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Lewis Carroll Is in a Hospital



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Then She Fell Jennine Willett, left, as the White Queen, and Tara O'Con as one of the Alices, at Arts@Renaissance, on the garden level of the former Greenpoint Hospital.

"You might as well come in," the mad-woman said. She knew, I guess, that I had been watching her through the window. She had been in a frenzy then: writhing on the

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REVIEW**

floor, throwing herself against the wall, staring into the mirror with icy disgust.

But now she was calm, even regal, especially once she fastened that crimson ruff around her neck. After I had entered the room and sat down, right behind her dressing table, the Red Queen (for that is her name; she is played by Rebekah Morin) handed me a cordial. Though it came from a

medicine bottle, and was the fourth libation I had been offered that evening, I accepted it. It seemed the proper thing to do, and I didn't want to offend her.

Grown-ups are so perplexing, aren't they?

Like everyone who had gathered that night at a former outpatient building of the Greenpoint Hospital in north Brooklyn to see the transporting immersive theater project "Then She Fell," I am over 21. (You have to be, just to get in.)

Yet for much of the hazy two hours I spent wandering through rooms there, I felt like a bewildered but enchanted child, made privy

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Visiting Lewis Carroll In a Brooklyn Hospital

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to the arcana of another, darker world. That does not mean that I felt innocent.

I originally visited the landscape portrayed in "Then She Fell," a site-specific creation of Third Rail Projects, many, many years ago, when I first read (or had read to me) Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass." I have since returned often to Carroll's masterpieces; I even studied them in college. I have also seen all sorts of movie and stage versions of Alice's adventures (under the influence, in my student days), according to Walt Disney, Tim Burton, Richard Foreman, ad infinitum.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

More images from "Then She Fell":
nytimes.com/arts

But "Then She Fell," which admits only 15 people per performance for a personal guided tour of its Wonderland, is the only adaptation that has reconnected me with my earliest experiences with Carroll's books. And I realized more forcefully than ever just what a genius Carroll (1832-1898) was in giving fantastical shape to the thoughts, fears, confusions and uncanny knowingness of children. He understood exactly what paths to take to set up camp in their imaginations.

Or, to be specific, one particular imagination, that of Alice Liddell, the little girl for whom he wrote the Wonderland books. Carroll was undoubtedly in love with the child, whom he posed for photographs that today look uncomfortably erotic. "Then She Fell" addresses the ambiguity of that relationship, but without drifting into the polluted shallows of pathography. This show occupies a dreamscape where the judgments and classifications of the waking mind are inoperative, and where the single self keeps splitting and blurring.

Theatergoers who have participated in the long-running Punch-drunk production "Sleep No More," which reinvents Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as a movable feast in a multilevel hotel, will be familiar with the form of "Then She Fell." Directed, designed and choreographed by Zach Morris, with Tom Pearson and Jennine Willett, this show, too, tells its story impressionistically — and partly through dance — in a series of elaborately furnished rooms.

But "Then She Fell" is less spectacular and more intimate than "Sleep No More," and far more illuminating about its source material. It also keeps a tighter leash on its audience, which is firmly led along designated routes and divided into small and then smaller groups.

Finally, you may end up, as I did, all alone with one of the two

actresses playing Alice (Marissa Nielsen-Pincus and Tara O'Con), in a closet occupied by shelves of dolls, a hairbrush and an overwhelming sense of regret.

But that was late in the evening, and I had more or less come of age by then. I had begun my journey two hours earlier, when I was checked in by a doctor and nurses bearing clipboards (planting the suspicion that we might all be patients in a mental institution). I was also given a wine-based drink (devised by the mixologist Kathy Hubler). One of the nurses made prefatory remarks about the "liminal" experience we were about to undergo and the idea of falling as its central dynamic.

And fall we do, even though we're mostly on our feet. Most of the words heard (and seen) are by Carroll, whose prose and poems are on pages hidden in drawers and pasted on walls and recited or read by different performers. (I had one told to me as a bedtime story by the White Queen, played by Ms. Willett, as I lay on a crisp-sheeted cot in a hallway.)

You are encouraged to rummage through trunks and cabinets (which you may unlock with keys issued to you earlier) in rooms replete with opulent, slightly seedy Victorian accouterments. You are offered dainty comestibles (designed by Megan Johnson and Leigh Friend). And you are bossed around by slender, gymnastic creatures in Victorian

Marissa Nielsen-Pincus as one of the Alices, and Alberto Denis as Lewis Carroll.

Then She Fell

Directed, designed and choreographed by Zach Morris, with Tom Pearson and Jennine Willett, in collaboration with the company; production manager, Debra Stunich; costumes by Karen Young; lighting by Kryssy Wright; music and sound by Sean Hagerty; movement coach, Tori Sparks. A Third Rail Projects production. Mr. Morris, Mr. Pearson and Ms. Willett, artistic directors; presented by Arts@Renaissance. At Arts@Renaissance (garden level of the former Greenpoint Hospital), 2 Kingsland Avenue, at Maspeth Avenue, Brooklyn; (718) 388-5454, thenshefell.com. Through Jan. 6. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Elizabeth Carena (Hatter), Alberto Denis (Lewis Carroll), Stacie C. Fields (Nurse), Rebekah Morin (Red Queen), Zach Morris (various), Marissa Nielsen-Pincus (Alice), Tara O'Con (Alice), Tom Pearson (White Rabbit), Zoë Schieber (Doctor/White Queen), Debra Stunich (Nurse) and Jennine Willett (White Queen).

garb (proper and improper) who like to crawl up walls and perch in window ledges and perform pas de deux that skirt the pornographic.

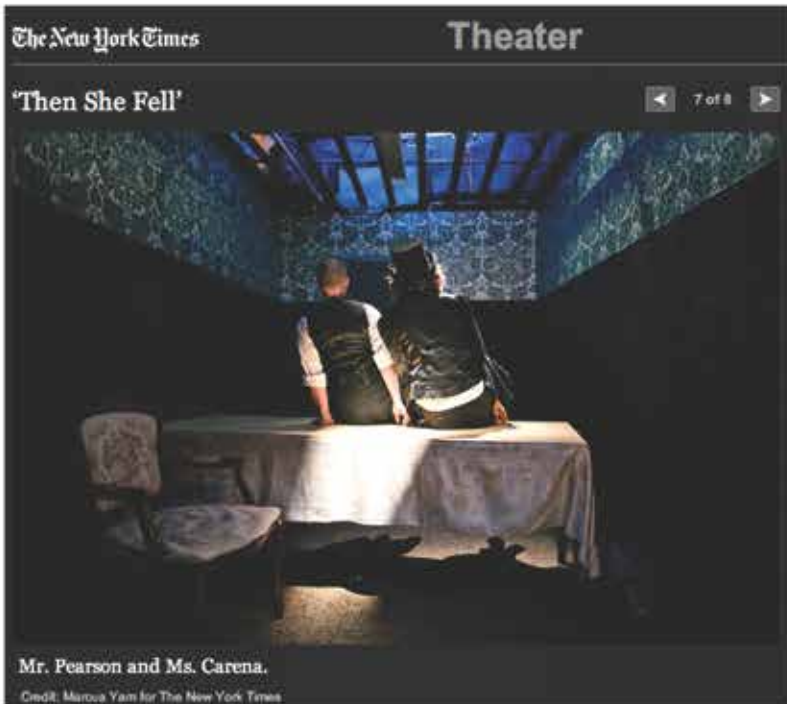
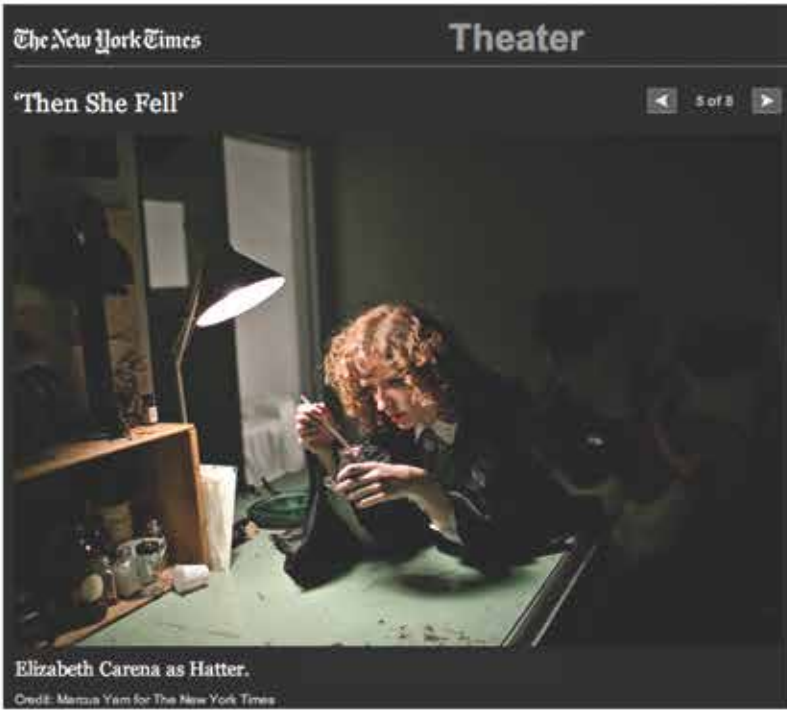
Nothing is explained as it's happening. And if you don't know Carroll's life and works, you won't know who these people are supposed to be. (Programs are given out only at the conclusion.) What you will experience is the feeling that children sometimes have of being swept up into busy, self-important social rituals that make no sense. And of spying on adult activities that don't make much sense either and are equally creepy and thrilling.

Among the set pieces: a truly mad tea party that noisily redefines and explodes table etiquette (led of course by the Mad Hatter, embodied by an elegant and antic Elizabeth Carena); several visions of two Alices discovering each other on opposite sides of a mirror in subliminally sensual reveries; your being made to paint a white rose red by the White Rabbit (Mr. Pearson, without the literal-minded burden of bunny ears); and a forlorn session, in a flooded room, on a derelict dock with a bereft, barefoot man (Alberto Denis).

That man will turn out to have been Lewis Carroll, and he has been hovering on the edges of this adventure all along. Yes, that was he who sprang into a room from a courtyard window, just as my journey through Wonderland was beginning. He had tapped on the window, and Alice, who had been brooding in a corner, had leapt into joyous life to open it for him. Yes, you might as well come in.

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