

Monday, 25 August 2014 21:51

Bellydance Evolution Alice in Wonderland Brings the Audience to Their Feet

Written by Erica White

It was almost like walking near a bakery. The way the smell of freshly baked bread or pastries wafts suddenly from nowhere and engulfs you making you crave donuts and croissants.

That was the scene walking from the parking lot to the entry gate of the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre.



The light beating of drums and laughter drifted from beyond the gates. Walking up the stairs to the amphitheater guest were greeted with their first taste of what the night had to offer.

Among picnickers and well-wishers a dancer sashayed in front of drummers on the terrace.

The mood was instantly transformed from the hum-drum of urban life. We were no longer members of stressed out commuters we were in a desert oasis or perhaps a garden?

“The Ford already looks like Wonderland,” Artistic Director Jillina Carlano said. “With all the trees and we’re going to use them to create our version of Wonderland.”

And indeed they did.

The setting was minimal with only a few toadstools with pale pink, yellow and red polka dot caps with lime green and yellow stalks. Purple, blue and mauve lights glow eerily on the foliage surrounding the Ford stage.

The audience was diverse. A mix of old and young mingle talking, laughing, and a few were dressed like gypsies in flowing skirts and beads. Children were also in attendance, an initial concern for Assistant Director Heather Aued.

“People have a preconceived idea of what belly dance is and people don’t really know it unless they are in that culture,” Aued said. It is art, it is dance and it is important for us to show people that it is something high caliber like river-dance, ballroom, dancing hip-hop and jazz. It is just as creative and just as beautiful and entertaining.”

In other words all ages were welcomed. Belly dance, Aued said, is often mistaken for stripping or over sexualized to the uninformed outsider, but really it is story telling like any other art form.

“It is exciting to have new people come and see it. Hopefully they it love and have a new appreciation,” Aued said. “That is part of the goal with the company. With Bellydance Evolution we want it [belly dance] to evolve to something bigger than dancing at night clubs.”



The flickering of the house lights alerted guest to the start of the first act. Music sounding vaguely like the beginning of the X-Files theme with a Middle Eastern undertone played as Alice, Assistant Director Lauren Boldt, wanders down the back stage stairs. As lead and ensemble dancers make their debut it is abundantly clear that this is not the typical dance performance audience. Uproarious whistles and ululations of approval descended from crowd while the dancers beamed moving in and out of tight circles around each other.



By the time the hip-hop dancing White Rabbit Daniel Mendes appeared the audience was in full giddiness with only ten minutes into the show. Mendes and his LA based dance crew *Shut Up & Dance* pop locked and slid across the stage mimicking the hands of time by synchronizing the movement of a clock.

Alice's descent down the rabbit hole features a number of dancers in brown swirling around Boldt. Bellydance Evolution used many innovative techniques to capture the fantastical that is Wonderland. When Alice would shrink, a dancer would appear higher on the stage carrying a key just out of her range. Or when Alice would grow the dancers would crouch

down and become smaller tables and Boldt would seemingly grow before our eyes.

All the while the most important background star conveyed the unspoken, and moved the performances along. The music.

"The music steals the show," Boldt said. "In a good way."

The music was composed by Paul Dinletir, co-founder of the movie trailer production house *Audiomachine*. Dinletir worked with each lead dancer to help create the themes, emotions and moods outlined for their characters.

"The leads we all had a say in our music," Aued said. "We'd send Paul our musical inspirations or musical vision for the piece and he'd take it from there."

Aued's vision for the Mad Hatter was an essence of danger and badass, as opposed to the usual kooky portrayal.

"I wanted it [The Mad Hatter] to be darker," Aued said.

A self-professed rocker girl Aued's accompaniment included heavy guitars and a sinister laugh, which Aued recorded, as she walked on the stage. The Mad Hatter has never looked so cool and in control as Aued's imitation.

But that was just a sampling that made Belly dance Evolutions version of *Alice in Wonderland* so spectacular. So much of the personality of the lead dancers shaped the performance making it their own and turning a timeless story into something completely new.

It was like seeing *Alice in Wonderland* for the first time ever. The audience reacted with equal intrigue as each scene unfolded. Sharon Kihara as the caterpillar looked almost like a sorceress emerging from the scented fog. With mesmerizing and delicate movements she whirled. Like most professionals she made it look easy and effortless.

Louchia Tchoukri as the Duchess was the perfect mix of naughty and nice. It was hard to hate her in her hot pink costume and charismatic smile. Even while she taunted The Chef and Master Percussionist Ozzy Ashkenazi the audience fell in love with her stomach trembles and dramatics.

Jillina Carlano. Carlano played a cunning, mean-spirited, albeit charming Queen of Hearts. Carlano often gestured the beheading of many of her subjects for the slightest annoyances even taking a male audience member crowning him the King of Hearts then motioning "off with his head."

In the “Who Stole the Tarts” scene, The Caterpillar, The Duchess, The Mad Hatter and White Rabbit made reappearance dancing their conviction of Alice’s guilt. But Alice was not going out quietly. Boldt, with defiance, defended herself with her hips.

Then, as suddenly as Alice finds herself in Wonderland she is back in the garden. A final dance by all the cast concludes the show and the audience held nothing back giving a standing ovation with the Ford ringing with ululations.

Bellydance Evolution has upcoming tour dates nationwide in September. Details can be found on their website www.bellydanceevolution.com and merchandise can be purchased at www.jillishop.com.

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