

SPOTLIGHT

stage

Alice's Wonderland coming to Golden Gate Park

By Jean Schiffman | Special to The Examiner |

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We Players presents “Adventures with Alice,” an immersive walk through Golden Gate Park.

Lauren Matley

“Would you like to play croquet?” a performer in a suggestion of a costume — a hat and what appears to be a bathrobe, clearly rehearsal garb — asks me, prancing around excitedly.

I’ve just entered a fenced site on the west end of Golden Gate Park, the first stop on the one-mile walk of We Players’ new production, “Adventures with Alice.” Here, audience members will watch a caucus race, a trial (concerning the theft of the Queen of Hearts’ tarts), and a highly nontraditional game of croquet.

“Oh, no thank you,” I said hastily.

“Pity — you would make an excellent ball.”

I’m here two weeks before opening to observe the rehearsal of the latest We Player’s al fresco theater piece, a conflation and adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s 19th-century children’s books, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking Glass.”

Like many of the San Francisco-based company’s previous plays — 27 productions in 17 parks — it’s an immersive show in which the audience follows the actors on a journey. I’ve climbed Strawberry Hill here in Golden Gate Park to watch “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” taken a ferry to Angel Island for a day-long hike/performance of “The Odyssey,” boarded a ship to see “Twelfth Night” (in which shipwrecked Viola emerged, dripping, from the bay) and much more.

No other local theater does anything close to what We Players has been doing for the past two decades.

Founder and artistic director Ava Roy is no newcomer to the witty and wonderful nonsense of mathematician Lewis Carroll’s two “Alice” books — books he wrote to entertain a favorite child, little Alice Liddell, the daughter of a friend.

Roy first directed her adaptation combining the two books in high school, then wrote another adaptation as her senior thesis at Stanford. Her third adaptation was scheduled to open here in 2020, but the pandemic interfered.

This is her fourth adaptation, with a cast of eight plus a band. Familiar characters include the White Queen (Libby Oberlin), the self-important Red Queen (Drew Watkins), the drowsy Dormouse (Ling Ling Lee), the March Hare (María Ascención Leigh), the perennially tardy White Rabbit (Britt Lauer), those rotund, ever-bickering Tweedle twins (Leigh and Lee), the Mad Hatter and Humpty Dumpty (both played by Alan Coyne), and of course confused and sometimes impertinent Alice (Regina León).

The audience trails Alice, who scurries after the White Rabbit over lush green meadows, and through shady groves of eucalyptus, from the Polo Field to Lloyd Lake on John F. Kennedy Drive. Along the way, familiar Carrollian characters lurk behind trees, race across fields on make-believe horses and create chaos, turning the world topsy-turvy.

“I don’t necessarily know what I’m doing — I don’t necessarily have an outline,” Roy said in an interview. “I intuitively move stuff around until a pattern emerges, which is what I do when I’m directing, too. And I make space for the actors to invent.”

Today, she’s crouched on the ground madly taking notes as the actors work out late changes in the route. The White Rabbit, giant ears flapping, practices zig-zagging backward down a sloping path. The White Knight gallops across a hillock on a hobby horse.

“Good job!” Roy shouts. A jogger lopez by, unconcerned. A dog wanders across the playing area.

To create this version of “Alice,” Roy assembled all her previous versions, even a filmed version that she made in high school that she promised no one would ever see. She reread the books, watched old movie versions, and read some of the letters written by Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson).

“The nonsense of Wonderland is truly that: non-sense, the opposite of sense. It’s not random nonsense; it’s rooted in sense; it’s thoughtful, inverse sense,” she said.

Much of the staging is dictated by the physical space, she said. The Tweedles, for instance, need an area with lots of trees that they can disappear behind, then suddenly reappear. Likewise, Humpty Dumpty needs a wall.

“It’s the same whether it’s Shakespeare or ‘Alice,’” said Roy. “What’s the psychological mood? How will the visual metaphor of the space help draw out the content of the scene and vice versa?” The challenge for the actors, she adds, is to stay focused when park visitors wander through scenes.

But when animals show up, that can be exhilarating. Roy often works with the actors to discover spirit animals that might inspire their characterizations. Recently during rehearsal, a red-tail hawk landed above the Red Queen, who, as it happens, has been using images of hawks and eagles to develop the haughty character.

Roy said of Alice, in her proper little white gloves and lacey pinafore, “Alice is a proxy for the reader or the audience. She’s the lens through which we engage in Wonderland. We are essentially Alice, following her and, in large part, seeing the world through her eyes. It’s a hero’s journey, a right of passage.”

“The whole story is an invitation to imagine and to wonder — to magic,” said Roy. “I want to create work in public places that opens us up to wonder. Magic is happening around us all the time. If we don’t look, we won’t see it. And if we start paying attention, we’ll see more than we ever imagined possible.”April 27-May 20

Thursdays-Sundays at 5 pm

weplayers.org

\$20-\$65

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