

# Lewis Carroll's dream lives on in wonderful 'Alice'

By Michael Phillips  
Tribune theater critic

You needn't focus on Charles Dodgson's complex, fervent photographic interest in young Alice Liddell to get the willies from the books Dodgson wrote in her honor.

The books also happen to be marvels: "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass," in which a forthright girl falls down a rabbit hole, meets creatures of all stripes and runs afoul of the Queen of Hearts, one of the most whim-prone tyrants in all of literature. The episodes are so relentlessly fraught with the threat of violence and madness that only the inspired comic illogic brought to the party by Dodgson (in his Lewis Carroll guise) save them from the nightmarish depths of, say, Kafka's "The Trial."

Theater artists worldwide have found themselves pulled into Carroll's vortex. The latest is Zeljko Djukic, artistic director of the T.U.T.A. collective. T.U.T.A. stands for The Utopian Theatre Asylum. Its inmates — who made their strong Chicago debut last year with "The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other" — have cre-

## "Alice"

**When:** Through June 8

**Where:** T.U.T.A. (The Utopian Theatre Asylum) at Chicago Dramatists, 1105 W. Chicago Ave.

**Phone:** 847-217-0691

ated a starkly beautiful riff on Carroll's books.

"Alice" begins with the sinister appearance of a book, moving of its own volition. Costumed in a red dress and tennis shoes, Alice (sprightly Allegra Hollenbeck) first spies the volume sliding across the stage toward her. The White Rabbit (memorably creepy Bob Kulhan, with buck teeth and a

top hat) then sidles into the action, rehearsing his lines: "Oh dear, oh dear! I shall be too late!"

Later, Alice finds herself sitting at the rabbit's makeup mirror, applying powder and lipstick. As heightened in this adaptation by Stephen Angus and director Djukic, Alice's wonderland adventures relate to the shadowy world of the theater.

This is excellent design work on a low budget. Bosnia-based scenic designers Tanja and Stjepan Ros trained as architects and graphic designers. Their blood-red set, with red-and-white checked tile down front, imagines a series of proscenium arches; Natasa Vucurovic Djukic's costumes suggest all they need to.

At one point, there's a startling shift in perspective: When Alice sits down to tea, we see the

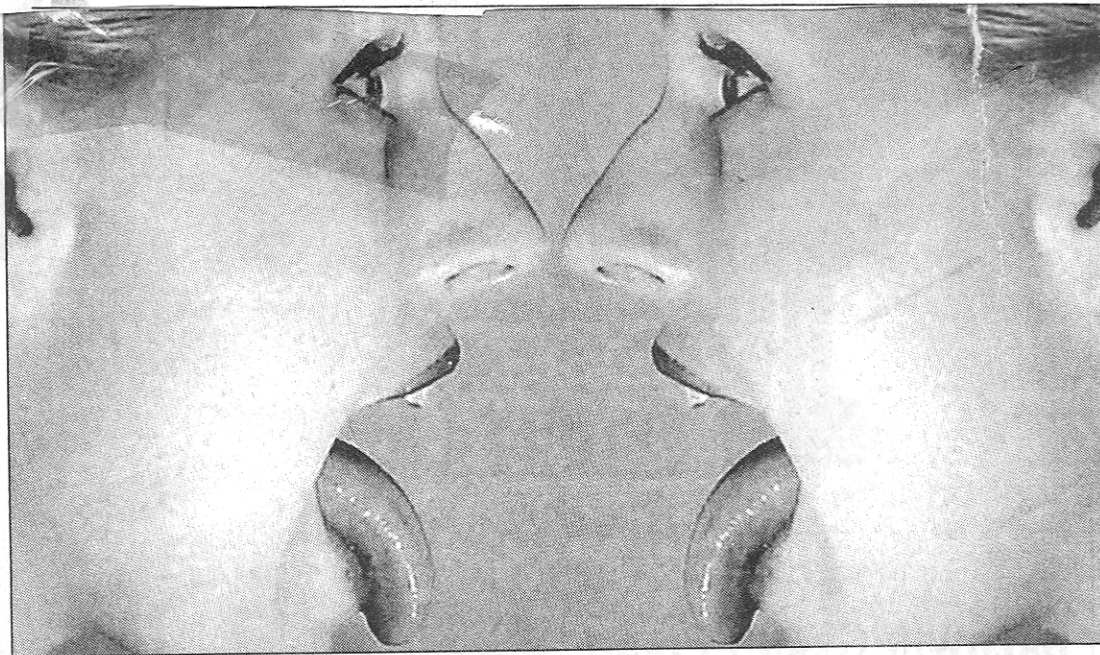


Photo by Chien Yuan

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party guests and the table setting as if watching from above. That scene dribbles out after a while, as do some others. Some of the acting is strident, and Djukic's sense of humor is not light.

But it's a genuinely searching production. And while Hollenbeck, particularly funny when required to swim or run in place, shares some scenes with Jacqueline Stone's wry

Cheshire Cat, it's Hollenbeck who has the Cheshire Cat grin.

Near the close of Carroll's second "Alice" book, he wrote: "Still she haunts me, phantom-wise, / Alice moving under skies / Never seen by waking eyes." Carroll's unsettling dream lives on. Without overplaying the psychosexual subtext, T.U.T.A.'s "Alice" acknowledges it, artfully and well.