The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies:
A Ballet Vaudeville

Inspired by Lewis Carroll’s
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
And Through the Looking-Glass
And the Illustrations of
John Tenniel

Concept and Choreography:
Keith Michael

Costume Design:
Sylvia Nolan

Décor Design and
Painting:
Gillian Bradshaw-Smith

Lighting Design:
Ted Sullivan

Doll House Built by:
Brian W. Griffin

Doll House Painted by:
Nancy Horne

The Wonderland Company

Alice
The White Rabbit
The Queen of Hearts
The Cheshire Cat
The Mad Hatter
The Dormouse
Tweedledum/The Duchess
Tweedledee/The Cook
The Baby
The Flamingoes
The Hedgehogs
The Catepillar/Cards
The Teacups

Photo: Richard Terminie
About the Performance
Follow Alice on a magical journey to New York’s Palace Theater in 1915. Meet the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter, and all your favorite Wonderland characters. Tap your toes to ragtime, waltzes, popular tunes, and marches. Join in a clap-tap-rap version of the wacky Jabberwocky poem. See burlesque, African juba, Irish step-dancing, ballroom dancing, acrobatics, and classical pointe (up on the toes) dancing.

A Ballet Vaudeville
Is it ballet, or something different? If you answered “something different,” you would be correct. The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies is ‘A Ballet Vaudeville” that combines many different styles of dance and music from turn-of-the-century vaudeville houses.

Vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment in the late 1800’s through the early 1900’s. It was a variety show of specialty acts including songs, dances, skits, acrobatics, and pantomime.

Ballet is a dance form that began in Italy in the 1400’s. It combines music, movement, costumes, lights, and often painted scenery to help tell a story without words.

New York Theatre Ballet has combined these elements to create a turn-of-the-century “romp” complete with costumes that create the characters, scenery, and lively music. All of these capture the mood of mysterious Wonderland, where nothing happens as you might expect.
A Dancer’s Life

Like dancers everywhere, members of the New York Theatre Ballet have a very strict schedule. They take a two-hour dance class six days a week. This helps them practice their technique and keeps their muscles toned so they do not hurt themselves while dancing. After practice, they rehearse dance patterns another four-and-a-half hours for their upcoming performance.

Dancers need to develop a strong and supple body, a huge vocabulary of steps and styles, learn music and know great literature, painting and sculpture.

Lewis Carroll: (1832-1898), an English mathematician, created the characters that inspired this ballet vaudeville in two books written over 130 years ago: Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. Carroll, whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, also loved to create math games, word puzzles, and poems with hidden meanings.

Lewis had not children of his own, but liked making up stories to entertain his friends’ children. Once, while boating with his young friends, Alice Liddell and her sisters, Lewis made up a story that Alice liked so much, she begged him to write it, and he came up with Alice in Wonderland.

Pratfalls and Slapstick

You will see the dancers engage in zany antics such as pratfalls, slapstick, and acrobatics. These comic routines have their roots in the 16th-century Italian tradition of commedia dell’arte, where stock characters performed silly physical stunts to make the audience laugh. This tradition was passed down to the vaudeville stage, and can still be seen today.

Pratfalls are staged falls the performers learn to do to make it look like they’ve fallen down, but they do not actually hurt themselves.

A slapstick is a soft “stick” made of foam or other soft material, which the performers sometimes use to strike each other in comedy sketches.

A Synopsis of The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies

Once upon a time there was girl named Alice. She and some family members and friends took a trip in a rowboat down a long, winding river. It was a hot, bright day and she and her sister were relaxing on the riverbank after the trip. She was growing very tired of having nothing to do. Suddenly, a White Rabbit appears. Curiosity overtakes Alice and she decides to follow him down a hole into an underground world. Throughout her journey in this strange land she meets many eccentric creatures. First she meets a caterpillar, then a Cheshire cat who keeps disappearing and reappearing. She has a tea party with a Mad Hatter.
This turns out to be a rather comical situation of which she can't seem to make any sense. Tweedledee and Tweedledum pay her a visit, and a baby turns into a pig in the cook's kitchen. She plays croquet using flamingoes as the mallets and hedgehogs as the balls. As if this isn't strange enough, The Red Queen wants her decapitated! Luckily, she is saved by a deck of cards that are painting rosebushes red. Nothing is more thrilling than when she is crowned Queen Alice!

Then, just as briskly as she had followed the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, she finds herself back on the riverbank. Were her travels all a dream? As she brushes away the fallen leaves, she realizes it was her imagination that took her on this magical journey.

Jabberwocky Poem

In The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies production, this poem is an important and unique section where the text is used as the music. Many of the words used were made up by Lewis Carroll. These word creations are called “portmanteaus” – words that have two meanings.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.
And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went Galumphing back.

‘And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Calloh! Callay!
He chortled in his joy.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

SECTION 2: POST-ACTIVITY
(Teachers – Please copy the two activity sheets that follow for your students and lead them through the drawing and writing exercises.)

Learning Activity #2
a. Set design activity sheet – students use the blank stage set to re-create a scene from The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies that was especially memorable, including the characters and dances they saw on stage; or students can create their own scene.

b. Review activity sheet – students write a review of The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies, including descriptions of their favorite parts in the production, what they were surprised by, and what they remember the most.

Please mail the reviews back to:
New York Theatre Ballet
30 East 31st Street, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10016
REVIEW ACTIVITY SHEET

Write a review of The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies, including descriptions of your favorite parts, what surprised you, and what you remember most.

__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

TEACHER RESOURCES

Recommended Reading:


Stoffel, Stephanie Lovett. *Lewis Carroll in Wonderland, The Life and Times of Alice and her Creator*.


Recommended Video:

Doublets is a word game invented by Lewis Carroll. To play the game, change only one letter each time, following this example of how to turn a HEAD into a TAIL.

HEAD
HEAL
TEAL
TAAL
TAIL

TRY THESE:

MUM   CAR   BAT   TEA
____   ___   ___   ___
____   VAN   MAN   ___
DAD         POT

HOW ABOUT SOME HARDER ONES?

Make BREAD from FLOUR – Change NOUN to VERB
Bring JACK to JILL

FLOUR   NOUN   JACK
_______   ______  ______
_______   ______  ______
_______   ______  JILL
_______   ______  VERB
BREAD

Now try to make your own doublet!
The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies
A Ballet Vaudeville

Concept & Choreography by Keith Michael

Music
A pastiche of 1915 vaudeville favorites

Scenic Design by Gillian Bradshaw-Smith
Costume Design by Sylvia Taalsohn Nolan

Inspired by Lewis Carroll's
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass

World Premiere: June 8-17, 2001
New York City

The Alice-in-Wonderland Follies opens in 1915 at The Palace Theater in New York in the electric atmosphere of a vaudeville extravaganza celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1865 publication of Lewis Carroll's literary classic Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With rapid-fire staging and droll humor, Alice's fantasies unfold in music halls reminiscent of the crowd-pleasing effervescence of headliners such as Joe Weber and Lew Fields, Lillian Russell, Helen Hayes, Eddie Foy, Vernon Castile, Fay Templeton and Marie Dresler – the perfect time-travel cast.

Springing to life are a host of favorite scenes and characters: Alice and the White Rabbit, the Red Queen, the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the Duchess, the Cook and the Baby of “Pig and Pepper” fame; the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, Tweedledum and Tweedledee; the Cards, Flamingos and Hedgehogs from the Queen’s Croquet-Ground; The Jabberwocky poem and the triumphant crowning of Queen Alice.

The music is a confection of high-brow and low-brow art styles prevalent in vaudeville houses across the country at the turn of 20th century – ragtime, waltzes, classical composers interpretations of popular forms, sentimental favorites, opera standards, dance hall classics, czardas and foot-tapping marches. The dance vocabulary is a melting pot dessert of the American vernacular – burlesque “song and dance”, African juba and Irish step dancing, balloon, toe-tap, slapstick physical comedy, minstrel strutting, eccentric dancing and acrobatics – all finessed with a froth of classical pointe dancing.

John Tenniel’s original illustrations inspire the stage set based on over-sized children’s toy’s – a doll house, toy trees, and alphabet blocks. Rearrangements and transformations underscore the fancy of Alice’s peripatetic propensity for changes in size. And who can resist a derby hat with white rabbit ears, a Cheshire Cat with a 50-foot tail and an exploding tea table with characters in tea-cup hats?

In other words, in the hyperbolic lunacy of Weber and Fields, “What a jumble of jollification!”