

# Alice, Formerly of Wonderland, is Pitch-perfect Fun —with an Edge

By Jesse Caverly / VOICE

**HILARIOUSLY BITTERSWEET, SMART, AND DARING,** *Alice, Formerly of Wonderland* is a refreshing take on a revered story. Set in late 1800s Oxford, told with omniscient narration by the Caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*, this is an imaginative story about the very real possibility that Alice Liddel, the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's books, and Prince Leopold, 8th heir to the crown under his mum, Queen Victoria, might have fallen in love. A triumph, *Alice, Formerly of Wonderland* is perfectly at home in the Old Vic, and runs through June 16th.

This play could fall under musical comedy, but with playwright Mark Saltzman's sharp pen and director Jim Fall's astute direction, it becomes much more than that. When two people from very different walks of life fall for each other, how can they fare against a meddling Queen, disapproving father, and a lovestruck rival? The play answers this as a gleeful comedy, with a touch of the psychedelic, and a poignant ending.

With a whirl-wind story, and the use of stagecraft complimented by the illusory nature of the source material, it works. *Of course* a capella songs about the ritual of Tea at Four and plotting seduction with a man-sized vampy caterpillar fit right in! Saltzman uses all the richness of the time, place, and the rabbit hole itself to craft a sharp, funny, and reassuring story about the difference between what we want and what we can have.

When the story, acting, comedic timing, and musical numbers are all in such harmony, risks can be taken. Pregnant pauses risk awkwardness, expository songs for the sake of painting a new world, everything lands firmly in the hands of the very talented and capable cast.

And, none of the characters fall into stereotypes. The villainous Queen (Bree Murphy) is very human, and broken with grief

and pain over the loss of the king. Her alcoholism may be worth a few wry laughs, but it also invites sympathy. The romantic rival to Prince Leopold (Edward Brocket, played by Sawyer Patterson) is not a one dimensional cardboard cut-out bully, and has an earnest heart and a moral compass. The Caterpillar (Matthew Greenwood) is an arrogant mess, but he knows it, even revels in it, and emboldens us as the audience to go *all in* with him. (His comeuppance at the end is well deserved and side-splitting funny.)

Prince Leopold, as entitled and as unworldly in the everyday affairs of common people as he is, still wants more than the world handed to him. That he is arduously pursuing an education for real, not just an honorary doctorate, speaks to his character. The prince was afflicted with hemophilia, giving him even more of a reason to quarantine away from the world. Despite this he wants more and is willing to throw his privilege away for something real with Alice.

Alice herself is not some starstruck girl; she has learned the price of her fame (having gone 'viral' before social media existed) and how to use that fame for her own protection and placement. She has a whip smart edge that the patriarchy and Empire can't temper, and we see how that can also grow toxic. She is complex and vulnerable, and for all her mastering of Oxford and unwanted fame, she, too, falls in love.

This production is fearless. The acting and chemistry between everybody on stage is palpable; nobody feels like they're trying, and this effortlessness delivers. Margie Mays, in the title role, owns Alice, body and soul. Much like her character, she has a supreme confidence in who she is and knows how vulnerable that can make her. Mays is a talent to watch out for.

*Alice, Formerly of Wonderland* will find its home in the canon of the extended Alice-world multiverse that has captured the imaginations of millions since 1865.

For tickets (\$40 to \$86), visit [www.etc.sb.org](http://www.etc.sb.org)



Photos by Zach Mendez

Margie Mays and Matthew Greenwood star in *Alice, Formerly of Wonderland*.



Margie Mays and Sam O'Byrne find romance in *Alice, Formerly of Wonderland*.

**PATRICIA CHIDLAW**

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