



## THEATER

# Review: 'Adventures With Alice' is theater as wonderful as its Golden Gate Park setting



Lily Janiak | April 28, 2023 Updated: May 5, 2023, 12:42 pm



The White Queen (Libby Oberlin) and the Red Queen (Drew Watkins) play cards in a scene from "Adventures With Alice."

Photo: Adam Pardee/Special to The Chronicle

Any jaunt to Golden Gate Park can feel like an excursion to wonderland. Impossible purple profusions

blossom from trees. Fog hurtles in, casting the early evening in a magical yet eerie glow. Each nook has its own distinct look and feel, like the many lands of a fairy kingdom.

With We Players' splendid, site-specific "Adventures With Alice," which opened Friday, April 28, San Francisco's beloved park has met its theatrical match.



Humpty Dumpty (Alan Coyne) and Alice (Regina León) in We Players' "Adventures With Alice"

Photo: Adam Pardue/Special to The Chronicle

Many previous We Players outings to local, state and national parks – the 23-year-old company's specialty – have revealed their surroundings as canvases for artistic expression. They've been diverting excuses to explore or rediscover our region's natural wonders, even if many performances have lacked emotional precision and commitment.

This time, in Ava Roy's adaptation of Lewis Carroll's Alice stories, superb We Players regulars make complete sense of Carroll's famous nonsense. Iconic characters become playgrounds for individual performers' idiosyncratic vamping. When the White Queen (Libby Oberlin) gets tangled in her own zigzagging gibberish, her eventual bleating seems like a logical conclusion. In this gently participatory show, where performers take special care to extend a hand to the youngest audience members, it wouldn't be out of place to reply, "Indeed," if only you spoke billy-goat.

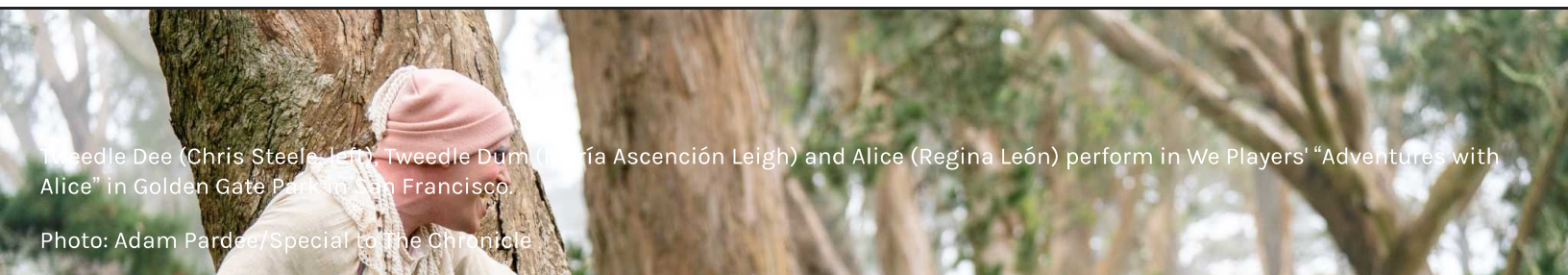


Tweedle Dum (María Ascención Leigh) walks with audience member Aureliana Leigh, 2, in the croquet scene during “Adventures With Alice.”

Photo: Adam Pardee/Special to The Chronicle

Under Roy’s direction, as Alice (Regina León) leads us on a mile-long walk in fitful pursuit of the White Rabbit (Britt Lauer), these cast members show that silliness is serious business. Thoughtful, crisp physical choices make possible apparent frivolity and spontaneity, with performers keeping the energy awhirl by continually destabilizing laws of physics and social norms alike. The White Knight, part nutty professor and part hair-tossing gallant in Nick Dickson’s winsome rendering, forges a delicious running gag out of tripping over a wagon handle even in a wide-open meadow, then makes a compelling acrobatic case for leapfrogging an obstacle face-first.

Among children’s literature authors, few rival Carroll’s understanding that kids can handle the grotesque perhaps better than adults do. If nightmares and the imaginary are still real for you, outlandish distortions and giddiness laced with menace make a certain sense, even in real life.



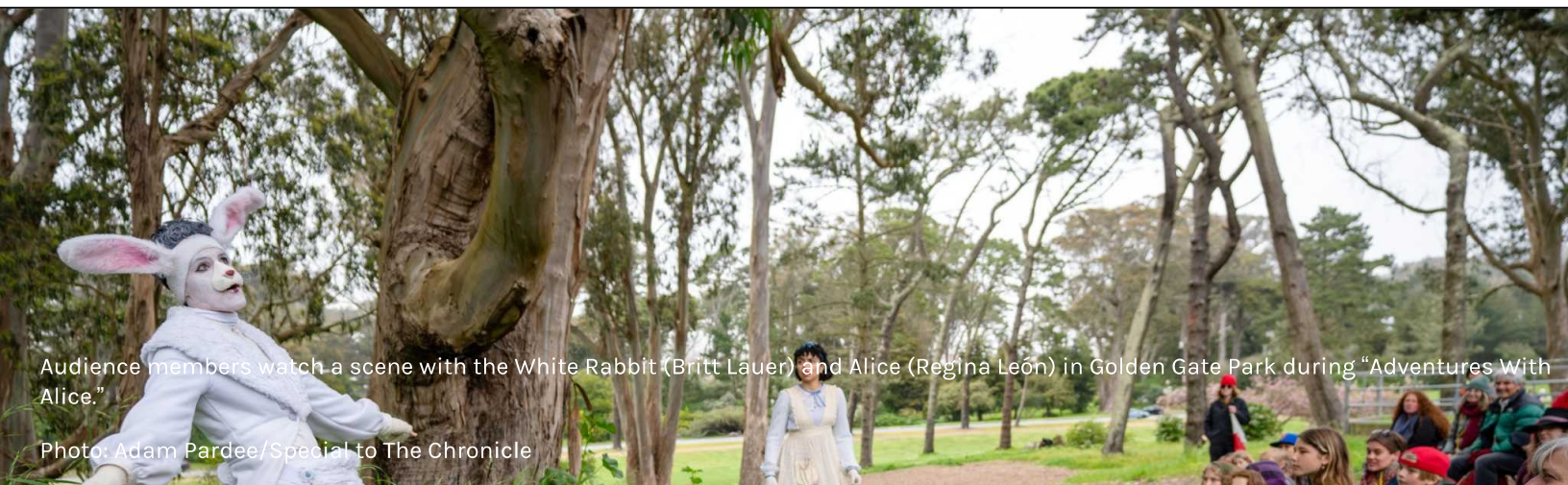
Tweedle Dee (Chris Steele, left), Tweedle Dum (María Ascención Leigh) and Alice (Regina León) perform in We Players’ “Adventures with Alice” in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Photo: Adam Pardee/Special to The Chronicle



In “Adventures With Alice,” Chris Steele and Maria Ascención Leigh, as **Tweedle Dee** and Tweedle Dum, embody that notion with flair and insight. They gorge on their words even as they spit them out in disgust. Eyebrows and voices rocket up and down. They mine each moment for extra bits that further develop situation and character – feeding blades of grass to the baa-ing White Queen, underlining their weirdness with beepity-boopity sound effects. Here the characters aren’t just twins; they seem to spin round an invisible nucleus, each pulling and volleying the other in some gravitational vortex.

Brooke Jennings’ show-stopping costume designs, with spiffy spats, lacy pantaloons and puffed, frilly short shorts, offer new details to savor at each new bend along the show’s wooded path. The **Red Queen** (Drew Watkins) wields his red cape as both pair of fluttering wings and formidable weapon. The white queen’s wooly wig, hosting both bird’s nest and dangling ball of yarn among other hitchhikers, seems to make her goat bleating inevitable.



Audience members watch a scene with the White Rabbit (Britt Lauer) and Alice (Regina León) in Golden Gate Park during “Adventures With Alice.”

Photo: Adam Pardee, Special to The Chronicle



Throughout opening day, part of the delight was the way the park’s onlookers interacted with the performance. Bicyclists, joggers and vapers looked on with bemusement and envy; at one point, in a moment the company couldn’t restage if it tried, a dog barked furiously at Lauer’s White Rabbit as she crouched behind a distant tree.

If the show can feel plotless, part of its point is to expose adults’ rules – including those for dramatic structure – as arbitrary. Peppered into the tomfoolery and twaddle are riddles that become mind-expanding bits of wisdom: “Things are much of a muchness,” offers the Dormouse (Steele). “Here,” the Red Queen says, “it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place.”



Tweedle Dee (Chris Steele) holds a stop sign so audience members can cross John F. Kennedy Drive before the next scene in “Adventures With Alice.”

Photo: Adam Pardee/Special to The Chronicle

By the time you depart the park (and however many layers you were planning to bring, double them), all its denizens seem part of the show: the ducks and geese startled by the White Queen's ravings, the flora curling upward like an caterpillar, the revelers bursting out of a glen to clamber down a hillside. In *We Players*' hands, a city jewel is polished to a fresh gleam.

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### More Information



**“Adventures with Alice”**: Adapted and directed by Ava Roy. Through May 20. Two hours, 10 minutes. \$20-\$80. Park Stables, Golden Gate Park Equestrian Center, S.F.

[www.weplayers.org](http://www.weplayers.org)

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Lily Janiak

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Lily Janiak joined the San Francisco Chronicle as theater critic in May 2016. Previously, her writing appeared in Theatre Bay Area, American Theatre, SF Weekly, the Village Voice and HowlRound. She holds a BA in theater studies from Yale and an MA in drama from San Francisco State.

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