

Ballet embraces Carroll's Wonderland world

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By Stephanie McKay



Jacelyn Lobay played a whimsical Alice in Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet's WONDERLAND at the Sid Buckwold Theatre, TCU Place, for a one-night-only performance
Photograph by: Michelle Berg, The StarPhoenix

With Alice in Wonderland, one needs to embrace the weirdness of Lewis Carroll's magical world to really do it justice. The Royal Winnipeg's unusual and beautiful interpretation of Wonderland -performed Wednesday evening at TCU Place -does just that and then some.

The company only recently debuted this piece, choreographed by Saskatchewan native Shawn Hounsell, but already its curious (and curiuser) style is making a mark as one of the most unique shows in its repertoire.

The mad world of Alice's dreams is created entirely through projections as opposed to an extravagantly sculpted stage. Surprisingly this makes the show even better. From the stunning forest at the beginning to a rapidly growing and shrinking Alice, the projections achieve gorgeous visuals an ordinary set just couldn't.

Wonderland is the familiar tale of Alice, a young girl who finds herself lost in a wild and sometimes frightening land. RWB's production follows a similar storyline and characters, but is really its own work of art.

Alice is danced with a youthful lightness by Jacelyn Lobay. She does spend a bit too much time running, though. It is understandable she would be frantic in such a strange world, but it's a shame to not see Lobay dancing when her movement is so lovely.

A deliciously mad, megaphone-wielding Queen of Hearts is danced by principal Tara Birtwhistle, who is retiring at the end of this season. It is a fitting final diva role for this extraordinary dancer.

Anyone who has seen Birtwhistle in previous RWB productions knows what a fantastic dancer she is.

But in Wonderland her movement is purposefully awkward and imperfect, and she is perfect at it.

Her entourage of arrogant flamingos en pointe were the perfect complement to the queen's over-the-top attitude.

Hounsell's choreography is modern and ingenious with its flexed feet and odd angles. He clearly isn't afraid to take risks. In his Wonderland, the caterpillar is an undulating group of four dancers moving perfectly in unison. The White Rabbit - wonderfully brought to life by Yosuke Mino - doesn't need ears, just a brilliantly busied demeanour and wrist permanently flexed to check his watch.

Wonderland is a new work, but it is fairly polished. Its newness only showed a few times during group numbers where synchronicity was slightly off. The dancers occasionally had troubles interacting with the projections, which were timed in hopes of matching their movements. The dance of living flowers was pretty, but diminished the momentum created by the Queen's bombastic entrance.

One of the most notable parts of Wonderland is its sense of humour. Never stuck-up or stuffy, the show's journey is full of sweet comedic moments. The audience might see an unexplained man in a gorilla suit or a dancer holding up an applause sign, in addition to exquisite dancing.

During narration at the beginning of the ballet, Alice exclaims "I don't remember how it happened, but I do remember that it was wonderful."

Same goes for this exquisitely strange ballet.

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