

on
STAGE

For adults only

Bogart takes Alice on a new, revised adventure

By **JOHN HAYES**

Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Once upon a time, while on a journey to a place far, far away, a man entertained his niece and her two young friends by telling a fantastic story. Up was down, he said, down was up, and little girls, if they were very, very good, could find their way through the looking glass to a strange, enchanted world.

The man was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and the story was so entertaining it fired even his imagination. After the trip he wrote it down, developed it over time and eventually published it under his pseudonym, Lewis Carroll. "Alice in Wonderland" and its sequel, "Alice Through the Looking Glass," became one of the world's most popular children's stories and the third most widely translated narrative in literary history. It has inspired myriad adaptations, spin-offs and references from film, stage and TV versions to a seriously chunky drug anthem by Jefferson Airplane.

An early Dodgson draft with the original title "Alice's Adventures Underground" became the inspiration for a compelling new work by Anne Bogart's SITI company (previously the Saratoga International Theater Institute). Co-commissioned by City Theatre and the Wexner Center at Ohio State University, the literal take on the author's original manuscript makes its world premier tonight at City Theatre.

But don't expect the giggly-wiggly Saturday matinee crowd. "Alice's Adventures Underground" is a curiously choreographed drama for adult audiences. Bogart says, "In a way, it's a love story."

"Alice is played by a very stunning young woman," she says by phone of the two-person adaptation. "Dodgson was obsessed with the girl he told the story to. I didn't want to work with a little girl [because of the] dense undertones in the story. Once I had decided to do a fairy tale, I became interested in a man telling a young girl a story. The original version is shorter — I guess he tweaked the working model — and as he added

stage **PREVIEW**

'ALICE'S ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND'

WHERE: City Theatre, Bingham and 13th streets, South Side.

WHEN: Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 5:30 and 9 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m., through Dec. 20.

TICKETS: \$19-\$28; 412-431-CITY.

episodes to the later story it got more elaborate. This is the original, except we steal the Mad Hatter and the tea party from the famous version."

Rather than showing the fantasy through a cast of characters, Bogart says her concept is "subtler, very much about the lost art of storytelling [and] the importance for human beings to tell and hear stories. It's still a very physical and musical production, but I think it asks the audience to listen in a different way. It doesn't proclaim as much as it invites."

Her SITI company is a unique producing organization that works within the movement-theory disciplines of Japanese acting coach Tadashi Suzuki. Bogart and Suzuki founded SITI in 1992 to combine his anti-method of choreographed performing with the forging of international relationships among producing theaters. City Theatre was among the first to participate. Its involvement preceded SITI's formalization, in fact, sparked by collaborations among former City Theatre members Will Bond and Kelly Maurer, Bogart and other actors who would later found the company.

"The Medium," a SITI piece about media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, was performed at City Theatre during the 1996-97 season. A year later, City Theatre and the Portland Stage Company co-commissioned "Culture of Desire," about Warholian consumerism. An early form of "Alice" workshopped recently at Columbus' Wexner



Susan Hightower and Jefferson Mays perform in "Alice's Adventures Underground," now at City Theatre.

Center. City Theatre producing director Marc Masterson says an eighth of the Pittsburgh portion of the commission was provided through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The rest came from the theater's operating budget.

"A play doesn't happen just like that," he says, snapping his finger in his South Side office. "It needs some time to grow. This is a great relationship we've forged with SITI. It's a great thing to be able to work on a project over a period of time — it doesn't happen that much in this business. . . . But we're really a producing organization, we're not a presenting organi-

zation. I'm not used to taking something somebody has already done somewhere else and plunking it down on our stage. It's a different way of thinking."

Because of its involvement during developmental stages, City Theatre's name will remain attached to "Alice's Adventures Underground," as it remains tagged to "Culture of Desire." "Wherever these plays go, and they're going all over the world, our name is associated with it as the company that made it possible," says Masterson. "To me, doing new work is the most challenging and invigorating part of the job. Isn't that what we should be doing?"

Follow that rabbit

'Alice's Adventures' goes deep into Lewis Carroll's world

WEEKEND MAG • FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 1998

By **CHRISTOPHER RAWSON**
Post-Gazette Drama Critic

Half the pleasure of "Alice's Adventures Under Ground," the newest exotic fruit of the collaboration between City and SITI — our City Theatre and the inventive national nomads presided over by guru Anne Bogart — is that it takes us back to Lewis Carroll's bottomless classic.

Trite but true. You hear all the time that some adaptation of a masterpiece has the advantage of leading us back to its source. But that's not just what I mean. In the case of Carroll's unique treasure, every visit to any adult version of it is freshly revelatory because it is so endlessly layered and rich in itself. We can never simply return to "Alice" because every time we visit her she is eye-opening new and enticingly different.

Partly that's because we are different, no doubt, more ready to hear something never before noticed.

But as with all its projects, a SITI "Alice" is *sui generis* beyond even the freshness guaranteed by this source. And that's the other half of the pleasure: The SITI mode, an intense performance discipline seamlessly bonded to a crisp, colorful visual schema. Lights, set pieces, costumes, sound and music are all integrated brushstrokes in an apparently simple, delicately sophisticated talking picture.

Come to think of it, a characteristic SITI project has many similarities to Carroll's work — jokey, punning, mysterious, innocent, psychologically murky ("when we were young and Freudened," someone once said), primal, ironic, complex and enchanting, with a touch of menace.

The current result, a world premiere, is 80 intermissionless minutes, all "Alice," all-SITI. And the company wears its intellect lightly this holiday time — not that you want to confuse it with your neighborhood "Christmas Carol." No matter what level you approach this "Alice" from, you will be impressed by the efficient, direct and almost naive way it goes right to work to tell its story.

In outline, that story is the familiar one from the first of the "Alice" books, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." But the adapter of the text, Ireland's Jocelyn Clarke (a theater critic, no less), used instead the *ur*-"Alice," the handwritten, illustrated "Alice's Adventures Under Ground" which Charles Dodgson originally gave to young Alice Liddell in 1864 to



Kevin Filzsimons

Susan Hightower and Jefferson Mays in "Alice": The girl is a force to be reckoned with; the narrator slips into author and many other roles along the way. The box is a character as well.

stage REVIEW

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record the story he had told her extempore on a boating expedition two years earlier.

As Jocelyn says, this was the true expression of love from the eccentric Oxford mathematician to his very young friend. Three years later, doubled in size and by now meant more to be read than heard, it appeared as "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" under Dodgson's new pseudonym.

Clarke lifts his version of the Mad Hatter's tea party from the published book, but his reliance on

its predecessor certainly contributes to that air of oddity and newness I've praised. The linguistic jokes are there, the tangled sexual implications, the sunny playfulness.

Rabbit hole, dark hall, locked door, primal soup (talk about Freudened!), bizarre animals, Caucus Race, Cheshire Cat, tea party, Queen of Hearts, ostrich and hedgehog croquet, Mock Turtle, lobster quadrille, trial of the Knave . . . the well-known elements eventually spiral down to Alice's waking and the delicately bereft Dodgson's gentle farewell.

Dressed in a prim three-piece suit, Jefferson Mays plays every role except Alice. Sometimes, as in the tea party, roles tumble on top of each other but never lose their individuality. But his best creation is the narrator, who has a variety of modes, mostly eager, brisk, modest and confiding. Inevitably he comes to be Dodgson himself, inviting prepubescent Alice to play.

Perky in a white frock, Susan Hightower plays Alice (and, for a

bit, the Dormouse). Demure she is, and innocent, perhaps, but post-pubescent and nubile, definitely. Her smile can be read as seductive or mischievous; she glitters with fun, her strong chin making her a force to reckon with when she chooses.

The third "character" is a tall, colorfully-striped box that moves freely, providing a hiding place, platform, corners, ladder, revolve, table or whatever is needed. It comes to have such personality that when its operator emerged to take place in the curtain call, I swear I saw the box lose heart, its personality gone.

Neil Patel's set arranges box, framed pictures of Alice Liddell and Mimi Jordan Sherin's lights around a central circle. Smith's spotlights have a lunar feel and she paints with looming shadows. Darron West and James Schuette provide sound and costumes.

Bogart is the ringleader, of course, but you can't see where one person's work ends and another begins.

Alice's Adventures Underground Is a Zany Romp

Review by Amy Smithhammer & J.S. Laslo

Yet again South Side's City Theatre has come through with a great show. This may seem like yet another take on the traditional Alice in Wonderland story, but it is anything but. While still using Lewis Carrol's original text, this version is quite possibly the most powerful version you may ever have the chance to see.

Starring Susan Hightower as Alice and Jefferson Mays as the Charles (Lewis Carrol) it is one of the most moving pieces of acting you will ever see.

Jefferson Mays was amazing at his ability to play up to three or four parts at once, acting out all of the characters except for Alice.

Susan Hightower also put on the performance of a life-time in the way she added a tiniest bit of woman to a young girl, just enough.

The stage was plain having only a box and few lights, but it was the use of music, lighting, and actor's movement that transported you from your seat to the world of your own imagination.

We would recommend for ANY-ONE who is a kid at heart, the time, the money, and the last vestiges of an imagination to see this play. It could bring back fond childhood memories, or it could bring a new understanding to a beloved classic. It is a great story about

a man trying to keep the imagination of a young girl about to enter adulthood.

If you are into literature, fantasy, imagination, role-playing, or just theatre, this show is well worth the nineteen to twenty-eight dollar ticket price.

Alice's Adventures Underground

will run through December 20th and the times are Tuesday through Friday 8pm and Saturday 5:30pm and 9pm, Sunday at 2pm. City Theatre on the South Side is located 57 South 13th Street. To order tickets or more information call 412-431-CITY.



Susan Hightower and Jefferson Mays in City Theater's Alice's Adventures Undergaround.

Photo by Kevin Fitzsimons

Eat Me—Drink Me— Stage Me?

28 IN PITTSBURGH DECEMBER 9, 1998

THEATER | BY TED HOOVER

*Alice's latest rabbit-hole transformation:
She's postmodern!*

ALICE'S ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND

Text Arranged by Jocelyn Clarke

Directed by Anne Bogart

City Theatre

Thru Dec. 20, 431-CITY

Time: 1986. Place: an East German disco. You've just dropped some killer acid, and now two exceptionally talented refugees from a Soviet acrobatic troupe are performing Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*—and you're not sure if what you're seeing is the result of the drugs, the show or the cheap vodka and non-mentholated cigarettes.

This gives you an idea of what's in store at the City Theatre's co-production with the Saratoga International Theatre Institute of *Alice's Adventures Underground*.

I should say up-front that of all the SITI shows I've seen so far, this is the most accessible and entertaining—thanks, in no small part, to its strong linear quality and relatively uncluttered performance. And the *Alice* books are my favorite works of literature ever, so I certainly enjoy any chance I have to spend with them.

Susan Hightower as Alice and Jefferson Mays as everyone else are remarkably able performers. Hightower is just great with her strong combination of petulance and fear, while Mays astounds with impeccable physicality and lightening-quick characterizations. They, and this production, reach dizzying heights with a mind-boggling Mad Hatter Tea Party that is simply stunning to watch.

Of course, this being the 1990s and context being everything—as I'm sure these SITI people would be the first to tell you—when you pull back from the show or dig under its skin, it's not all quite as successful as it looks. Even at 100 minutes the show seems to run too long. This might be because the ending wrests the focus of the story from Alice and places it on the man; not only is this rather unforgivable (one of the reasons I love *Alice* so much is because it's one of the few children's stories in which the girl doesn't spend her time trying to trap an available prince) but it's unsupported by the previous text, leaving the whole thing feeling hazy and unsatisfyingly unresolved.

There's also a nagging feeling that SITI and director Anne Bogart should pick on somebody their own size. The *Alice* books are characterized by freewheeling, pastoral airiness and cheerfully nonsensical whimsy; this production, on the other hand, is mannered and calculated beyond all humanity—as freewheeling as a bank statement and as whimsical as a firing squad.

One of the things that's succeeded in killing theater is theater people doing theater for theater people, as real audience members stare slack-jawed, wondering how rude it would be to leave at intermission. This *Alice* is, I'm afraid, guilty of that—but I gotta tell you that murder never looked quite so stylish.



Susan Hightower and Jefferson Mays star in *Alice's Adventures Underground*.

Go Ask Alice

City Theatre's interpretation of the Lewis Carroll tale

By L.L. Kirchner

Trippy phantasmagoria or children's fairy tale? *Alice In Wonderland* was written by one Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a.

Lewis Carroll, a mathematician professor at Oxford University's Christ Church College.

The story was made up to amuse his boss's daughter, Alice. If the academics were in cahoots on the drug ring, letting Alice in on their euphemisms might have been a sort of career-limiting move, wouldn't you think? And yet, Dodgson had a brilliant career as a mathematician, though not the fame of Carroll. Of course even today the book is sold in the children's section of the book store. Still, not a single child was present when I saw City Theatre's current production of *Alice's Adventures Underground*. Not that I was surprised, what with the not-for-the-squeamish title, and promotional materials touting director Anne Bogart's interpretation of the "relationship between a man and a woman."

Huh? Aren't we talking about good old Alice, who drinks something, gets bigger, eats cake, gets smaller, eats the mushroom, gets right-sized, finds the mad tea party, plays croquet with a deck of cards (wait, was I just writing about controlled substances?). In any case, I certainly never thought

about this story as an allegory for a burgeoning sex life. That's too depressing even for me.

Strangely though, this production does introduce an sensual manner between Alice and the

other characters. Yet it's

still appropriate for children, sort of like older editions of cartoons such as "Popeye." The characters might make all sorts of references that, if interpreted, would be inappropriate for children, but there's enough else going on to keep that from enticing them. Then again, Susan Hightower's Alice, far from looking the impish youth, is a muscular, womanly creature.

The set, too, is some funky stroke of genius. Consisting of basically a big box that rolls around the stage, some lights and photographs of a little Victorian girl, saying the props are minimal would be an understatement. Through their words and actions, though, an entire underground world is created. The music and lighting cast just the necessary spell to achieve this effect, thanks to Mimi Jor-

dan Sherin and Darron L. West.

One more thing: Bogart uses only two actors to portray all the characters. Hightower is Alice, with one odd exception where she becomes the Dormouse, and Jefferson Mays is everyone else — the Rabbit, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat,

fifteen minutes it will take out of your life just to see this. He hisses, he spews, he's a New Yorker, he's a Brit, he rocks.

Hightower must play it straight to all this, and she does it with aplomb. Though she does not appear girlie, her voice bespeaks the wonder

Play By Play

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the Queen, etc.

Mays is mesmerizing. Even though he looks at Alice almost the whole time, my eyes were glued to him. With a changed voice, shades of different mannerisms and the same darn suit throughout, Mays becomes these entirely separate entities. It is worth spending the hour and

that is Alice.

If it's still unclear, go see this play. Take kids or just be one. ☞

City Theatre on the South Side presents *Alice's Adventures Underground* through Dec. 20. Performances are at 8 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 5:30 and 9 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. 431-CITY.

'Alice's' destination unclear in City Theatre production

By Alice T. Carter
STAFF WRITER

"Curiouser and curiouser," said Alice during her adventures underground.

And this Alice couldn't agree more after seeing "Alice's Adventures Underground" at City Theatre.

Anne Bogart and her SITI company created and performed this interpretation of Lewis Carroll's classic that opened Wednesday night at City Theatre.

Veterans of last year's "Culture of Desire" and 1996's "The Medium" — know that SITI's productions often induce the feeling that, like Alice, you're falling and falling without knowing when — or where — that fall will end.

This 80-minute, intermissionless performance trip down the SITI rabbit hole meanders through interesting visual and intellectual territory, but never seems to arrive at any dramatic destination.

Carroll, a pseudonym for Charles Lutwidge Dodson, originally told the story to entertain the three young Liddell sisters. For Christmas 1864 he presented Alice Liddell with a handprinted copy of the manuscript, illustrated with 37 pictures he had drawn for it.

Academics have used up entire forests dissecting the pedophilic intentions behind Carroll's writings. Here, a subtle, but certain, electric current of attraction and flirtation crackles between Susan Hightower's Alice and Jefferson Mays as the Carroll storytelling fig-

Review

ure who plays the other roles.

Hightower and Mays also provide a narrative that emphasizes storyline but downplays Carroll's elaborate word play.

For the audience, it's not unlike being read a bedtime story by a really enthusiastic parent who creates special voices and facial expressions to bring the story to life. For some, the parallel was a tad too close. More than one audience member succumbed to slumber as those well-modulated voices floated across the darkened auditorium.

That's not to suggest that the show is boring. Plastic-faced Jefferson Mays transforms himself from mouse to caterpillar to Cheshire cat with a swift adjustment of facial expression, voice and hand and body movements. Susan Hightower is a very grown-up Alice with a limber body and a sense of self-possession.

It's clear there's some serious child's play going on here that the performers find rewarding. But it leaves the audience like adults sitting on the playground's sidelines, entertained at the activity but not quite sure what the kids are up to.

"Alice's Adventures Underground" continues at 8 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 5:30 and 9 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday through Dec. 20 at City Theatre, Bingham at 13th streets, South Side. Tickets are \$19 to \$28. Information: (412) 431-2489.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



**CHRISTOPHER
RAWSON**

ON STAGE

Pittsburgh stages boast 3 premieres

Without fanfare, Pittsburgh is host to three theatrical premieres in less than a week — not just regional or national premieres, but international.

Sort of. There's a small caveat in each case, but not enough to keep us from patting ourselves and three of our four biggest theaters on the back. (Only the Civic Light Opera is missing.)

At the Public Theater, opened last Friday, is the Reduced Shakespeare Company's "The Millennium Musical." Though it had a few shakedown performances elsewhere, the cheery "bad boys of abridgment" are billing this as their premiere (but who knows what they'll say at their next stop).

At City Theatre, opening tonight, is "Alice's Adventures Underground," the latest creation by Anne Bogart's Saratoga International Theater Institute, with which City has formed a gradually strengthening bond. This, too, has been performed elsewhere — a Columbus, Ohio, critic hailed it as a premiere there — but we're assured that was a preview and this is the debut of the finished product.

And last night the Broadway Series hosted the opening of the nearly-all-new tour of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Sunset Boulevard" — sort of half-a-premiere, perhaps, but a coup, nonetheless.

Of course, a premiere isn't always a guaranteed pleasure: I'll bet the "Millennium Musical" gets better after it's played a few more places, and who knows what glitches might have greeted me last night at the Benedum? But the very fact of these premieres and the theatrical partnerships behind them speak to the maturing of professional Pittsburgh theater.