

DANCE

## Oregon Ballet Theatre locates the wonder in 'Wonderland'

OBT's 'Alice' is just curiouser enough to keep the kids happy and the adults cooing

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By HEATHER WISNER

Tiny girls in poofy dresses spin circles around steam punks sipping coffee in the Keller Auditorium lobby this Sunday, in a scene to rival the afternoon's main event: *Alice (in Wonderland)*, which Oregon Ballet Theatre has mounted for a two-week run. This is the West Coast and company premiere of the ballet, which *Septime Webre* created in 2012 for the Washington Ballet, and if the large and enthusiastic crowd it drew to the matinee is any indication, we may not have seen the last of it.

The show offers plenty to enthuse about, particularly its gratifying blast of color and motion during a dreary Oregon winter. Costumer Liu Vandal, scenic designer James Kronzer and puppetry designer Eric J. Van Wyck have conspired to create a vivid alternate universe teeming with feathered, fuzzy and finned creatures and kooky humans whose psychedelic frippery would not have looked out of place in the Mark Morris *Pepperland* show last week. As a bonus, the OBT Orchestra plays composer-violist Matthew Pierce's score live for all shows.



Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers in Septime Webre's "ALICE (in Wonderland)", performed at the Keller Auditorium/Photo by Jingqi Zhao

Lewis Carroll's storytelling in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* has inspired too many dances, films and other artistic ventures to enumerate: This one begins, as many do, with Alice taking leave of her squabbling family to join Carroll for a rowboat ride. It's the point in the production where the stagecraft wizardry kicks in, as crew members hang the boat prop from the pair's shoulders, then remove it once Carroll has rowed them across the stage.

More effects follow in quick succession. As she tumbles down the rabbit hole, Alice is suspended above the stage by wires; Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee pedal just her mid-air on a tandem bike. She's also suspended from wires to simulate her sudden oversized growth: Another dancer hidden by her long skirt performs her steps, and the adult dancers playing large, colorful doors are swapped out for children playing tinier versions.

A note about kids: there are many in this show—often dancing miniatures of the adult characters—and the cuteness index is off the charts. A collective "Aww!" gusted through the auditorium when the fluffy pink flamingo chicks bobbed their beaked headdresses or the wee hedgehogs somersaulted through the croquet "wickets" formed by petite playing cards. From an artistic director's standpoint, having kids in the show is a winning formula to get students stage time and families into seats, and unless you're a hardened cynic, you'll likely join in the cooing.

The company's adults have plenty to do, too. Besides dodging small children, many play dual roles over multiple acts. The men, it's worth noting, get most of the choicest solos (and a few eyebrow-raising corps parts—the white-clad, carnival-mask-wearing gents who go-go dance on the tea table have a distinctly adult flair.) At the Sunday matinee, Adam Hartley had fun as the March Hare, saucily wiggling his cottontail and whiskered nose as he beckoned to Alice (Ansa Capizzi); he later returned as a lumbering Duchess who sparred with a hapless Chauncey Parsons as the Cook. Dressed like a refugee from *Glee*, Colby Parsons's Cheshire Cat arched his back and nibbled against Alice's legs in a jazy, moonlit pas de deux. And Brian Simcoe reeled off a solid series of coupé jeté turns and turns à la seconde, as the Dodo, craning his neck and taking one last, furtive peck at Alice before making his exit. As for the women, Eva Burton was both a bad-tempered Mother and haughty Queen of Hearts, while Katherine Monogue, as the Caterpillar, undulated beautifully over the heads of her partners before blossoming into a butterfly whose enormous wings were flapped manually by puppeteers.

The show's choreography presents its share of challenges. While the puppetry adds to the wow factor, it can also interfere with the flow of movement, as dancers are prepped for certain feats. And some of the more unusual partnering, especially when it involves more than two people, can look labored.

That said, there's enough wonder in this wonderland that you won't regret a visit. They're not all mad here, just charmingly eccentric.

Oregon Ballet Theatre's "Alice (in Wonderland)" continues March 1-4, Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St.

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1. Martha Ullman West says: February 27, 2018 at 3:35 pm

I saw the same performance with my grandchildren, ages 5 and 9. And I certainly agree with the sawawr factor—the children really are adorable—and it's a beautifully designed production. I did think the narrative got lost in the stagecraft, so to speak, so I asked my 9 year old grandson after the show (very well read kid!) if it was recognizably Alice in Wonderland to him, and he said "Oh yes." Which was reassuring. I very much enjoyed some of the unexpected casting, particularly Chauncey Parsons, an impeccable classical dancer (Kirov Academy trained) as the hapless (and tumbling) cook. I did think the first act was way too long, and some of the star turns ditto, but everyone in the audience seemed to be enjoying themselves, including me. And for those audience members familiar with the 19th century classics, it's amusing to spot the bits that Webre, a bit of a magpie as many choreographers are, has inserted into the action (cygnets' dance from Swan Lake, for example).

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