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Joel Hathaway dances with Missouri Contemporary Ballet

Hathaway performs as the Caterpillar

BY BECKY NEEMS
MAY 16, 2013 | 12:00 A.M. CST

As **Joel Hathaway** puts on his ballet pointe shoes, he laughs from conversations with other dancers and hears the paws of Snapelle, a corgi mix, shuffle on the vinyl floor. He anticipates his dance as the Caterpillar from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by perching on a wooden table used as a makeshift mushroom so the imaginary insect can glare at Alice.

The duet of the Caterpillar and Alice is like a conversation that can be playful as well as an annoyance for both characters. Hathaway, 27, describes the situation and how the Caterpillar is perched on his giant mushroom and relaxes while Alice interrupts his pondering with petty conversation. The Caterpillar gives Alice, played by **Carrie Milikin**, quizzical looks while posing away from her uninterested. Alice uses body language, such as getting closer to him and crossing her arms in frustration, in order to listen to the Caterpillar's wisdom. The Caterpillar will not let her have her way because he is busy pondering his thoughts and smoking hookah on his lonesome mushroom.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

WHERE: Jesse Hall
WHEN: June 1 at 7 p.m. and
June 2 at 2 p.m.
COST: **\$19-\$29**
CALL: 219-7134
ONLINE: **Missouri
Contemporary Ballet**

The Caterpillar then gets off his mushroom pedestal and dances with Alice because she has disrupted his pondering. The Caterpillar lifts Alice in the air as they dance a duet to piano and flute, an original score by Tom Andes.

The Caterpillar uses his height to jump and "fly across the stage quickly but gracefully," **Joanne Sandorfi**, the ballet mistress, says.

After five minutes of the conversational, whimsical duet, the Caterpillar does a set of fast-spinning pirouettes and the music stops. The audience is then transported from Wonderland back to the **Missouri Contemporary Ballet's** dance studio. Hathaway lies panting and sweating on the

floor from the duet. Milikin gets advice from Karen Mareck Grundy, the executive director, and Ken Braso, the rehearsal director, about her performance.

The group then breaks for lunch as Grundy and Braso listen to the next jazzy song on the soundtrack as Grundy's dog, Snapelle, runs around with excitement. Fernando Rodriguez, an observer of the Alice/Caterpillar exchange and a dancer in the company, stays behind to stretch.

In the back room, Hathaway and his other coworkers discuss lunch while some are hanging out or cooling off from rehearsal. A few are wearing many layers despite the moderate temperature outside in order to keep their joints warm and ready to dance.

There is a relaxing atmosphere at MCB. The studio is housed in the **North Village Arts District** in a warehouse on Orr Street.

The nine professional dancers of the company will be dancing alongside 40 students of the school of MCB and others in the production June 1 and 2. This is the first full-length ballet for the company.

Hathaway is in his second year with the company. His talents are malleable because of many years of experience. He started out with jazz and tap at age 9, traditional ballet at 12 and modern in college. Now he incorporates all forms of dance into the contemporary style Grundy creates at MCB.

Hathaway's journey to MCB

Hathaway knew he wanted to become a dancer when he first saw *The Nutcracker*. He auditioned for the part of Fritz, Marie's older brother, but was cast with a solo role as the mechanical bear and as a Russian soldier. Even at a young age, he was passionate and rebellious and made dance a priority.

Hathaway was raised in the ocean town of Seaside, Ore, and moved to Seattle to attend **Cornish College of the Arts** in 2004.

"Homework was always a problem," Hathaway says. In high school he would choose to practice for show choir or dance instead of working on his assignments. He also struggled in college because of his frustration with what type of dance he wanted to pursue.

He thought traditional ballet was his calling, but Cornish pushed him to venture in different genres. Popular styles such as jazz and tap were still incorporated and new ones were, as well.

Hathaway says traditional ballet is a "codified technique," and modern dance is more organic and involving the human body's natural movement.

"I have a clear understanding of ballet, and I'm willing to find smooth qualities and sharp movements,"

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he says. "(You're) constantly pushing yourself to make a phrase of movement smoother, as if it becomes a sentence."

He was learning how to incorporate traditional and modern ballet at Cornish but was struggling because he wanted a change in direction. When he went to **Ballet Chicago** for a summer intensive his junior year, they asked if he wanted to join full-time because he embodied what they were looking for stylistically and physically. "When I was younger I didn't know what was right and wrong," he says. "There are different approaches to ballet." But he ultimately decided to finish at Cornish and thought that was the best decision for him.

Upon graduating, he danced for the **Milwaukee Ballet** for two years then performed for **Royal Caribbean Productions** on Royal Caribbean cruise ships for six months.

He says when he was on the cruise ship, he would perform the same show every night and missed being in a studio. He decided it was time for a change. That was when he heard from Millikin, his partner playing Alice in his duet, about MCB.

Millikin and Hathaway danced together in the Milwaukee Ballet, and from day one he liked the vibe of MCB.

The Caterpillar dance

The group was done with their lunch break. Millikin, Hathaway and a few other dancers gathered around Grundy as she read from Lewis Carroll's book to find out what happens in another scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

It was like story time in elementary school, but instead of just painting an image in their minds, Grundy and the others would create a scene that would transform to the dance floor.

She was reading "The Lobster Quadrille" between laughing at the odd topics and vocabulary of the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon.

She was confused about how to turn this scene into a dance, so Grundy got out of her artist's chair and started working with Hathaway. She created movements that contorted her body and maintained imaginary wings and odd facial expressions like the Gryphon. "Karen doesn't like anything too predictable," Hathaway says about her choreography.

Hathaway would mimic her movements and twist his arms and torso one way while his legs would move another. He also used quirky facial expressions to mimic the oddity of the character. Millikin tried to keep her composure when he was six inches from her face and making the most ridiculous countenance. Eventually the whole room started laughing as he moved around Alice and kept his hands sprawled in a gesture to signify he had wings while moving in unnatural, fun ways, like a puppet on strings.

"We do a lot of twisting, a lot of contorting; there's definitely a lot of sharp movements," Sandorfi says. She also says their dancing is musically driven. This is important in their production of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and Hathaway is a perfect match to amplify this style.

Hathaway is fun-loving and energetic, and his personality and passion shows when he is performing. The relaxed but professional environment of MCB meshes with Hathaway's goals and talents.

In a colorful warehouse on **Orr Street**, a studio door is open during rehearsals where passerby can peek in and see graceful ballet one minute and goofing around the next. This is the welcoming atmosphere of MCB. It is the perfect mix of traditional technique and quirky contemporary style — a modern-day Wonderland.

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