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by Kathryn Harris

## Theater review: **'Alice' a fun family romp**

Lewis Carroll's fanciful story of Alice and her adventures in Wonderland has entertained children for decades. For the most part it's been thorough any number of one-dimensional books and films, with a star-studded television movie airing last year. The crew at the UAF Theater Department wanted to turn that up a notch. What if the audience could now go down the rabbit hole with Alice? What if they could participate in the Mad Hatter's Tea Party?

Lighting designer turned director Kade Mendelowitz has created a show that allows the audience to move with Alice. The result is a fun, if occasionally uneven, "Alice in Wonderland" that is an entertaining family outing. And it doesn't drain the pocketbook.

The audience begins the journey at the entrance to the rabbit hole. Alice is bemoaning that nothing out of the ordinary ever happens. Lo and behold, a white rabbit appears holding a big clock and fretting over the possibility that his lateness could cost him his head if the queen catches on. The audience follows Alice down and eventually through eight different sets that represent the different places in Alice's search for the rabbit. It begins in a small section of the main auditorium and snakes through backstage areas that are transformed into Wonderland.

The director and production crew carefully plotted out how to move audience through the sets with the least number of logistical headaches. The audience enters in staggered groups of 15 every 10 minutes. Each set has chairs which are easily accessible. The audience moved quickly and easily with no chair shuffling or confusion to detract from the play. Multiple Alices and White Rabbits rotate with each sitting. The other players stay within their set and wait for the next group.

The cast is a mix of UAF theater students, local elementary school students and others. Tiffany Guinn played Alice and Will Nash was the White Rabbit as I followed them through Wonderland. Cast standouts were Telo Walden and the delightfully slapstick and Tracy Campbell who played the Queen of Hearts with a perfect mix of malice and lunacy.

Costuming and makeup stuck faithfully with the traditional look of "Alice in Wonderland," Alice in red and white, the rabbit in a white waistcoat, Doormouse in a fedora. The

characters are as familiar as our next-door neighbors and with each new movement into a new part of Wonderland it seemed a little like a reunion with old friends.

Some of the eight sets work; others don't. Once down the rabbit hole, the method of making Alice, and the audience along with her, shrink is well done with the lowering of the pit orchestra area. From there we go to the less effective pool of Alice's tears. Because there is little in the set design to give the impression of being under water it is hard to escape the notion that we are behind the stage rather than within it.

The caterpillar's lair is spooky with large mushrooms growing out of the wall and the caterpillar chanting "ohm" while casually twisting an antenna. The Tea Party is set in the costume room and the audience sits down at the table with the performers. The tables are cafeteria style with no tablecloths surrounded by costumes, props, and various theater paraphernalia that was hard to ignore. Cheshire Cat is a computer image projected on a screen that is difficult to see. The trial of the Knave of Hearts is in a storage area that allows the King to be high above the audience who sits in a jury box.

As the audience travels through labyrinth halls and rooms beneath the stage, in no time is there a sense of being lost in a strange but fascinating place. At times, however, the message seems to get lost in the medium, particularly when we pass ironing boards, in the costume room or posted student messages in a hallway.

Despite its few missteps, "Alice in Wonderland" is a great way to spend an hour or so this weekend. Kids will love it because it does not involve sitting still for much longer than five minutes at a time. And ticket prices of \$3-\$6 couldn't be better. The response to the show has so far been more than expected. Theater patrons are encouraged to buy their tickets early to avoid waiting in line to go through Wonderland, and check the time on your ticket to see when you are scheduled to begin your adventure. Tickets are available at the Lee H. Salisbury box office. Shows begin at 7:30 Friday and Saturday evenings with a 2 p.m. matinee on Sunday.