

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

It was one of those nights in New York, where everything feels surreal, and I'm reminded how weird living here is.

So I was in the East Village. I had to get to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Normally, that would be a straight shot on the L train. But when I got down to the station, the L was suspended in both directions. This was rush hour.

We were all diverted to another station to take the M train, which I forgot existed. Every ten minutes a new train arrived but they were so packed you literally couldn't squeeze in. The amount of the people waiting on the platform started swelling. A fight broke out. The cops came down to break it up.

I kept checking my watch, like the White Rabbit, saying, I'm late, I'm late, I'm going to be late. Finally, I couldn't take it. When the third train pulled up packed like sardines, and I wedged myself into those people. They were not happy. I could barely breathe, but I was going to make it on time.

Where was I going? To a show called "Then She Fell." A half hour later, I was walking to the address and started recording a voice memo.

EM: Okay. So I am in deep, deep, deep into Brooklyn, I don't know where I am. There is an old church here, two old churches connected and it's all red and rusted. This seriously looks like Arkham Asylum, this is pretty cool.

Arkham Asylum is a Batman video game, with super creepy production design. The comparison wasn't that far off. I mean the show wasn't Batman-related. It was a radical interpretation of Alice in Wonderland that played out like a video game.

It's this new trend called Immersive Theater, where you experience the show like a virtual world – interacting with the sets and the actors. There's no stage – the stage is the entire building. And when I emerged three hours later:

EM: That was completely amazing and I'm in some kind of seventh heaven right now, I have to figure out how to get home and digest everything and reread Alice and figure out

what the hell was going on with Lewis Carroll and her. That was definitely the sad and disturbing back and subtext to the whole thing.

What did I learn? What happened in there? Who put this thing together and why? That's after the break.

UNDERWRITING

So, let's back up. The building attached to the church turned out to be an old brick schoolhouse. The school looked like it had barely been touched since 1940.

I wasn't allowed to record during the show, so I'm going to describe it. And if you're in New York and plan on seeing it, you might want to skip the next few minutes.

The production design was Victorian or Edwardian, evoking a time when "madness" had a feeling of wild abandonment -- letting go of all repression, consequences be damned.

Actors, dressed as nurses and doctors, lead us into a waiting room and gave us little vials to drink. This was the first of many vials we were asked to drink. Each one was alcoholic and really **tasty. If the plan was to get us tipsy, it worked.**

Music played throughout the whole building – THIS music in fact.

They gave us each a skeleton key – which looked like the logo my podcast. We could touch anything, open anything **EXCEPT the doors.**

We were discouraged from speaking, unless we were asked a question. There wasn't much dialogue anyway. Almost everything was movement.

There were 15 audience members, broken into groups of four. A doctor lead our group downstairs, where Alice was waiting. She showed me objects in her room, when slowly a bearded man in a Victorian suit came down the stairs. I immediately understood this was Lewis Carroll. They performed a dance on the stairwell that was mesmerizing and ambiguous. Was this a seduction? I wasn't sure how she felt about it.

In the next room, Alice discovered another Alice in the mirror -- another actresses dressed as Alice. Their mirror movements were equally mesmerizing and weird.

Our group of four was broken into two -- me and this other guy who was becoming uncomfortable with the intimacy of the show.

The white rabbit appeared but he wasn't dressed as a bunny. He had a rabbit pin, a cane, and a white Victorian suit. He was peeved at how late we were.

He lead us into a closet, which turned out to be the back of a medicine cabinet. We watched through the shelves of pills while the Red Queen danced a mental breakdown in her padded cell. It was weirdly poignant, and one of many times we were voyeurs. And when she noticed us, she was mad and chased us out.

We found ourselves in the largest room so far, with broken teacups piled up the walls and I just gasped. The mad tea party! It did not disappoint. The white queen came out, wearing a herringbone corset dress. Her dance was seductive with fierce eye contact. I have never experienced this much direct eye contact with performers in a show, delivering lines inches from your face.

I loved it but the dude next to me looked really weirded out, so she started calling him the Dormouse.

We were joined by Alice, the Red Queen, the White Rabbit -- and the Mad Hatter, looking exactly as you'd expect from the illustrations, but played a woman. The tea party was a violently passive aggressive dance of cups and saucers. The tea itself was quite tasty.

The White Queen brought me, and the Dormouse, into a small room, where she put us to bed and read a backwards love story.

The Hatter brought us down to her shop, where I had to take insanely fast dictation to Lewis Carroll himself. She was obsessed with him, tacking clippings about him and the real life Alice all over her dresser.

After a few more encounters, I finally met Lewis Carroll himself. At this point, I am an audience of one. I don't know where everyone else is. He led me through his office to a surreal room where the floorboards were ripped off, with water underneath.

He put a note in a bottle saying good-bye to Alice, and placed it in the water. There were a dozen bottles there already. I was reminded the old joke that the definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over again, expecting different results.

Finally, I met with the doctor. He handed me a note. Alice's family has asked Lewis Carroll to stop seeing her, ever again.

*All right so I'm back, a couple weeks later, this place doesn't look as mysterious as it did, fairly typical outer borough neighborhood. (WALKING, GATE, DOORBELL)
Hi.*

Marissa: Hey

I'm Eric.

M: I'm Marissa.

M: Nice to meet you (FADE UNDER)

Tom Pearson and Marissa Nielsen-Pincus are members of the artistic team at Third Rail Projects. They played Alice and the White Rabbit in earlier productions, but not the night that I was there.

T: Carrie Fisher just said something cool when they were launching the new Star Wars series about not going to the character but bringing the character to her, and I feel like that's true of what we do, we bring the character and we bring it to who we are, and that layer of three dimensionality where those two meet defines it, that happened with me and white rabbit, I would never chosen the white rabbit, I don't like rabbits, I'm scared of them, but there was a moment and everyone in agreement was like Tom. And I'm like, it's true, it's so true.

Because he's the guy with the stopwatch trying to get this really complicated show to run on time.

They've done two shows a night for the last four years. The run an open-ended, so long as they keep getting 15 audience members per show.

(FOOSTEPS)

I have to say, seeing the space during the day, was kind of a letdown. I felt the absence of magic.

T: I know I hate showing you in daylight.

But I got to ask questions, like I was really curious about the room in Lewis Carroll's office, where the floorboards were broken away, and there was water underneath.

T: If you remember Alice in Wonderland story, when they first get to Wonderland, she's big, lost, crying her crying, and because she's so big her crying creates pool of tears, we thought about this room being -- we don't talk about this room much so I'm going to be minimal. It's more psychological space, when you're with character and you're in literal moment taking letter, and then you walk through threshold into an interior space that they're experiencing, and this was an effort literalize a metaphoric space.

These are Alice's tears, for me his final scene.

T: Is this where you ended?

It was here then went into doctor handed me the note.

T: That's a nice way to go through.

I was surprised how much of the old schoolhouse they were able to use – from the desks and chairs, which were welded together in impossible structures, to the dissected creatures in glass jars and cases.

T: That's from the school, spiders, frogs, butterflies, pressed leaves.

But this wasn't the first location for the show. They started out in an old hospital. That version of the show had a very different feel, like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

Tom specializes in immersive theater – which he compares to a role-playing video game. The audience is like the player moving through a space. You have agency to pick things up, and examine them, but you're still being guided by characters. Think of it as virtual reality with no headset required.

T: At first we were the antidote to digital experience we've been living in, that's why people were coming they wanted tactile engagement with something real and that's true but also people understand world through digital upbringing, that the show itself teaches you how to deal with the show, there's always in video game that training field where you learn the rules and apply them.

M: The idea of immersive theater, my husband is video game designer.

Really?

M: The way he talks about games is completely the same as we talk about the structure of immersive theater like Sleep No More where you have agency and the world exists and you can move within it, that's one model for a video game.

That show she referenced -- Sleep No More -- is like a much bigger version of this show, but it's a retelling of Macbeth in a giant building in Chelsea, which is a trendy part of Manhattan. Sleep No More is really popular, but personally, I found it confusing.

I liked their show much better because I came out full of questions, but they were poignant questions like "why was Lewis Carroll himself in the show?"

Tom said it all started with an idea that they had been kicking around for a while. They wanted do a show that explored the theme of duality. Then one of them came across a biography of Lewis Carroll.

T: The idea of Lewis Carroll organizing that became an anchor point for the audience like if we could hook them into something they had a cultural framework of and recognized the symbols of we could go into deeper space, when you're in moment of Alice growing you know what that means, painting a rose you know the consequence of that, so you can turn a corner on it and take it to other place because the audience knows where they are.

I had that recognition, oh that's the red queen, that's the white queen.

T: I think behind it all he was literal and metaphor authoring the work, I my mind he's the only one who's whole as a character, he's in the middle and he has conflicting desire, but either side of him is a reflection, so you have the two Alice's, and a red queen and white queen at the other end who are ultimate results of that warring agenda, and the

rabbit and hatter in our world reflect each other, and so there's sense of duality he was anchor in middle of that for us.

So you started with LC and his feelings about Alice, relationship, obsession to her and everything else, you many character, cat, caterpillar, you didn't have to have two Alice, how you ended up this cast of characters?

T: The two texts drove those decisions, there's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Looking Glass and they both happened on either side of whatever this real life event was that caused the Liddell family to sever relationship with Charles Dodgson, who is Lewis Carroll, you know his identity has duality to it, but two books are very much one is written as a love song to this child of wondrous things or nonsensical things in adult world, following the logic of chance, and card games and on the other side you have a young woman on her way to being a queen who follows a certain steps as advised by queen, on this logical chess strategy pathway, that was written after the event, there was just a lot of intrigued and that offered frame work of the ideas of duality in the work.

Lewis Carroll had lots of "child friends" as he called them, but he was most fond of Alice Liddell. He wrote the books for her.

In the summer of 1863, Carroll took 11-year old Alice on a boating trip, and shortly afterward, her mother forbade him from seeing her or her sisters again. He did reestablish polite relations with the family, but he wasn't allowed to play alone with the children. What caused that rift has been the subject of scholarship and debate for decades.

Carroll's defenders say it was a misunderstanding. There were rumors he was using Alice and her siblings to court their governess. But there was also a rumor that he asked Alice to marry him. The age of consent at that time was 12.

Others point out that he took nude and semi-nude pictures of children – which was somewhat acceptable at the time. There were cherubic photos of nude children all over Victorian culture. But the Liddell sisters were not young girls. The pages from his diary are missing during this time – which is strange because Lewis Carroll took meticulous notes.

But as an older woman, Alice embraced her literary fame and traveled the world promoting the book. So she's a bit of a mystery too.

M: I think in our interest in this rupture between Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell staying in that ambiguity and not answer that question.

T: On some very basic level it's a love story and whether its on the innocent spectrum or not is up to interpretation but it was definitely a moment of real rupture and loss for the people involved and so maybe the evidence is in the work itself, and so that's where we're looking.

The characters are caught in that ambiguity. The Hatter is obsessed with it.

T: Hatter is never called the Mad Hatter in text, and that's subtlety we picked up on, the madness is projected by reader, and there was a tradition of Hatters going mad because used mercury in hat making, there were little things we pulled out and attributed hatter's madness to existential crisis with her authors and God and if you're created by someone for amusement of this girl, do you really exist? You know she's making connections between written text and the images and the real man and the author and when FBI trying to find serial killer and bring that all together.

The ending made so much more sense to me now, where Carroll puts a good-bye note to Alice in the water.

But my experience was a fluke. Everyone in the show sees it in a different order. Everyone is being told a different story, depending on where you start.

T: It affects your sympathies see Red Queen breaking down at the beginning she's humanized for you early on and seeing things through her eyes don't realize other side later, where as if you see her engagement with white rabbit early and you don't get her until later on she's the devil for a while, and when it hits you at the end she's working through problem, and you see the other side of it, it hits you in different way, tat's true with all the characters, you get to know them and sympathize with them early on or see them open up over the course of the show.

The transitions are brutally hard. The timing of shuffling all these audience members through the building comes down to mathematics, which is appropriate, since Carroll was a mathematician and there were math jokes throughout the books.

But beyond all that, I was most interested in talking with them about the intimacy of it, what it's like playing to an audience of one or two people.

M: I think the eye contact in the show is so powerful like as a performer it feels powerful that connection with another person is really satisfying but we definitely modulate within the show if there's someone you can feel it's too much for them, you find ways to give them more space.

T: And there's something about meeting the audience wherever they are and people when they come into the space can be processing the work and it's not always clear are they enjoying it? Are they uncomfortable? So you learn to look for really subtle cues how to honor their choices and say yes to what they're saying yes to and bring it into the spaces it needs to go to make the narrative work.

M: Like we even talk about the audience as your scene partner like as if they're another performer in that way, not that they're in a performing way, but the way we meet another performer in a duet, it requires that same kind of attention.

T: A lot of that is about presence and being in the same space together. It almost goes back to really clear social behavior that we all know but sometimes in performance it gets so heightened you forget to listen and in this type of work you have to listen don't make eye contact if you don't want to engage someone. Simple things, like subway rules.

Subway rules – exactly!

That must be intense for the actors.

T: You know, when you're acclimating to a work and figuring out how to do two shows a night as someone who's jumping on table, throwing things around room, and flipping over things, that's one level of physical stamina you develop, but also, it's not heavily psychological but there's an alert mental stamina that you have to develop to be fully present with every audience member time after time, after time, and that was a new practice we got to develop along the way.

M: I think it's so much fun.

Yeah?

M: Yeah. The Alice's have scenes where you're having a really intimate conversation with the audience, and they're sharing very personal things with you. I just never got tired of having those conversations.

On one hand, this trend of immersive theater goes really well with the technology we consume. We're used to going into interactive virtual spaces and clicking things to open them up.

On the other hand, technology has made us terrible audience members. I get so mad when I go to theater or symphony and seeing the flash of someone's phone light up in the middle of a performance, or they talk to the person they came with like they're watching Netflix at home. I keep reading articles about actors or conductors that stop in the middle of a performance and scolding an audience member.

That's called breaking the Fourth Wall – which is the invisible wall that we watch the characters through. These days, people come to shows thinking that fourth wall wraps around them and makes them invisible.

My only criticism of “Then She Fell,” would be that I wasn't sure who we were supposed to be in this show. Are we visitors to the hospital? Are we patients? Sometimes I wondered if I was supposed to be Hayley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense*, like the characters were ghosts who had a story they had to tell me.

I know that wasn't an oversight. They creators of the show made a very conscious choice to keep our relationship with the characters ambiguous, and let us decide. It worked. It has made me wonder, who are we, if we're not sitting in a seat? What kind of audience have we become?

I think the show re-establish us as listeners. And I've never listened so actively, so intimately -- I listened down to my bones. And afterward, all I could think was – more, please.

Well, that's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to the staff at Third Rail Projects including Marissa Nielsen-Pincus and Tom Pearson, who says just because the audience is supposed to stay quiet and do as they're told, that doesn't always happen. This is New York after all.

T: My favorite moment is not my own but one that Lizzie experience where she had elderly couple in hat shop, one of them is assistant taking dictation to Lewis Carroll she's blazing through at light speed.

Yes, I remember.

T: It's a feudal endeavor, the man was struggling with it and the lady took over the scene and gave Lizzie the pen and paper and said I'm going to tell you what to tell Mr. Carroll, this nonsense has to stop!

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.