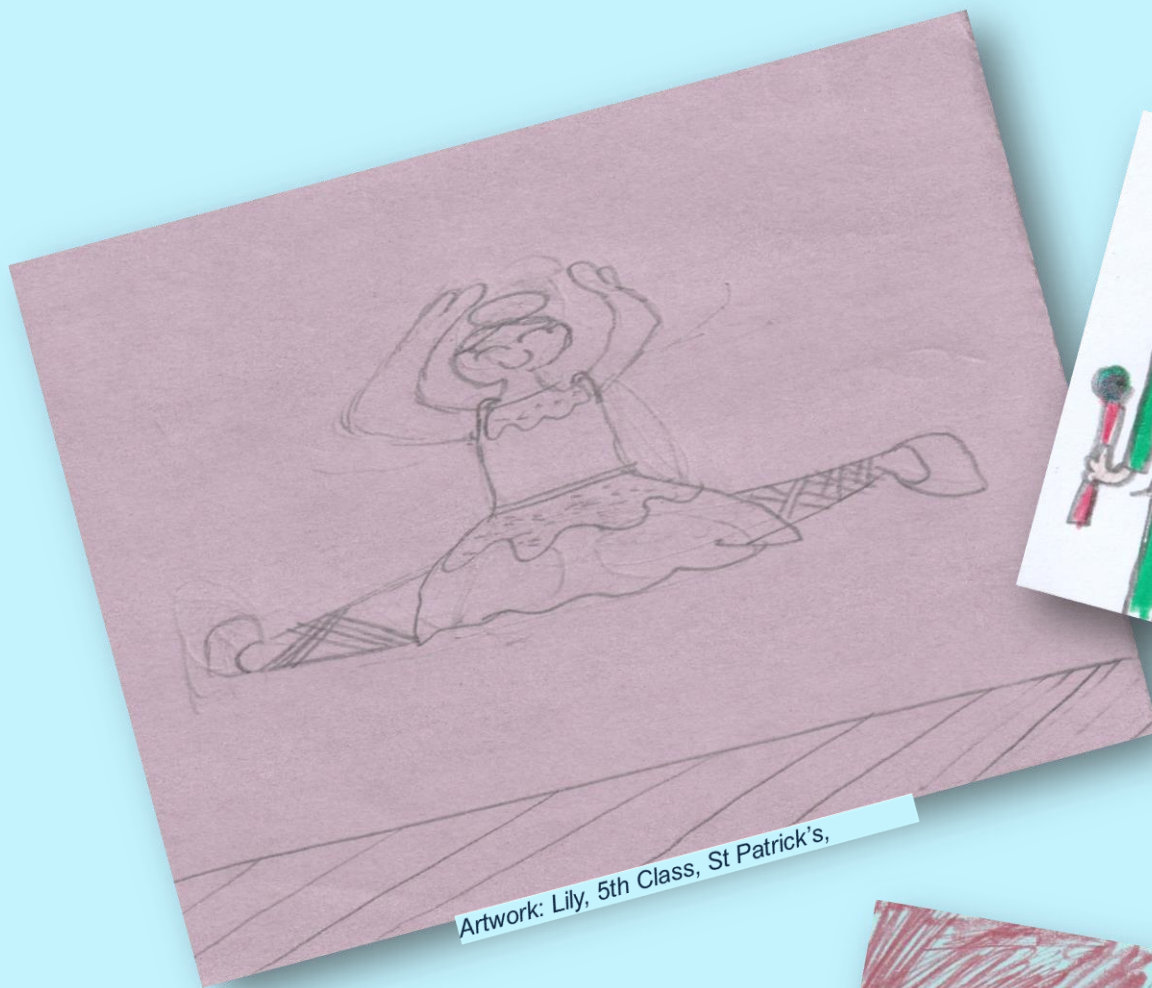
The INYB dancers taking part in each workshop presentation are all experienced performers with the ballet company. They also train with their own local dancing teachers throughout the year. In order to keep their place in the company, they must maintain their technique and development, and all have to undergo an annual audition process. As many as 300 children from across Ireland apply to audition for the National Youth Ballet each year.

The View from the Staffroom (St Patick's GNS, Hollypark)

Teachers spoke with great enthusiasm about the impact of ***Our Dancing Steps*** on their pupils. Deputy Principal Michaela Marnell described the visit as "a wonderful learning opportunity for our staff and pupils alike," while 5th Class Teacher Louise Conlon called it "a delightful, magical and enriching experience" that introduced many children to ballet as an expressive art form they may not have encountered before. Teachers consistently highlighted the joy, inspiration and educational value that the programme brought into the school day.

The workshops and performances were praised for their careful planning, inclusivity and engagement. 2nd Class Teacher Martha Lamont noted that pupils enjoyed seeing warm-ups, solos, duets and group dances, with the addition of costumes and pointe shoes adding excitement and authenticity. Michaela Marnell highlighted how the performance "supported the Dance Strand of our PE curriculum delivery," while Louise Conlon described the sound of Tchaikovsky's music filling the school corridors as "enchanted."

Perhaps most telling was the response of the children themselves. Special Needs Assistant Emma Hayden observed that pupils loved the opportunity to learn a short dance from ***The Nutcracker*** and were soon attempting *pirouettes* and *jetés* in the playground. The experience sparked curiosity, creativity and joy, leaving pupils and teachers alike eager for a return visit and hoping the programme might expand so that "even more of our pupils can be exposed to this valuable artistic experience" (Louise Conlon).



Artwork: Lily, 5th Class, St Patrick's,



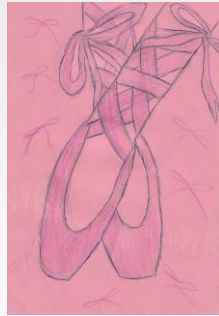
Nutcracker Dolls: Tom & Anon., 2nd Class, St Attracta's, Meadowbrook



Artwork: Faye, 2nd Class, St Patrick's,

My favourite part was the Nutcracker because the music was fast. My favourite dance was the mime. What I learned most is that... the mime was over one hundred years old. The best costume was Cillian's Spanish dancing costume.

Otis, 2nd Class, St Attracta's, Meadowbrook



Today we saw the INYB perform in our school. My favourite part was the mime because you got to tell the dancers what you saw.

The best costume was the boy's costume.

Tom, 2nd Class, St Attracta's, Meadowbrook

My favourite bit was the mime and the Nutcracker. The Nutcracker was magical and the mime was incredible. The dancers are amazing. Go raibh míle maith aga!

Laura, 2nd Class, St Attracta's, Meadowbrook



I like WOW, I danced with one of the ballerina[s]. It was AMAZING. The Nutcracker dance was so fun when I got to dance. I really liked the Spanish dance, it was also amazing. That was the best dance I have ever seen! That was amazing. I am not kidding.

Fionn, 2nd Class, St Attracta's, Meadowbrook

Artwork L – R., Upper Row: Sherry, Siún, Zoe; Lower Row: Charlotte, Sophie, Riley.
(5th Class, St Patrick's, Hollypark)