Wondrous 'Alice' leaps onto stage

Tuesday, February 21, 2018

Oregon Ballet Theatre pulls out all stops in adaptation of Lewis Carroll story, set to show Feb. 24-March 4 at Keller Auditorium

It's all feet, legs, arms and hands on stage for Oregon Ballet Theatre, which has prepared to perform in its most ambitious ballet ever.

It's the West Coast premiere of "Alice (the wonderland)," adapted by Septime Webre from the Lewis Carroll story about the young woman who goes down a rabbit hole and discovers an imaginative and zany world of characters and magic. The highly athletic and vibrant production takes place Feb. 24-March 4 at Keller Auditorium, and involves choreography (ballet and acrobatics), puppets, props and costumes and sets on a Cirque du Soleil scale, the OBT Orchestra playing an original score by Matthew Pierce and a cast of 100.

"It's a huge undertaking and requires our whole team to pull out all the stops," says Kevin Irving, OBT artistic director.

"Alice" is the perfect vehicle to show off the considerable skills and artistry of the Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers.

Of the 100 dancers, about half come from the OBT School. And, principal Brian Simcoe plays Lewis Carroll and The Mad Hatter.

The way they describe it, "Alice" will be unlike anything they have done. Because it's non-stop action.

"You can't relax," Cheng says. "You have to be in the character. It's fun. For me, personally, it's challenging."

Webre created the show in 2012, basing it off Carroll's classics "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass."

Cheng wasn't a big "Alice" reader or watcher growing up, but she has watched the Johnny Depp and Mia Wasikowska movies — Tim Burton's "Alice in Wonderland" and James Bobin's "Alice Through the Looking Glass."

COURTESY: WASHINGTON BALLET - Septime Webre created the ballet "Alice (the wonderland)" in 2012, and it has been staged to rave reviews. Oregon Ballet Theatre performs the ballet Feb. 24-March 4 at Keller Auditorium.

"Technically, there's a lot of turning and jumping," Cheng says. "Alice is almost on stage the whole time. It'snot like doing 'Swan Lake,' where it's very difficult but you can go off stage and rest. For this production, all the resting time is on stage. You're running around and throwing around and doing fun lifts. That actually takes a lot of energy.

"I'm still trying to learn (the role), how to make it better. It's a lot ... I have to do all this research to get more in tune, and find a way to do it."

Simcoe wasn't a big "Alice" fan growing up, either, but he learned to like the story.

His version of The Mad Hatter hasn't come to full development, yet.
"I'm still trying to find his motivation," he says. "I think his wackiness should come from a
darker and more cynical outlook on life. I'm trying to still find the humor."

The dancing is very physical, he adds. "It's very technical and requires stamina and body
strength," Simcoe says.

"It'll be extensive involvement of OBT School students.

"It's very inspiring from the young kids," Cheng says. "I feel their energy. It's good to have
the school with us. It's great to remind ourselves why we're doing this."

Simcoe has been around long enough with OBT to know that the company has really
expanded its horizons with "Alice."

"It's really exciting, actually," he says. "It's quite a bit of challenge, especially for the men
because the whole production is so over the top. There are so many technical elements
that have to be achieved. We're trying to reach new heights.

"I'm excited to get it to the stage. I think fans will love it. I love the whimsical element to this.
It's very refreshing."

Oregon Ballet Theatre's "Alice (in wonderland)" takes place Feb. 24-March 4 at Keller
Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Show times are: 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24; 2
p.m. Sunday, Feb. 25; 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Friday, March 1-2; 2 and 7:30 Saturday, March
3; noon Sunday, March 4. Tickets start at $29. For more: www.obt.org.