

## DANCE

# Story ballet delivers poetic lesson in self-esteem

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Everyone of a certain age, thanks to Walt Disney, knows what happens to Dumbo, the elephant with big ears and persevering spirit.

But Dancing Wheels Company and School has put an engaging spin on the tale in "Daring to Be Dumbo," the new story ballet the Cleveland company for dancers with and without disabilities introduced Friday at St. Ignatius High School's Breen Center for the Performing Arts.

As choreographed and written in storybook mode by David Rousseve, Dumbo is a junior high student who learns to bolster her self-esteem in the face of cruel classmates. She responds to bullying by accepting the gifts she alone possesses. It's the kind of life lesson Dancing Wheels' artistic director Mary Verdi-Fletcher teaches whenever she and her colleagues take to a stage or a classroom.

They do so to bright and often poignant effect in "Daring to Be Dumbo," which is set to Jeremy Allen's colorful arrangements of music — recorded by the Chagrin Studio Orchestra under conductor Stephen A. Eva — from the 1941 Disney animated film.

Rousseve packs a great deal of detail into the ballet's 50 minutes, using spoken passages (he's the narrator), projections and Robin VanLear's enchanting puppets to add shadings to the story. And he isn't afraid to explore dark corners, as when Dumbo's adoptive mother dies in a car accident.

Much of the choreography emphasizes the coming-of-age concept. It's buoyant and quirky when the ensemble of junior high students is in cheerleading action, but it can also turn poetic. Dumbo dances a duet with her compassionate new friend, Timmy, and later is reunited in a dream with her deceased mother.

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## REVIEW

### Daring to Be Dumbo

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Dreams and nightmares pervade "Daring to Be Dumbo," which reaches a rousing peak after the heroine becomes tipsy upon imbibing spiked punch. She imagines an ensemble of forbidding elephants — dancing giddily to (what else?) "Pink Elephants on Parade" — yet soon finds joy envisioning herself and Timmy, depicted as a mouse, soaring via VanLear's puppets and the jaunty tune, "When I See an Elephant Fly."

The ballet occasionally stops in its tracks and becomes talky as the dancers speak dialogue, whose meaning could easily be conveyed through mime. But the cast was so wired for the occasion that their contributions kept the work in irresistible motion, with keen help from costume designer Judith Peck

Richner and lighting designer Jeremy K. Benjamin.

Dezare Foster was a charismatic and affecting Dumbo. She brought athletic grace to the role on her own and teaming with wheelchair dancers Jennifer Sikora, spunky as Timmy, and Verdi-Fletcher, tender as the mother.

The ballet promises to have a long and significant life beyond the stage. It is the springboard for a Dancing Wheels documentary about bullying and an outreach program being funded through Cuyahoga Arts and Culture's Creative Culture Grants program. Expect to see Dumbo fly on WKYC Channel 3 and elsewhere starting sometime next year.

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