

## artsfirst night

# Taking the panto out of fairytale

This Grimm story receives a serious makeover, says **Dominic Maxwell**

**Theatre**  
**Cinderella:**  
 A Fairy Tale  
 Tobacco Factory,  
 Bristol

★★★★☆

Seeing a Christmas show in January can feel like arriving at a birthday party after the candles have been blown out. But this non-panto fairytale from the Tobacco Factory and the Travelling Light theatre company is so bewitching that you'd gladly watch it in a heatwave.

It contains no fairy godmothers, no glass slippers, no fancy carriages. Instead, this reworking of the Grimm brothers version of the tale gives us a determined heroine — Ella — and a



Lisa Kerr as Ella and Thomas Eccleshare as the Prince in Sally Cookson's staging of Cinderella

nerdy, birdwatching Prince. We get a not-so-ugly stepsister and brother. And mum herself, who may have murdered Ella's dad — "Careless of him to choke on that fishbone" — has a malignancy motivated by her dread of poverty.

Sally Cookson's production is aimed at ages six and up, but it's probably the grown-ups who get the most from the

instantly captivating opening. The cast don woolly hats as they animate beautiful white bird puppets. Ella's mum dies in childbirth, so dad brings her up, shows her the difference between wagtails and warblers as they walk through the local forest. "Nothing stays the same," sing the musicians, Benji and Will Bower, and we feel the

inexorable force of change. By the time Craig Edwards sticks on a dress in front of us to turn from lovely dad to evil stepmother, we're deeply involved in a story rich in a sense of loss and humour alike. It's simply stunning theatre.

If Cookson, the designer Katie Sykes and the dramaturg Adam Peck — there's no writer credited as such — can't quite maintain that jaw-dropping level for two hours, their show captivates throughout. Lisa Kerr's tomboyish Ella is no pushover, cannily fooling her stepsiblings into scrubbing the floor for her. Lucy Tuck and Saikat Ahamed look properly prim in their blue sailor suits, but look like victims too as stepmother dresses them both up to woo the Prince at the ball.

Every beat of the story is reinvented with precision and panache. Ella's friends the birds help her out when all looks lost as nature and music take the place of the supernatural. Bower's alluring folk-jazz soundtrack does a lot to sustain the magical mood and it's a thrill to see him and his brother play such a variety of stringed and percussion instruments to a pre-recorded backing.

So, Grimm though it all is, there's light to leaven the darkness. Thomas Eccleshare's Prince gets to work the crowd with great wit, and the acting, singing and dancing is a joy. It's no mean feat to make the most familiar fairytale of them all scrub up quite as fresh as this. Let's hope it has a life beyond this holiday season. Because, come on, Bristol, it would just be selfish to keep this one all to yourselves.

Box office: 0117-902 0344, to Jan 15

A colourful Cinderella in Stratford East First Night, in the main paper