

Broadway Bugs is a 24-carrot performance

► Tulsa Symphony Orchestra's weekend shows offered classical tunes and hilarious cartoons.

review

By **JAMES D. WATTS JR.**
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When an audience spends the evening laughing at practically everything an orchestra plays, it usually means something has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Unless, that is, said orchestra is sharing the stage with the likes of Bugs Bunny, Elmer J. Fudd, Porky Pig, Wile E. Coyote and the other characters that sprang from the minds of the Warner Bros. animation studios. Then laughter in the concert hall isn't just welcomed — it's unavoidable.

The Tulsa Symphony Orchestra this weekend presented "Bugs Bunny on Broadway," a show created by conductor George Daugherty that featured a baker's dozen of classic Warner Bros. cartoons with live orchestral accompaniment.

It sounds, when described so plainly, like some kind of humor. I speak from experience: when I mentioned to my parents how I was going to be spending my Saturday evening, they responded with bemused interest, but I couldn't help but feel the unspoken question, "When is our son going to get himself a real job?"

Ah, but that's the beauty of "Bugs Bunny on Broadway," which the orchestra presented as a special offering Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. It's a show that makes you realize the amount of artistry, of creativity, of mad genius that went into the creation of these seven-minute, brightly colored, action-packed mini-movies.

The visual and comic artistry of Warner Bros. classic cartoons has long been championed. This concert was more a celebration of the musical artistry that underlies the frenetic foolishness of Elmer's pursuit of that "wascally wabbit," or Mr. Coyote's highly complex and utterly doomed attempts to lay knife and fork on the Roadrunner.

Composers Carl Stalling and Milt Franklyn often gleefully plundered the orchestral and operatic repertoire for their inspiration. Sometimes, they slipped in some choice pieces as part of their own original scores, the way a snippet of Smetana's "The Bartered Bride" shows up during the chase scene in the Roadrunner cartoon "Zoom and Bored."

But with most of the cartoons in "Bugs Bunny on Broadway," the classical music used is an in-

tegral part of the comedy. The action in "The Rabbit of Seville," for example, would be funny regardless of the soundtrack.

The fact that this particular duel between Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd takes place to Franklyn's wonderful arrangement of Rossini's overture to "The Barber of Seville" only makes the action funnier.

As Daugherty, who conducted the evening, said, most Americans of a certain age got their first taste of classical music from these cartoons.

He opened the concert by leading the orchestra in a straightforward and vigorous performance of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." Later in the evening, he asked, "How many of you, when you heard that, thought, 'Ah, Wagner, I so needed to hear that!' And how many of you heard in your minds a voice singing, 'Kill da wabbit?'"

It was obvious that most of Saturday night's crowd could more easily imagine Elmer Fudd in a horned helmet than some operatic warrior women riding through the clouds.

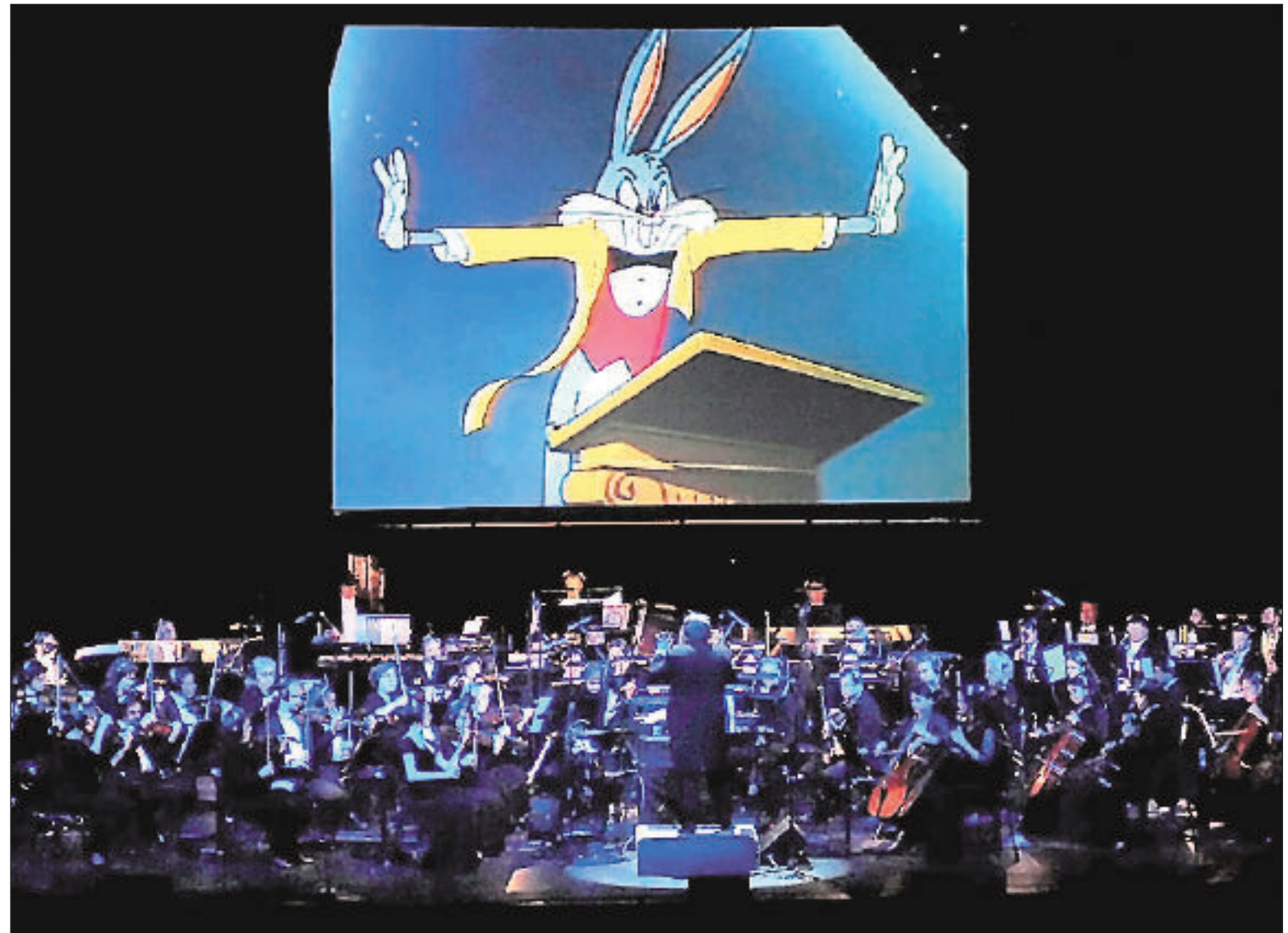
There's nothing wrong with that. Music is memorable for all sorts of reasons, and "because I heard it in a cartoon" is as legitimate a reason as any.

And "legitimate" just begins to describe the music the Tulsa Symphony had to play. These cartoons were scored for a full orchestra and re-creating these complex, ever-shifting scores live required a microscopically precise synchronization. Miss a cue, and the whole enterprise falls apart.

Daugherty was effusive in his praise — from the podium and backstage — of the Tulsa Symphony, calling it a "world-class gem of an orchestra." And that's what they sounded like, playing these pieces with all the energy and verve one could want, every note in its perfectly polished place.

That was true even when the orchestra was being "conducted" by Maestro Bugs Bunny himself, in "Baton Bunny," where Bugs leads a wild take on Von Suppe's "Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna," and "Long-Haired Hare," in which Bugs dons a disguise (a take-off on conductor Leopold Stokowski) to torment an arrogant opera singer.

Not every cartoon featured the orchestra. Some classics, like "A Froggy Evening" and "This Is a Life," were presented as is, giv-



Photos by BRANDI SIMONS / for the Tulsa World

Bugs Bunny is projected on the big screen Saturday at the Performing Arts Center during a performance by the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra playing Warner Brothers Studios cartoons' original scores. Below are more scenes projected during the concert.



ing the orchestra a chance to rest and — if they were sitting close enough to the edge of the stage — actually see some of the cartoons being projected on

the screen above them.

Daugherty has been presenting "Bugs Bunny on Broadway" around the world for nearly two

decades — in large part because audiences demand its return. It's an evening of pure joy, and one hopes that this weekend's perfor-

mances weren't "Ah-deeb-biddah-deeb, ah, that's all, folks!"

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