

VARIETY®

January 3, 1999

ALICE'S ADVENTURES

(DRAMA; CITY THEATER CO.;
150SEATS; \$28TOP)

A City Theater Co. and SITI Co. presentation of a play in one act by Jocelyn Clarke based on "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll. Directed by Anne Bogart. Sets, Neil Patel; costumes, James Schuette; lighting, Mimi Jordan Sherin; sound, Darron L. West; production stage manager, Megan Wanlass; Opened November 27, 1998. Reviewed December 5. Running time: 1 HOUR, 20 MIN.
With: Jefferson Mays, Susan Hightower.

By CHRIS JONES

Having turned "Miss Julie" in Louisville into a wrestling match interrupted by a sexual ballet, Anne Bogart is not a director one would immediately associate with a classic of children's literature like "Alice in Wonderland," in which weird but usually kid-friendly events ensure after a little girl happens to fall down a rabbit hole. Yet Lewis Carroll's surreal excursion into the mind of a young girl has long operated on several levels (many of them best understood by adults). And in Bogart's typically arresting clutches, this whacked-out kid's tale becomes an epic battle of gender and narrative control. On tour in Pittsburgh, Bogart's pair of SITI actors deliver focused and disturbingly intense performances.

The text here is a taut adaptation of the Carroll tale crafted by Jocelyn Clarke, a Dublin-based theater critic. With the help of Clark's incisive and crisp text, Bogart stages the entire tale with just two actors. Susan Hightower is an Alice of ambiguous age and sexual maturity; Jefferson Mays plays everyone and everything else.

The performers chase each other in and around a massive toy-like box which opens, closes, spins and is otherwise manipulated by an unseen human operator. Neil Patel's simple but remarkably rich design features illuminated pictures of young girls, their portraits ringing the playing area.

It would be wrong to assume that the show, which features Bogart's typically obsessive attention to recorded sound, tightly focused lighting and precisely choreographed human movement, is unsuitable for, or inaccessible to, children.

Hightower's Alice, an intentionally complicated mix of child and adolescent, is a grounded heroine who runs the show and seemingly knows little fear. She's every girl's ideal girl. And Mays provides a veritable galaxy of bizarre characterizations that deliciously encapsulated Carroll's beguiling blend of offbeat charm and slightly threatening insanity. The few kids in attendance at the City Theater looked riveted. (City Theater commissioned the play along with Ohio State U and City State in Springfield, Mass.)

After 75 minutes of surreal human images that never cease amazing the audience (despite the technical simplicity), one leaves with the impression that this production is about the battle of a child to stay a child in the face of a complicated, amusing, enticing but absolutely adult collection of creatures, pleasures and forces. Superbly acted and unafraid to approach the darkness of its source, Bogart's "Alice" is a rare and complex family show about the vulnerability and ecstasy of youth.