



THEATRE REVIEW: ALICE'S ADVENTURE'S IN WONDERLAND, THE ROYAL BALLET, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

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THE perennial dominance of *The Nutcracker* is at an end.

I predict that Christopher Wheeldon's triumphant production of Lewis Carroll's immortal classic will become the must-see ballet for children and adults alike. As a full-length narrative ballet – the first commissioned by the Royal Ballet in sixteen years – it is a cogent and immensely entertaining work. As a feat of engineering design, it is out of this world.

The gang's all here. The White Rabbit (Edward Watson), whose transformation from photographer to bustling bunny begins with a white fluffy tail bursting through his trousers; the Queen of Hearts (Zenaïda Yanowsky), wheeled on in an enormous red dress that opens to reveal the King sitting at her feet.

The Mad Hatter, brilliantly interpreted by Steven McRae as a tap-dancing vaudevillian. And Shakesperaeaan actor Simon Russell Beale as the Duchess – half Gormenghast's Swelter/half Widow Twanky.

With Joby Talbot's inventive score driving the action and setting the mood, shifting gear from cod-Tchaikovsky to Bernard Hermann hysteria and from thundering Stravinsky to lush Rogers and Hammerstein with ease, this romps along, building scene after scene of breathtaking invention.

Wheeldon's fortunate to have the resources of both The Royal Opera House and co-producers The National Ballet of Canada at his disposal but he spends the money wisely.

The spectacular animation and visual effects – like Alice falling down the rabbit hole or growing and shrinking – are never superfluous to requirements.

The real magic is on the stage, centred around Lauren Cuthbertson's sublime Alice – all little girl flirtiness to begin with gradually deciphering the woman who is beginning to burst through the child. The Cheshire Cat, animated by several puppeteers like the War Horse, comes on in pieces and reconstitutes itself before coming apart again; the caterpillar undulates across the stage on a series of shapely legs.

The Duchess and the Cook (Kirsten McNally) battle it out with cleavers and cooking pots in the kitchen from Hell.

Wheeldon has leapt from the wonder boy of neo-classical abstraction into the front rank of narrative dancemakers with this wonderful production. Like Michael Corder and John Cranko, he understands that movement and mime must tell the story down to the smallest detail.

No gesture, no step is wasted. Rather than pursue a clearly identifiable dance style from scratch he has looted, plundered and borrowed from many styles, melting them down into his vocabulary, which becomes more contemporary as the evening progresses. The final sequences as the Queen of Hearts struts her stuff could have come straight from the comic performances of New York's gender-bending Trocks.

By turns hallucinatory and hilarious, this is a hit. A palpable hit.