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Adventures in a Sinister Wonderland

A stage work is inspired by Lewis Carroll's life and works.

By SIOBHAN BURKE

"Eat," the White Queen barks, as you wonder what to do with the waferlike snack she has handed you. In the midst of this tumultuous feast, there's no time for questions. Heaping bowls of fruit and diminutive cocktails materialize from who knows where, as she clambers onto tabletops and chairs, ricochets among cabinets and walls. A creaky lantern hangs from the ceiling; she reaches toward it and, with a brisk shove, sets it swinging on its precarious hinges. When Alice appears, our careening hostess gives her one drink, then another, luring the girlish visitor into a state as wild as her own.

By this point, you've consumed the mysterious hors d'oeuvre (it was some kind of bruschetta), along with a lot of information about these characters. The queen's order is the only word spoken during this roughly five-minute vignette. But a lush, if fragmented story arrives by way of the exacting, exuberant choreography, performed by two of the intrepid dancers in the cast of "Then She Fell."

"The choreography to me is the language, the way these people communicate," said Jennine Willett, one of the artistic directors of Third Rail Projects, the site-specific dance-theater company behind this immersive, multi-sensory work. On a recent afternoon, she and her co-directors, Tom Pearson and Zach Morris, were gathered around a weathered banquet table on the second floor of a the Kingsland Ward at St. John's, a former mental institution in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. "Then She Fell" — which, last month, earned a Bessie Award nomination for outstanding production — happens there twice a night, six nights a week, for no more than 15 audience members at a time.

The movement in the show, Ms. Willett said, evolved through a constant paring down to essentials: "When it didn't feel like choreography anymore, that's when we knew, O.K., this is what it should be — when you forget that the characters are dancing, because that's just what they do, and you wouldn't expect them to do anything else."

Some of those characters may seem familiar: the White Rabbit, Hatter, White Queen, Red Queen, Alice (who also has light and dark alter egos) and their creator, Lewis Carroll. Inspired by Carroll's writings and biography, "Then She Fell" derives its fractured narratives, its doppelgängers and mirror images, from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass." A labyrinthine journey through shadowy corridors and meticulously decorated rooms, it exposes the sinister undertones of these childhood tales, while grappling with the more adult complexities of Carroll's attraction to his prepubescent muse, Alice Liddell.

By far the longest-running show that Third Rail has produced, "Then She Fell" opened last October to rhapsodic reviews from theater critics (including one from Ben Brantley of The New York Times). It

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Above from left, Tom Pearson, Jennine Willet and Zach Morris on the set for "Then She Fell" in Brooklyn. Top right, Marissa Nielsen-Pincus as Alice and Alberto Denis as Lewis Carroll at Greenpoint Hospital, where the show opened last fall.

MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

relocated in March from its initial, equally institutional Brooklyn setting — a former outpatient wing of the Greenpoint Hospital — to accommodate its consistently sold-out run (which was recently extended, again, through Oct. 27). Last spring, the directors held their first formal audition, a ritual that felt almost alien, they said, to what had always been a small company of familiar collaborators. Along with the show's popularity, the cast has grown to 29 dancers from 9.

The newcomers have been learning, in a few rehearsals, what Third Rail's core members developed over two years of research: the highly specified gestures and physical idiosyncrasies that define each inhabitant of the ward.

"We were looking at all of the characters as emanations of this Lewis Carroll-Alice Liddell relationship, as they manifested in the texts," explained Mr. Morris, the show's "vision keeper," a title that Third Rail bestows upon the director at the helm of a project. "All of these characters might be aspects of Lewis Carroll, or aspects of Alice Liddell, so we found a spectrum that we were operating in, in terms of movement qualities. There are characters who are decidedly vertical, whose carriage and movement vocabulary are born out of a Victorian formality. That's true of the White Rabbit and Red Queen. Then on the flip side, there's this unfettered fluidness that is true of the Mad Hatter and White Queen. And the two Alices are on either side."

Depending on where they fall in that spectrum, Mr. Morris added, "there are things that our characters will always do and will never do."

"The uprightness was a clear physical task for me," said Rebekah Morin, who plays the Red Queen. Like all of the original cast members, she was integral in developing her role. She challenged herself never to lower her chin, "keeping the head on a level, while the rest of the body spins out from underneath," she said.

"I'm only one grab away from her at any point in time," said Mr. Pearson, who originated the White Rabbit role, describing his tussling duet with Ms. Morin, in which she whisks him into compromised positions with the help of some parlor furniture. In Third Rail's work, furniture — along with windowsills, door frames, staircases, walls — function practically as extensions of the body. Every architectural structure, Mr. Pearson said, inspires a slew of questions: "How do you live in it? How do you fight it? How do you get somewhere you couldn't get without it?"

And then there are subtler modes of physicality demanded by a work in which performers and spectators interact in eerily close quarters, often one on one.

"One of the greater challenges," said Elizabeth Carena, a bewitching Hatter, "is the amount of eye contact that goes on in the show — how close you are to somebody for two hours, getting to know a number of audience members pretty intimately."

"I actually saw somebody who had been to the show in the real world," she continued. "I said, 'Do I know you?' I looked at him and I thought: I've talked to that person before. How did we meet? And he said, 'I saw your show.'"