

The Royal Ballet's Alice - coming to a big screen near you

The company's brightest stars are back in Wonderland – and this time it's hitting the cinemas

By Jessica Duchen Wednesday 13 March 2013

Two years after its world premiere, the Royal Ballet's first full-length creation in two decades is back at the Royal Opera House, and this time it is coming to a cinema near you. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon to a specially composed score by Joby Talbot, is the ROH's next live cinecast. It stars its original Alice and Lewis Carroll/White Rabbit, respectively Lauren Cuthbertson and Edward Watson; and the pair agree that this ballet is the perfect choice for the big screen.

"It's a bit like a crazy movie anyway," says Watson. "There's so much going on, the colours are so bright and the characters are extremely vivid." Cuthbertson adds: "I think it'll work best out of all the productions we've relayed."

Cuthbertson, 28, and Watson, 36, are two of only three British principals currently in the Royal Ballet, the third being Rupert Pennefather. Trained at the company's own school, which they entered as children, they share certain qualities beyond this background; not least, each cuts a strikingly individual figure both within the company and in the profession as a whole.

Cuthbertson's sparky nature has made her a favourite not only on stage, but also on Twitter – follow her at @LondonBallerina. In performance she's a dynamic, spontaneous dancer with lengthy limbs and a penchant for ecstatic whirls; she excels, too, in dramatic roles such as the heroine of Kenneth MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet.

Her progress to Alice was anything but straightforward. In spring 2009 she was stricken with glandular fever, which then turned into postviral fatigue syndrome and kept her off the Covent Garden stage for about 18 months. The hardest part of it, she says, was coming back. "It is very tricky, mentally – you don't realise how tricky, in fact, until you're coming out the other end. When I was sick I didn't really know how ill I was or where my career had gone. I didn't realise the absence of it until I was starting to feel better. And suddenly you think, 'Right, OK – oh shit, what's happened to everyone?'"

Having endured more than her fair share of troubles – first that illness, and then, last year, surgery on her ankle which later had to be redone – she has bounced back with

determination. "I still have the joy of dance in me after all that," she says. "Once I got going in the studio again my coach had to tell me to calm down. It felt so fantastic that I just wanted to carry on."

Watson, whose inner strength can unleash with almost terrifying intensity on stage, is widely regarded as the company's most acrobatic, versatile and dramatically profound male principal. He is renowned for his roles in Arthur Pita's award-winning Kafka creation *The Metamorphosis* and as the tormented Crown Prince Rudolf in MacMillan's *Mayerling* – both ballets in which he is appearing this spring.

Each has been perceived as a choreographer's muse – Watson to Wayne McGregor ("In many ways I am what Wayne has made me," he declares) and Cuthbertson to Wheeldon, who featured her in his *Souvenirs* for a ROH gala when she was only 16 and still at the Royal Ballet School.

But it was when she created the role of Alice that the public's view of Cuthbertson shifted from much-loved principal dancer to internationally recognised prima ballerina. "It injected my career humungously, in a very titanic, energetic way," she says.

"For nearly three months before the premiere I didn't have a performance, so I was able to be Alice from the moment I got out of bed. I cut my hair into a six-year-old-style bob so that I could prance around being her. It made me realise that in other ballets I should make sure I understand my roles as fully as I do Alice, because I got so much more out of it."

But one vital member of the original cast is no longer there. The young Ukrainian star Sergei Polunin, who created the role of Jack/the Knave of Hearts, partnering Cuthbertson's Alice, walked out of the Royal Ballet without warning in January 2012. Since then, he has found a new home with the Stanislavsky Ballet in Moscow.

"It was a huge shock when Sergei left," Cuthbertson says. "I'd never expected him to stay around for long, but it came at a moment when I was thoroughly enjoying performing with him. We were meant to be doing *Romeo and Juliet* and Alice together, and suddenly to have to prepare two huge ballets with two new partners in a very short space of time, one of which was Alice, which had a whole new section and the other one, *Romeo*, which was being screened in cinemas – well, it was a lot to do. Still, he's happy now. What more could you want for a colleague and friend?" Federico Bonelli stepped into his shoes with aplomb, she adds – "He was like a knight in shining armour!" – and he will dance the role on the first night and in the cinema relay.

The cinecasts mean significant extra pressure: "They're quite scary," says Watson, "as it's the biggest audience we have for a single show."

But they are also vital to the dissolving of boundaries that in the age of social media and the internet are no longer necessary between stage and audience. Cuthbertson says: "I'd like to think that the ballet world is breaking down barriers and traditions without diluting the product – the important thing is that the standard we strive for shouldn't be compromised." Twitter is part of that too. "You get a different insight into our work – at the ballet often people can feel quite removed from what they're seeing. Inviting that kind of exchange can only be a healthy thing, and it's great fun."

And fun – the joy of dance – is what it is all about. "There's a lovely moment in Act I for Alice and the Knave when I feel so free," says Cuthbertson. "I love moments when you're dancing together as a duet, not as a pas de deux, and here it feels like you're playing with your best friend, jumping around in the woods, in the green among all the flowers. It takes me back to when I was a child in that kind of open space – just jumping around."

'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 15 March to 13 April. Live cinema relay on 28 March: cinema.roh.org.uk