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Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Royal Opera House, London

The Centaur & the Animal, Sadler's Wells, London

Curiouser and curiouser...a Victorian tale stuffed with wordplay makes for an instant classic of modern ballet

Reviewed by Jenny Gilbert

Sunday, 6 March 2011

The Royal Ballet has staked an arm and a leg on its latest venture.

No one's saying how much it cost – these days that might seem tactless, even though the National Ballet of Canada is shouldering some of the burden. But this is also a big emotional investment for the Royal. It's the company's first new full-evening work for 16 years; its first full-length new musical score for 20. It has been two years in the making and is a final throw of the dice for its director, Dame Monica Mason, soon to retire and hoping for a lasting legacy.

And in Christopher Wheeldon's creation she's surely got it. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a thing of exuberant wit and scale, stacked with vivid ideas delivered with pace and panache. Only a curmudgeon would complain that it's more of a show than a ballet, with its sweeping cinematic score, tap-dancing Mad Hatter, War Horse-style puppetry and dazzling digital projections – an eclecticism that harks back to a time when ballet productions used every new effect going. What's more, this populist showcase has the potential to overturn the most entrenched antipathy to dance. Its two hours whisk by like the scut of a rabbit.

This is especially creditable given that, for all its whacky characters, Lewis Carroll's narrative is not an obvious fit for dance. Much of the book consists of puns and riddles, along with digs at Victorian education, with its endless learning by rote, divorced from understanding. The production's single nod to that theme is the jumble of alphabet letters that hurtle alongside Alice in the vortex of the rabbit-hole (dizzying screen graphics by Jon Driscoll and Gemma Carrington). Otherwise it's all action and character, some of which gets a bit lost in the hectic telling, leaving you wondering whether Act I really needed a scene change every two minutes, or quite so many elaborately whiskered and individualised animals.

When the choreographer comes to revise the piece in future seasons, he might bear in mind that sartorial tip beloved of women's magazine editors. Before going out for the evening, look in the mirror and take one thing off – a couple of dozen, in this case. Steven McRae's hoofing Mad Hatter is a joy, but he didn't need a horse-drawn travelling theatre stage to do it from (isn't it meant to be a tea party?) or a giant cup-cake trampoline that only gets bounced on once.

That said, the shaping of the narrative (by writer Nicholas Wright) is masterly. His added prologue anchors the factual Alice Liddell in her wealthy Oxford home, where her parents' guests – including Lewis Carroll himself, a visiting Indian dignitary, and a monstrous dowager aunt – reappear transformed in her dream. The unfair sacking of the affable gardener's boy, Jack, for stealing jam tarts, cleverly sets up the ultimate courtroom scene where Alice defends the Knave of Hearts (and falls in love with him in the course of a Nutcracker-esque pas de deux). It's all very neat.

The best of Bob Crowley's designs draw gasps and grins in equal measure. The Duchess's cottage that opens up to reveal a hell's kitchen of a sausage factory, in which Simon Russell Beale's Duchess capers gleefully among the pig carcasses. The Queen of Hearts' enormous shiny red pepper of a dress, opening on hinges to reveal the hen-pecked King cowering at her feet. The flamingo girls at the croquet match, one hand forming the beak and the other the tail. The dear little hedgehog children who curl up to be croquet balls.

Wheeldon plays similar games with the choreography, with a parody of the Rose Adage, Zenaida Yanowsky's greedy, psychotic Queen grabbing a jam tart from each of her three cavaliers, scoffing them as she goes. More extended pleasures include a brilliantly patterned set-piece of a game of cards, the girls' felt tutus spelling out their suit (diamonds, clubs, spades) whenever they bend over.

As in many 19th-century ballets, you have a wait for the meatiest dance material, and it's not till near the end that Wheeldon stretches his central couple: in the first cast, a pleasingly spirited Lauren Cuthbertson, and elegant Sergei Polunin. We could have done with more of him.

But the real engine powering the show is Joby Talbot's score, a storming piece of work spiced with exotic woodwind, James Bond brass, and an ironmongers'-worth of percussion, deployed with thrilling climactic control, wonderfully played under Barry Wordsworth.

Equestrian theatre is a rarity on British stages, and I'm rather glad of that. In France, the veteran horse-trainer Bartabas is a celebrity, and his theatrical creations, starring his four-legged protégés, are regarded as art. The Centaur & The Animal has been at Sadler's Wells for the week, and is a truly spooky affair: the stage shrouded in semi-darkness, from which silently-shod beasts

loom and retreat, while a naked Butoh artist, 60-year-old Ko Murobushi, distorts his body into crabbed, agonised shapes, and a heavily accented voice narrates the stream of consciousness of a leper, complete with revolting descriptions of pus and flaking skin.

It takes all sorts, I suppose. Me, I prefer my horses running in a field.

'Alice': in rep to 15 Mar (020-7304 4000); 'Centaur': tonight (0844 412 4300)

Next Week:

Jenny Gilbert is intrigued by Teddy and Topsy, a one-woman show about Isadora Duncan

Dance Choice

Champion of the story-ballet, David Nixon's latest for Northern Ballet is a three-act Cleopatra, with music by Claude-Michel Schonberg. Expect steamy gymnastics and an asp. At Edinburgh Festival Theatre (Thur to Sat) and touring. Meanwhile, catch Ailey 2 on tour at Truro's Hall for Cornwall (Mon & Tue), and Belfast's Grand Opera House (Fri & Sat).

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