

# Joby Talbot heads down the rabbit hole for the Royal Ballet's Alice



Joby Talbot Richard Pohle

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## Talbot's score for the Royal Ballet's new Alice has cost two years of angst - and the odds are stacked against success

Pity Joby Talbot. The last time the Royal Ballet commissioned a contemporary composer to write a full-length ballet, 20 years ago, it went straight to the knacker's yard. Try to find the last original full-length ballet score to strike gold and you have to travel 80 years back in time to Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

No wonder dance companies have gone hunting for the popular touch. Enter the Pet

Shop Boys (signed up for a Sadler's Wells extravaganza next month); Paul McCartney (working with New York City Ballet in September); Claude-Michel Schönberg, bringing his West End musical flair to a new *Cleopatra* for Northern Ballet; and the composer Joby Talbot, whose Royal Ballet commission, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with choreography from Christopher Wheeldon, opens with a gala premiere tonight. Two contrasting templates stare out at all of them: the enormously costly flop and the blinding masterpiece.

"It does slightly weigh on one," Talbot admits wearily, a dry choking chuckle killing his voice dead. "The bar has been set rather high. But if we expect this piece to be a success and go into the repertory then it has to be able to hold its own among the great ballets. Which is why I've been working so hard on it. Lavishing attention on it. Trying to get it just right." That's meant two years of sleepless nights, cold sweats and palpitations — "loads of them, at three in the morning".

Talbot is a night owl, a hangover from when he was a member of the dandyish pop band, the Divine Comedy, playing sticky-floored subterranean dives to pretentious art students and later Wembley with Robbie Williams. "I work better at night," he adds. "Probably something to do with me feeling very strongly that I don't want composition to feel like proper work. I want it to feel like it's just what I love doing. Like fun."

From an outsider's point of view, Talbot's career has been very, very fun, characterised by a carefree, magpie-like seizing of one glittery project after another. His translucent musical language, fresh, clear, dynamic, distinct, has led him to a decade and a half of saying yes to the most extraordinary array of commissions. Yes to a soundtrack for *The League of Gentlemen*. Yes to Divine Comedy. Yes to the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Tom Jones, Paul McCartney, Travis, the London Sinfonietta and Charlotte Gainsbourg. Yes to, er, Classic FM as their first composer in residence — which, he admits, was a bit of a mistake, closing doors to the top-tier orchestras and conductors: "But that was ten years ago," he says breezily.

Fearless. Until now.

Talbot is no stranger to ballet. He orchestrated songs by the White Stripes for the Royal Ballet's hit short, *Chroma*, with the choreographer Wayne McGregor. And he wrote the one-act *Fool's Paradise* for Wheeldon in 2007. But they were abstract dances: no plot, no dramaturgs, no characters. A lovely blank canvas. "You write a slow movement for an abstract ballet and it doesn't have to jump through hoops and introduce 14 characters all doing 14 things at once."

Narrative ballet — think *The Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake* — is much tougher. "Narrative ballet is divided into lots of bite-size chunks. You are writing an awful lot of miniatures that you have to fool people into thinking are joined together," he explains. "And these chunks have to concern themselves with illogical, unmusical considerations. Which is really hard."

He hadn't seen a ballet since he was a boy, so the Royal Ballet got him tickets to Stravinsky's *Firebird*. "I left before the end," he says, laughing and sighing simultaneously. "I had to. It was too daunting. I just thought: 'This is not helping at all.' It was a bit like trying to write a string quartet after hearing the late chamber

works of Beethoven. You'd come out wanting to write a saxophone concerto." He feared he'd frighten himself out of the commission. So the past was politely sidestepped and he got to work. Very, very slowly.

"One always expects a moment where it all starts to flow. You know that the first few minutes will be like pulling teeth but then gradually it will start to pull together. And then you're off," he says desperately. But it didn't happen. Stop start. Stop start. Two years of it.

That's narrative ballet for you. The torture is plain to see: as he explains the hell of writing each of the 24 miniatures, the toughest being the polka — "The whitest form in history. Bum ti-ti Bum ti-ti Bum. What do you do with that?" — his body goes into overdrive, conducting its own little personal session of origami: leg under buttock, arm under leg, leg by arm, two legs under buttocks, arms hugging back of chair, etc. His Eric Morecambe glasses then come off, and his face gets a smothering, his hands whisking the handsome features puce.

Benign, mildly crazed, Edwardian-looking. Talbot could join the show. He'd look good next to the angsty rabbits, hookah-smoking caterpillars and shouty Queens that will descend on the Royal Opera House tonight.

It's difficult wheedling information from Talbot on what exactly we will be faced with. That it's spectacular isn't in doubt, he assures me. Can it compete with *Anna Nicole*, the Royal Opera House's current operatic sensation? Oh yeah, he says confidently. And what sort of Alice will she be? Not the snotty little brat we all know and hate from the Disney film?

"She was unbearable, wasn't she?" Talbot whispers disapprovingly. No, the Alice we get, he explains, is a put-upon, three-dimensional Alice that we can root for, one from whose life Talbot and Wheeldon could create a real emotional drama. And just in case there wasn't enough jeopardy, she's on stage for most of the show, creating one of the largest ballerina roles in history.

And the music? "Unhinged," he says, "But in a good way. I found this strange, shifting, bitonal, tick-tocking language for Alice's Wonderland," he says. The score is massive. He tries to measure out the size with his arms, fails and starts nodding to the two opposing walls. Room-size? Not quite. But nearly. It's melodic and propulsive.

Characters have themes — "in a straight-down-the-line kind of way," he adds. The Queen has a tango. The Rabbit has a shofar — a ram's horn traditionally used in Jewish religious services. "The fun comes from what you do with those themes," he says with a glint in his eye. At the end of Act II, at the trial, there's a mash up of characters' themes as they pile on their evidence. "And we discovered that if you take a bass trombone mute and shove it inside a French horn it sounds like a Cheshire cat purring," he says, almost with a ta-da. "The orchestration is a big part of it. The whole production looks completely lavish, magical and beautiful. It's vital that the music steps up to the plate."

Does he know why the Royal Ballet's last full-length ballet score, *Cyrano*, written by Wilfred Josephs (and choreographed by David Bintley), flopped in 1991? "No one's mentioned it," he laughs, "which tells you quite a lot." It tells you how much they must

trust him.

The pressure may be enormous, the potential risks unthinkable, the competition (remember, it's got the press-saturating bosoms of *Anna Nicole* to contend with) suffocating, the task tear-your-hair-out tough. But get past the physical twitchiness — seeming to suggest that Talbot chose the wrong body when he was born — and he seems calm and even, dare I say it, confident. In fact he might actually be enjoying the peril of it all.

“I don't know if other composers feel this but I keep having this moment where I'm waiting for the Royal Ballet orchestra to say: “Let's move on to the Tchaikovsky.” But they don't move on to the Tchaikovsky. They move on to more of me. And every single time it comes as a bit of a surprise.”

***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* opens with a gala performance tonight at the Royal Opera House, London WC2. Further performances from March 2 (020-7304 4000, [www.roh.org.uk](http://www.roh.org.uk))**

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