

Ballet: Alice in Wonderland

Choreography: Christopher Wheeldon

Composer: Joby Talbot

## The Story

On a summer's day, a little girl named Alice is sitting under a tree when suddenly she sees a white rabbit in a waistcoat. Checking his pocket watch, he laments, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!"

Surprised, Alice chases after the White Rabbit and falls down a rabbit hole. Somehow she lands safely in a room with a table and a tiny door! Wondering how she will fit through the door, she sees a key on the table next to a little bottle that says, "Drink me." Alice sips from the bottle and shrinks down to a small enough size to fit through the door, realizing after that she forgot the key on the table and is unable to reach it now.

Alice then discovers a pastry cake nearby that says, "Eat me." Gobbling up the cake, Alice rapidly grows so big she begins to cry. The White Rabbit passes by, but seeing the giant Alice he's frightened and runs away, dropping a fan and gloves in his panic. Alice uses the fan for herself, and as she does she begins to shrink again until she's swimming in a pool of her own tears. Within the pool, she meets a variety of animals and birds, who gather on a bank. To dry themselves, one animal proposes giving a history lesson, as it is the driest thing it knows. But a Dodo bird interrupts and suggests a Caucus Race instead. All the animals run haphazardly in a circle until the Dodo declares the race is over, and that everyone has won.

Alice gives them all mints as prizes, but then accidentally scares them away telling them about her cat, who loves to chase birds and mice. Alice is not alone for long when the White Rabbit appears again, searching for the fan and gloves. Mistaking Alice for a servant, he orders her to go to his house to look for them. When she does, she sees another bottle and drinks from it, causing her to grow so big she gets stuck inside. The frazzled White Rabbit and his neighbors try several methods to get her out. Eventually, they throw stones into the house that turn into little cakes. Alice eats one and shrinks herself, fleeing into a forest outside.

In the forest, she meets a caterpillar seated on a mushroom and smoking a hookah. He tells her that taking a bite of one side of the mushroom will make her smaller, while the other side will make her bigger. After some trial and error nibbling, Alice finally returns to her normal size.

Alice now wanders until she comes across a house. It is the home of the Duchess, her baby, and a perpetually smiling Cheshire Cat. The busy Duchess hands Alice her baby to watch, but when the baby turns into a piglet in her arms, Alice lets it loose into the woods. The ever-smiling Cheshire Cat then appears and tells her she should pay a visit to the Mad Hatter. He dissipates, leaving only his grin behind, and Alice seeks out the Mad Hatter. She finds the Hatter, a March Hare, and a Dormouse

in the midst of an absurd tea party. The Mad Hatter explains that it is always tea time there because time stands still, and a ridiculous conversation ensues around the table, involving the riddle “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”.

Eventually, Alice leaves the tea party and discovers a door set in one of the trees nearby. Opening it, she finds herself back in the room from the start of her strange journey. She is able to take the key from the table and open up the smallest door, which leads into a beautiful garden. It turns out to be the croquet court of the Queen of Hearts, whose guard is a pack of playing cards. Alice is prompted to play a game of croquet with the Queen, which proves difficult, as the croquet mallets are squirming flamingos and the balls are reluctant hedgehogs. The Queen is very short-tempered, and is soon ordering everyone’s beheadings. The mischievous Cheshire Cat jokingly appears as *only* his head, and though the Queen tries to order his beheading she’s told it is impossible.

Alice goes on to meet several more exotic creatures, including a Gryphon and a Mock Turtle, who dance a Lobster Quadrille together while Alice recites a poem. The Gryphon then leads Alice away to watch an impending execution, this time of the Knave of Hearts, who is accused of stealing one of the Queen’s tarts. The trial is ridiculously conducted by the King of Hearts, and the jury is made up of many of the creatures Alice has met along her journey. Alice makes several remarks about how irrational the proceedings are, which angers the Queen. The Queen then orders *her* beheading, but Alice scoffs that the Queen’s guard is only a pack of playing cards! She easily fends them off at first, but the card guards begin to surround her and swarm all over her!

Alice is suddenly awakened by her sister, who is brushing fallen leaves from her face. Startled from her sleepy fog, Alice is left to wonder if the bizarre happenings were really just in her dreams, or if there truly is such a place as Wonderland.

## The History

“Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” is an English children’s novel written in 1865 by Lewis Carol. At a time when children’s stories were strictly for teaching morals and logic, Lewis Carol’s bizarre, logic-defying story captivated young readers and became an instant hit! It helped usher in a new era where children’s stories were written to delight and entertain more than to teach and explain.

Alice herself was a real person! Lewis Carol initially told the story to the daughter of a friend of his; a charming little girl named Alice Liddel. Alice loved the story so much that she asked him to write it down for her, and a little over two years later, Lewis Carol finished the first manuscript of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and presented it to her as a gift. His friends encouraged him to have it published, which he did, and the story met with such huge success that it has never been out of print since!

More than just literary success, Alice in Wonderland has gone on to inspire generations of artistic expression and pop culture since. Adaptations for musicals, movies, operas, radio, art, theme parks, board games, video games and more have been made, adding to the Alice in Wonderland legacy.

One of the more recent tellings of this English classic is the ballet “Alice in Wonderland”, commissioned by the Royal Ballet in London. It had its world premiere on February 28, 2011, featuring Lauren Cuthbertson in the lead role of Alice. The ballet was choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon, who wanted to create a ballet that was “lighter, more friendly” for audiences. A new, original full-length score was also commissioned for the ballet, and Joby Talbot was chosen to create it.

The ballet premiere was well-liked. Joby’s exuberant score was praised, and Wheeldon’s choreography is bright, witty, fun, and descriptive. Wheeldon’s ballet includes a few creative quirks; for example, in Lewis Carol’s tale Alice is a child, but in the ballet, Alice is a teenager beginning her first romance, and during the tea party scene, the Mad Hatter and his tea party companions perform a tap dance number as they interact with Alice.

Alice in Wonderland is a wonderfully fun ballet chock full of bright colors, quirky characters, illogical wit, alert narrative dance, and dramatic special staging effects!