

# Eat Me—Drink Me— Stage Me?

*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

**T**ime: 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

**T**ippy phantasmagoria or children's fairy tale? *Alice In Wonderland* was written by one Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, a mathematics 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 tout-ing 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 girly, her voice bespeaks the wonder

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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.

on  
**STAGE**

# Follow that rabbit

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

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 Fitzsimons

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

### 'ALICE'S ADVENTURES UNDER GROUND'

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

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

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

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.

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