

A POSTMODERN



'ALICE'

Director imaginatively rethinks an adventurous classic

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Everyone knows *Alice in Wonderland*, right? Still, the chameleonic Lewis Carroll classic invites multiple interpretations.

"Everyone reads their own version into it," said Anne Bogart, artistic director of SITI (formerly known as the Saratoga International Theater Institute).

The late-'60s version conceived by Andre Gregory was "all about drugs," she said. "Originally the story was an act of love, reflecting a complex relationship between a man and a young girl. If you listen to it that way, it resonates like an old man's infatuation."

In the Bogart adaptation, *Alice's Adventures*, Susan Hightower plays Alice and Jefferson Mays all the other characters.

The Wexner Center for the Arts will launch its "Theatrical Impulse" series Thursday with the New York-bound world premiere.

"Our *Alice* can be as many things as people can read into it," Bogart said, "but we're trying not to front-load it with obvious metaphors."

Her response to the story as a child was "fascination" and "imagination."

"It was a full-color Technicolor dream in my head," she said.

Her two-actor version, with a minimal set and few costume changes, likewise relies strongly on an imaginative audience.

Wearing only a contemporary dark suit with a vest, Mays plays the White Rabbit, Mad Hatter, Caterpillar, March Hare, Mouse, Dodo, King, Queen and Cheshire Cat.

"We're not interested in telling a story that everyone knows, with preconceptions of a joyful romp or a post-Freudian exploration, but something else entirely," Mays said. "The story has a dreamlike quality."

There's something empowering and liberating about a world without rules. It appeals to children because all the adult characters behave like fools, and a carnival atmosphere of nonsense pervades the entire book.

The SITI troupe hired Irish playwright Joselyn Clark to write an



Home away from New York

With *Alice's Adventures*, director Anne Bogart is enjoying her third adventure at the Wexner Center for the Arts — after the November 1996 tour of *The Medium* and the February premiere of *Bob*.

"I like the fact that it's an arts center," she said. "Regional theaters sometimes feel tired, but the Wexner feels like it's moving into the next century."

She calls Chuck Helm, director of performing arts, "a great champion of mine."

"I like being associated with the center because of its concern with cutting-edge performances and art."

Bogart rehearses new works in New York City with her troupe SITI but prefers to stage first productions elsewhere.

"New York City is like a butcher block for new works," she said.

With the help of Columbus audiences, Bogart and her troupe fine-tuned *Bob*, a one-man show about avant-garde director Robert Wilson, before taking it to New York.

She hopes to "tweak" her latest work similarly.

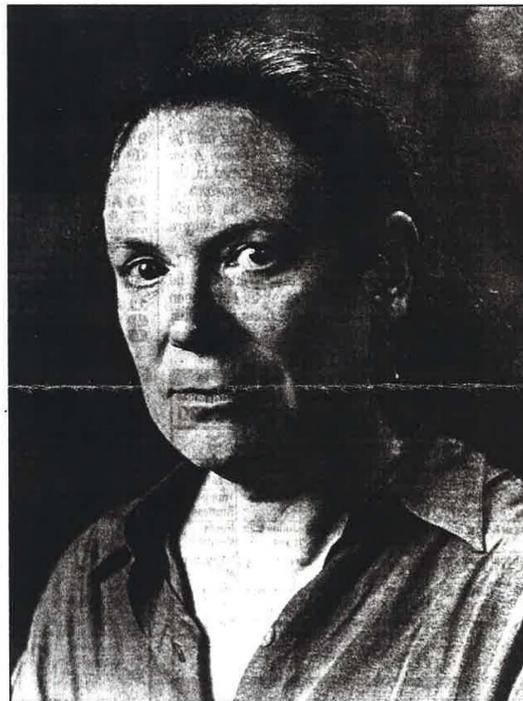
"*Alice's Adventures* is built to tour, and I hope it will become part of the repertoire of my company."

adaptation based on a facsimile edition of the first story, *Alice's Adventures Underground* — which professor Charles Dodgson (Carroll) gave to Alice Liddell as a Christmas present in 1863.

"The whole story was originally told extemporaneously to Alice and her two sisters on a boating trip along a river near Oxford," Mays said. "Dodgson just spun out this tale to entertain them, but it was special to her, so she asked him to write it down."

"It's what we call the ur-text." Hightower views the story as the metaphoric coming of age of a girl who is "bright, very curious and playful and a bit smart, and who doesn't particularly believe everything she hears."

Relatively new to the troupe, the actress is most impressed with the

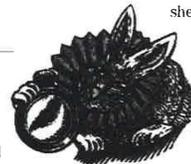


Fitz photos

"It was a full-color Technicolor dream in my head."

ANNE BOGART
director

■ *Alice's Adventures* will be presented at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday in the Wexner Center for the Arts, 1871 N. High St. Tickets cost \$16, or \$14 for center members. For more information, call 614-292-3535.



director's openness and collaborative approach.

"Our troupe is unusual for the amount of involvement from the company's actors and designers," she said.

Its plays are "connected to a very thoughtful exploratory process," Hightower said. "Anne asks the questions, but she doesn't necessarily have the answers. That spirit drives the work."

"We're trying to explore why we are all so drawn to the story, and we want to tell it in a way that's not the same but also in the way that it needs to be told."

Mays agreed, praising Bogart's "insatiable curiosity" and "fearlessness" in choosing material "because

she doesn't understand it."

The challenge of *Alice's Adventures*, Bogart said, was "finding a new way to tell a great story."

"You just don't want to be boring. My most common reaction (to other plays) is boredom, and that's a great fuel for one's work."

Bogart is internationally known for her "postmodern" style, which in her case favors images over words and collages over linear plots.

Yet she may have taken postmodernism as far as it can go.

"At the end of the century, we're getting to the end of the postmodern era," she said. "We've reached the end of deconstruction, of taking things apart. We're rediscovering meaning and story, and we should start putting things together again."