

Review: ‘The Grand Paradise’ Summons a ’70s Pleasure Palace



Jessy Smith, foreground, and Erik Abbott-Main in “The Grand Paradise.” Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The Grand Paradise NYT Critic's Pick | Off Off Broadway, Interactive, Play | 2 hrs.

Open Run | Grand Paradise, 383 Troutman Street

By Ben Brantley

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I had barely arrived for my tropical holiday in Brooklyn before I was deflowered. Yes, my lei, which had been hung welcomingly around my neck when I entered the resort called the Grand Paradise, was taken from me (gently) by a vulpine blonde in a pink satin bathing suit and pearls.

That occurred in her dressing room, where this guiding siren — whom I had just watched striking pinup poses with giant pearls on a nightclub stage — was showing me faded postcards affixed to her mirror and telling me about the different lovers they brought to mind. “Stan,” she would sigh, or “Harry,” or “Jim,” appending each name with the same wistful postscript: “He was my first.”

Now that my lei had been added to her collection, I was feeling shucked and sentimental. In the context of what seemed guaranteed to turn into a night of encounters with intimate strangers, she was, after all, my first.

“[The Grand Paradise](#),” the latest and lushest of the many immersive theater spectacles to set up camp in New York in recent years, traffics in instant nostalgia. Created by [Third Rail Projects](#), this interactive tour of an imaginary Floridian pleasure palace from the 1970s manages to summon romantic promise and regretful retrospection in a single, ocean-air breath.

The effect is of taking and remembering a wild vacation at the same time, the kind in which you drink too many pastel cocktails, smoke too much ganja and wake up in too many unfamiliar beds. At the Grand Paradise, though, you don’t really do these things (though sweet cocktails, in tiny cups, are on offer and the odds are you’ll find yourself fully horizontal at least once).

You just think you have, and any attendant pleasure and pain is hazy, as if what’s happening is already in the past. This paradise has been designed for [virtual hedonists](#). As the lady with the pearls warned me in our first conversation, “None of this is real.” She was speaking philosophically as well as literally, and you are free to take her words as either reassuring or disappointing.

Third Rail is the troupe responsible for “[Then She Fell](#),” an impressionistic rendering of the world of Lewis Carroll and his Wonderland novels, which has been running for three years (also in Brooklyn). That piece, set in what seemed to be a derelict mental hospital, is a more explicitly literary head trip, replete with Victorian imagery.

For “The Grand Paradise” — overseen by the company’s artistic directors, Zach Morris, Tom Pearson and Jennine Willett — the troupe drew from a kitschier and closer frame of reference. The Bushwick neighborhood warehouse it has taken over has been remodeled as a sybarite’s temple to the swinging ’70s.

O.K., those of you who were there in the era of Jimmy Carter’s presidency may recall that time as the less glamorous stepchild of the really swinging ’60s. But think about it. By the late 1970s, the sexual revolution was in its fullest flower, when a night at the disco could end in a public orgy and sexually transmitted diseases could be chased away with a hypodermic needle.



From left, Erik Abbott-Main, Carlton Cyrus Ward, Marissa Nielsen-Pincus and Jessy Smith in “The Grand Paradise.” Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

It was a sensibility translated into prime-time-appropriate television fare like “[The Love Boat](#)” and “[Fantasy Island](#).” These G-rated variations on the theme were all about penalty-free escapism, with the implicit guarantee that even the middle-aged were welcome at a party where the inner, innocent pleasure seeker would be unleashed to play.

“The Grand Paradise” absorbs this mind-set in all its tackiness without ironic grimaces. Do you remember the musical number in the 1979 Bob Fosse movie “[All That Jazz](#),” in which lithe dancers in leotards rehearse an erotic airline commercial? It’s called “[Take Off With Us](#),” and features the lines, “Meet our friendly, eager crew/They only live to service you (service, service, service).”

The group of 20 performers who usher you through “The Grand Paradise” exhale the same unspoken invitation. They’re all dancers and all good looking. We first see a selection of them slithering about the fountain grotto in the room where the audience gathers.

Rumor has it it’s the fountain of youth they’re dipping into. Anyway, they certainly all look refreshed and relaxed. The same cannot be said of the two couples who soon show up in vintage leisure wear (Bermuda shorts, a safari suit) with a trolley full of baggage.

They’re shy and inhibited. Not for long. One of the women (the one in the safari suit) finds herself staring, hypnotized, at a lamé-clad chanteuse on a balcony, who’s singing sultrily about drinking and drowning. The vacationer scrambles up next to the singer, and soon they’re changing outfits.

We’ll see the members of this vacationing quartet throughout the evening, doing various balletic and erotic pas de deux (and trois and quatre) to dreamy, sexed-up elevator music (Sean Hagerty). At least one of them strips down to swim in the fountain of youth. (I was required to hand him a box with dry underwear when he emerged.)

These dancers are graceful surrogates for the audience members (60 at each performance), who are led in smaller groups into different chambers, all impeccably in period. There is water, water — and sand, sand — everywhere.

There’s a beachscape with a weathered lifeguard station; a maritime-themed bar; a disco dance floor; grottoes with statuary; and a lot of smaller rooms, often decorated with many sand-filled hourglasses, seashells and yellowing photographs. Here you may be taken individually and asked deeply personal questions that you are under no obligation to answer. Sex is often the subject, but so is death.

Be prepared for a lot of New Age talk, delivered in hushed voices, about losing and capturing moments in the slipstream of time. Also be prepared to be touched a lot (though never too indecorously) and to be requisitioned for activities like a pillow fight or the burial of a tiny bird corpse.

Using the ’70s as a time frame turns out to have been an inspired idea. It allows the troupe to be philosophically gooey in ways that might be embarrassing otherwise. But, hey, here we’re all surfing through a past when people did things differently.

And all that abstract talk about time passing and frozen and resurrected? It winds up hitting home. Your stay at the Grand Paradise lasts a precisely measured two hours. But I can promise you that when it’s over, you’ll have little idea how long you’ve been there.

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383 Troutman Street
Brooklyn

[thegrandparadise.com](#)

Category Off Off Broadway, Interactive, Play

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Credits Created in collaboration with Zach Morris, Tom Pearson, Jennine Willett and company members

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