

Oregon Ballet Theatre's "Alice (in wonderland)" Isn't a Traditional Ballet or Lewis Carroll Adaptation

Off-the-cuff flourishes make "Alice" more than a nostalgic revisitaton.



(Jingzi Zhao)

By **Bennett Campbell Ferguson** | Published February 28 • Updated February 28

In one of the most ebullient scenes in Oregon Ballet Theatre's *Alice (in wonderland)*, Alice (Xuan Cheng) and the Mad Hatter (Brian Simeco) duke it out with the Jabberwock. It's not a surprise that our heroes triumph against the dragonlike bruiser. It is unexpected, however, when Alice celebrates their victory by flexing her muscles and striking an Arnold Schwarzenegger-style pose.

Seemingly off-the-cuff flourishes like this make *Alice* more than a nostalgic revisitaton. OBT's production mixes Lewis Carroll's psychedelic children's story with Septime Webre's choreography and Matthew Pierce's giddy music. Invigorated by James Kronzer's multicolored set design and a cast whose grace as dancers is matched by their charisma as actors, the performance makes Carroll's quirky and menacing dreamscape feel entirely new.

Alice (in wonderland) begins with Alice seated in a gray armchair and surrounded by towering white drapes. It's a deliberately drab image that frames her as a young woman whose life is a blank slate ripe to be filled with adventure. A family friend cheekily named Lewis Carroll (Simeco) is more than happy to help, as is the White Rabbit (Chauncey Parsons). He leads Alice down that notorious rabbit hole—an illusion created by suspending Cheng above the stage on wires to create the impression of a seemingly endless fall—and into Wonderland, the home of charming oddballs like the Mad Hatter and the wrathful and ridiculous monarch the Queen of Hearts (Martina Chavez).

There are also hedgehogs, flamingos and a sunglasses-wearing frog, but Alice savors the vastness of its menagerie without losing its grasp on the individual eccentricities of its characters. The dancers clearly understand that a thousand beautiful pirouettes mean nothing if they aren't fueled by personality. As the White Rabbit, Parsons nimbly hops across the stage with fussy precision that's perfect for a harried mammal determined not to miss his "very important date." Peter Franke's looser, more playful movements as the Cheshire Cat perfectly fit the famed feline's impish spirit, and Emily Parker gives an eerily undulating performance as a caterpillar.

Alice features plenty of pas de deux, but it's the zanier, less-expected moments that have the greatest force. Especially memorable is the Queen of Hearts' croquet game with flamingo mallets and hedgehog balls. *Alice* creates the comedic scene with croquet players who hoist dancers playing flamingos into the air and swing them at children in prickly hedgehog costumes, who then somersault through giant wickets. It's a feat of magnificent slapstick weirdness that's executed without a single false move.

There are moments in *Alice* that seem a little indulgent, including a lengthy flamingo dance that feels like a distraction from Alice's journey. But even that scene features young dancers dressed as baby flamingos who deliver the show's best sight gag by shaking their beaks in unison. That's the most remarkable thing about *Alice*—it never runs out of ways to fill you with awe.

SEE IT: *Alice (in wonderland)* is at the Keller Auditorium, 222 SW Clay St., obt.org. 7:30 pm Thursday-Saturday, 2 pm Saturday, noon Sunday, though March 4. \$45-\$121.

[Share on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#)

TRENDING

- 1 WW's November 2018 Endorsements for Oregon Ballot Measures 
- 2 WW's November 2018 Endorsement for Oregon Governor 
- 3 WW's November 2018 Endorsements For Portland City Hall, Multnomah County and Metro 
- 4 WW's November 2018 Endorsements for the Oregon Legislature 
- 5 Scared? Vote. WW's November 2018 Endorsements 

EXPLORE TOPICS AND CATEGORIES

- Dance
- Dance Review
- Oregon Ballet Theatre
- Theater

COMMENTS

About Bennett Campbell Ferguson

Bennett Campbell Ferguson is a Portland-based journalist and film critic. When not writing, he enjoys playing the piano, hiking and reading comic books.

MOST READ

- WW's November 2018 Endorsements for Oregon Ballot Measures 
- WW's November 2018 Endorsement for Oregon Governor 
- WW's November 2018 Endorsements For Portland City Hall, Multnomah County and Metro 
- WW's November 2018 Endorsements for the Oregon Legislature 

MOST COMMENTED

- Portland Streets Descend Into Bedlam, Again, as Proud Boys and Antifascists Maul Each Other  197
- What's Not to Like About Kate Brown?  176
- Why Is an Anti-Abortion Measure on the Ballot in America's Most Pro-Choice State?  151
- City Receives A Flood Of Calls After Fox News Segment Criticizes "Antifa Mob" In Portland  132
- Why Don't Portland Police Stop the Proud Boys From Brawling?  130

