

Alice's Adventures In Wonderland at Covent Garden



Lauren Cuthbertson as Alice is a natural as the woman-girl of the title role MARILYN KINGWILL

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Of course this isn't just another ballet. For the first time in 16 years the Royal Ballet has had both the will and the confidence to commission an original full-length production. There have been many short one-act creations since the mid 1990s but not until now has Monica Mason, the director of the Royal Ballet, decided that the time was right to take such an enormous gamble.

That gamble has certainly paid off. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with jolly choreography by Christopher Wheeldon and stunning music by Joby Talbot, is a spectacular family entertainment brought to life with enormous theatrical verve.

Based on *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and realised with the imaginative collaboration of Nicholas Wright, the playwright, and Bob Crowley, the designer, this two-act ballet evokes a strange world of Victorian whimsy, kooky dark deeds and

dreams of young romance. All this and Simon Russell Beale, one of our greatest actors, putting on dancing shoes for a star turn as the Duchess.

It starts with a prologue in the real world, at a garden party at the deanery where the Liddell family is entertaining guests. Those guests then morph into the exaggerated fantasy creatures that the 15-year-old Alice meets after falling down the rabbit hole. So Mother becomes the Queen of Hearts, Lewis Carroll himself becomes the White Rabbit and Jack, the gardener's son, becomes the Knave of Hearts and Alice's love interest.

For all its wonders both human and animal, however, *Wonderland* needs a substantial trim. There are too many miniature adventures slowing down the romantic momentum in the overlong first half. The second half, by contrast, is where the ballet takes flight, with the trial of the Knave of Hearts and Alice's chance to save the man she loves. We also have uproarious comedy, a parody of the Rose Adagio and a stage filled with madcap eccentrics running amok.

Talbot's score is utterly enchanting, a tapestry of wonder and mystery that shimmers with rich characterisation. Crowley's designs, with the help of clever video projections, evoke the hallucinogenic zoo of exotic inhabitants and invite you to step right in.

And the choreography? Wheeldon saves most of his zest and flair for the second half. But throughout there is charm and bustle to his character writing and real buzz in the big set pieces, such as the delicious waltz that ends act one.

The Royal Ballet is a company of actors and this gives them plenty to work with. Lauren Cuthbertson in the title role is a natural. Both girl and woman, she is the sweet energy that makes us care from beginning to end. Sergei Polunin is a most handsome Jack and Edward Watson a touching White Rabbit.

Russell Beale has the time of his life raging around the stage as the monstrous Duchess, his body fluttering like a deranged butterfly. But no one is a match for Zenaida Yanowsky's sensational Queen of Hearts, who is little short of demonic.

If you haven't got a ticket do not despair — the production returns next season.

Box office 020 7304 4000 to March 15