



STEAM-PUNK ATTITUDE

Ballet's costume designer gives 'Wonderland' inventive look with ruffles, goggles and baubles

AMANDA SIERADZKI COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

If Linda Bulecza, costume designer for the Ballet Arts Conservatory of Tallahassee, could travel anywhere in time, it would be to the industrial era. She can only imagine what the period's palpable energy must have been like — from the rise of steam-powered locomotives to new inventions and automation.

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If you go

What: Alice in Wonderland, presented by the Ballet Arts Conservatory of Tallahassee
When: 7:30 p.m. on Friday, June 9; 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, June 10
Where: Lincoln High School Auditorium, 3838 Trojan Trail
Cost: \$20 for adults, \$15 for children (Group discounts available).
Contact: For more information, visit <http://www.bact-dance.com> or call 850-562-1430.

ARNOLD ABELLERA
 Steampunk touches pop in the Queen of Hearts costume.

Ballet

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It also appeals to Bulecza's fascination with steampunk culture, a futuristic version of the industrial age imagined and expressed in fashion, book, and movies.

When it came time to put a twist on her designs for BACT's spring ballet, "Alice in Wonderland," premiering on June 9 and 10, steampunk was her first thought.

"I've often heard steampunk referred to as the time that never was," explains Bulecza. "It comes from the notion of the steam era which involves gears and locomotives. It also deals with the notion of time travel, which lends itself so well to Alice traveling and being time-driven."

In fact, it was during the company's first iteration of "Alice in Wonderland" 10 years ago that Bulecza began helping with costume design, creating paper-maché teapots and painting unitards. Her history as a seamstress reaches further back, however, starting with sewing her own clothes as a child.

As a self-taught artist, the first dance costume she ever made was for her daughter—a red pleated skirt and polka-dotted top fit for a jazzy solo number. As a painter and crafter of all kinds, Bulecza was ready to jump into new territory and next volunteered her time helping out for Pas de Vie's "Nutcracker" where she learned techniques for dance costuming from Claire Walker, the costume shop manager for the FSU Theater Department.

"I've never been shy about trying something new artistically," says Bulecza. "Claire gave me advice on the weight of fabrics and how to get more movement in them. Mainly, I've learned how to do costuming by reading and a lot of trial and error."

Bulecza says most of her process takes place in the researching and shopping stages. Many of her books, supplies, and patterns are sourced from an online dance website, which gives her helpful guidelines in terms of making bodices and tutus for ballet. When it comes to materials, her workshop is packed to the hilt with fabrics from all over the country.

Anytime she travels to a larger metropolitan area, New York City being among her favorites, she scours the fashion districts for low-priced, high-quality materials to take back home. She's also had luck on sites like eBay where she can buy directly from suppliers in China, especially when she's looking to acquire more embellished, intricate fabrics.

Her philosophy in costuming is to create as many reusable pieces as possible, so she is able to mix and match more easily for future projects. For example, in her first storybook ballet for BACT, "Christmas in Narnia," she created white circle skirts and blouses that have been used in multiple ways over the years, and will even make an appearance in "Alice." Her individual approach to costuming, however, never comes out the same way twice.

"I think flying by the seat of my pants would probably be my style," laughs Bulecza, as she relies on improvisation in her process. "I can do the traditional tutu or I can get into the crazy off-the-wall stuff. Mostly, I get a look in my head and I think about how I can make it work with the way the dancers move."

Over the years, she's formed a unique partnership with BACT's Artistic Director, Amy Lowe, working closely to create a cohesive look for each original ballet. It all begins with a sketch, and from there Bulecza looks to colors and music for inspiration.

She remarks that while the bulk of the



Linda Bulecza designed the costumes for the Ballet Arts Conservatory's recent production of "Alice in Wonderland."



Linda Bulecza costume for the caterpillar in Ballet Arts Conservatory's production of "Alice in Wonderland."

costuming is based in the Victorian Era, featuring formal attire and hats reimagined with steampunk trademarks like machinery, gears, goggles, and metal baubles. One of Bulecza's favorite costumes in the ballet is for the inquisitive Caterpillar who will stand out in a handmade turquoise unitard, wide belt, ruffled skirt, blue goggles, and antennae with dazzling disco-like balls.

Bulecza wants her and Lowe's vision for the ballet to stretch the audience's imagination of Wonderland, transforming the look and feel of familiar characters not only in appearance but additionally within the music and choreography. The June performance at Lincoln High School's Auditorium will be particularly special to Bulecza as her daughter, a recently graduated senior, will star as Alice after having been a teapot so many years ago.

Primarily, Bulecza hopes attendees will be thoroughly entertained as well as gain an appreciation for the company's willingness to go outside their comfort zones with this fresh steampunk take on a timeless tale.

"Without a doubt, this show has brought out the best in everyone in every way," smiles Bulecza. "The most rewarding aspect is when the girls are being fitted or are excited to see the new costumes. They just love putting them on and seeing each other in them, and that's definitely the best part for me."

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