

Golden Gate Park becomes a wild Wonderland in immersive 'Alice'

Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent

Lewis Carroll's "Alice" books are a perfect match for We Players.

The San Francisco troupe specializes in site-specific theater that usually involves a lot of walking from place to place in parks and other picturesque settings. Along the way the audience encounters larger-than-life characters enacting familiar scenes, often adapted from Shakespeare or ancient epics.

Carroll's novels "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass" similarly take their titular heroine on a tangled journey stumbling into all kinds of strange wonders.

In We Players' "Adventures with Alice," adapted and directed by founding artistic director Ava Roy, we follow Alice through the verdant lands of Golden Gate Park into one bizarre encounter after another. (Another run is planned for late September in Saratoga.)

Our Alice is Regina Léon, brimming with youthful enthusiasm and understandable befuddlement. She makes a perfect point person for all the tomfoolery, with indefatigable curiosity and enough self-assurance to push back against all the twisted logic and lunacy she's faced with.

With her we chase after Britt Lauer's fretful, panicky White Rabbit, who's always bellowing about lost time with positively religious zeal.

It's not the first time that We Players has dipped into these particular works. Roy drew on the same source material for "Jabberwocky," an interactive theater piece at Stanford University in 2003. In the program notes, she says the first full production that she directed in high school was also an original adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland," called "Ecila."

We Players originally planned to head back to Wonderland in April 2000 with a piece in Golden Gate Park that was then called "What Alice Found There," but like most theatrical productions it was waylaid by COVID-19. Three years later, with a new name, it finally comes to fruition.

By no means an exhaustive adaptation of either book (there's no Caterpillar or Cheshire Cat, for example), Roy's immersive new adaptation takes characters and scenes from both and draws especially heavily from "Looking-Glass."

Alan Coyne is an animated and ever-amusing presence as the cringing, anxious Mad Hatter and a huffy, imperious Humpty Dumpty.

María Ascención Leigh and Chris Steele are compellingly bizarre as Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, menacing Alice with synchronized, repeated and ritualized buffoonery. The pair are also entertainingly testy and tempestuous as the March Hare and the Dormouse in the crazed tea party, here portrayed without any discernible animal signifiers in dress or manner.

Drew Watkins is hilariously haughty and preening as the Red Queen as he sashays in a bright red suit and long flowing cape. Libby Oberlin is delightfully dotty as the manically giddy White Queen. Nick Dickson's pratfalls as the pillow-padded White Knight earn gasps from the crowd.

All are bedecked in bright, fanciful costumes by Brooke Jennings that make them easy to follow as they gambol from place to place. A three-piece brass band lurks nearby, offering jazzy accompaniment composed by Charlie Gurke.

The show involves a lot of trudging from place to place carrying the provided stools or seating pads of your choice, but the paths are gentle and there are plenty of chances to sit down (or stand) and watch any given scene. Patrons walk about a mile over the course of a little over two hours sans intermission. It's best to use the nearby restrooms beforehand, and to dress warm because the temperature tends to plummet toward evening.

It's hard to identify an overall dramatic arc for the show. Strange beings appear and lead us on a merry journey, and then they leave. But all the clowning and wordplay along the way is so sprightly and well performed that it's a Wonderland

well worth getting lost in.

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‘ADVENTURES WITH ALICE’

By Ava Roy, adapted from the novels by Lewis Carroll, presented by We Players

When: 5 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, through May 20

Where: From North Polo Field to Lloyd Lake, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

Running time: Two hours and 10 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$20-\$85

Contact: Tickets, parking details and more information is at www.weplayers.org