

Alice in Wonderland: the ballet

The Royal Ballet is taking a trip to Wonderland for its first brand new full-length work in 20 years. Jessica Duchen looks forward to a curious evening

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Oh, my ears and whiskers! A new, full-length classical ballet, with a story and a specially written score? It's the single biggest risk any ballet company can take, both artistically and financially, and all eyes will be on the results. The Royal Ballet is currently preparing to open its first such venture in 20 years: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon, with music by Joby Talbot.

It's by no means the first time that Alice has been turned into a ballet – English National Ballet already has an interpretation set to Tchaikovsky and choreographed by Derek Deane; others pop up around the world from Prague to San Diego. But the Royal Ballet (and its co-producers, The National Ballet of Canada) remain undaunted; and the enduring appeal of the story for dance is clear. It has everything: a huge popularity, an array of quirky characters, plus scenic possibilities involving expansion, shrinking and tumbling down rabbit holes.

The dramaturg Nicholas Wright must have had a peach of a job preparing the scenario, which features a real-world prologue providing each of the leading Wonderland characters with a "living" counterpart. We're promised some suitably dynamic theatrical effects, the precise nature of which are being kept closely under wraps before the show opens, but with Simon Russell Beale enlisted to dance a character vignette as the Duchess, it looks as if nothing is impossible. Yes, "dance" – the enthusiastic Shakespearean actor has been taking ballet classes in preparation for his first steps into this unfamiliar world, and has allegedly lost a couple of stone in the process.

For the Royal Opera House, it's all happening not a moment too soon. Full-evening story ballets are the staple diet of any ballet company: the big classics like *Swan Lake*, *The*

Sleeping Beauty and Romeo and Juliet are pretty much guaranteed a big, broad-based audience. But old warhorses can wear thin if they are simply revived season after season. Refreshing the full-length repertoire is essential, yet it seems ever more difficult to pull it off successfully.

Part of the problem is that entirely new creative projects, with newly commissioned music, have a lot to live up to: the great juggernauts, with scores by Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev have set the barre extremely high. The Royal Ballet's last attempt was David Bintley's first *Cyrano de Bergerac* in 1991 with a commissioned score by Wilfred Josephs; and it was maybe not the world's greatest success. The choreographer has since produced a new version for Birmingham Royal Ballet with a new score by a different composer, Carl Davis, which was received much more positively. Covent Garden's most recent new full-length ballet, Twyla Tharp's *Mr Worldly Wise*, 15 years ago, drew on pre-existing music by Rossini.

Alice might never have come about but for the determination of the Royal Ballet's director, Monica Mason. She is due to retire in June next year; Alice is in some ways a "legacy project" for this South African-born former ballerina, who first joined the Royal Ballet when she was 16. Its director since 2002, she is passionate about commissioning new works; she appointed Wayne McGregor as resident choreographer and has ensured a healthy flow of one-act novelties for the company. But nothing could be more vital in the long-term than the creation of a new classic, and that means ensuring the right team is in place to make it work.

At the helm of Alice is Wheeldon, the British-born darling of the New York contemporary ballet scene; he was New York City Ballet's resident choreographer for seven years from 2001. With a style rooted in the classical tradition, but with cutting-edge inventiveness and deep, empathetic musicality, Wheeldon is regarded by many as a worthy successor to George Balanchine. His ballets are ultra-demanding, with radiant extensions, crazy lifts and a high-octane propulsion that can leave the audience breathless, never mind the dancers. Perfect, then, for Carroll's visions of "The dream-child moving through a land/ Of wonders wild and new..."

Terrific dancing is a given, with the British stars Lauren Cuthbertson and Edward Watson leading the opening night cast as Alice and the White Rabbit/Lewis Carroll, Sergei Polunin as the Knave of Hearts/Jack and Zenaida Yanowsky as the Queen of Hearts/Alice's Mother. Successive performances promise to be equally dazzling, with the charismatic American ballerina Sarah Lamb as Alice on the second night and the lyrical Marianela Núñez on the third. But Alice's success doesn't rest solely on its choreography or execution: a ballet can stand or fall, so to speak, on its music. There'd be no *Swan Lake* without Tchaikovsky: so the composer, Talbot, is a more than vital part of the action.

Talbot is a dab hand at scores for dance, having collaborated previously with Wheeldon and McGregor; but then, he's a dab hand at most types of music, from film and TV scores – he did *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse*, amongst others – to avant-garde classical and mainstream pop music, in which he's worked with Sir Paul McCartney and Charlotte Church. Even so, creating a made-to-measure, full-evening score for Alice has been a new experience for him: in story-based dance, the music can never take a back seat. "In films the music is

often in the background, creating atmosphere," he says, "but for Alice, the music always has to drive the narrative."

There's an element of pastiche, he reveals, including "an enormous waltz which is like Johann Strauss gone bananas. And I had to write a polka, which is not something I think I'll do again in a hurry, though I enjoy the fact of having done it!" Those set pieces are only part of a musical adventure in Wonderland that promises to be multi-layered and atmospheric: "It's all glued together with a strange, magical language which is very much from the heart, rather golden, strange and disarming. There's an underlying, uneasy restlessness to the music."

Above all, the score promises glorious imagination and great fun. Talbot was still busy with the orchestration when we spoke, and says, with glee, that it will involve "as many musicians as we can squeeze into the orchestra pit. We've got some singers, masses of percussion and some peculiar additions to the orchestra: for the Caterpillar there's lots of North African percussion, and the principal horn has kindly agreed to play a shofar – a ram's horn trumpet, which is the White Rabbit's trumpet. So instead of a silvery, heraldic noise, he has something which sounds more like the Great Gonzo [of The Muppets]."

But even if Alice is a gift to any ballet company, what can a ballet interpretation bring to Lewis Carroll in return? Can it offer anything that the novel didn't already have? For Talbot there is one vital extra ingredient to stir in: heart.

"As a team, we've tried to make it more emotionally engaging than the original," he says. He finds Carroll's Alice an oddly deadpan little girl: "The strange thing about the story is that Alice is there in every scene, experiencing all these weird things, but she never seems the slightest bit concerned. If it was all happening to me, I'd be terrified!" And the task of transforming her into a more sympathetic character with whom we can all identify has been his as much as Wheeldon's: "If she's feeling sad and lonely I can give her plaintive music; if she's reacting with horror to the Duchess throwing the baby around the kitchen then she can be desperately worried and the music can reflect that. It's very emotional. It's going to be a roller-coaster ride."

So will the audience declare the opening night a "frabjous day"? Or will it be "Off with their heads"? When the curtain goes up, we'll find out.

'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 2 to 15 March