



**DARK LADY IN 'WONDERLAND':** Kate Shindle (center) as the Mad Hatter & the ensemble in *Wonderland*. Photo: Michal Daniel

## *Theater Review*

# Mind-numbing malice in *Wonderland*



### **WONDERLAND**

**Book by Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy**

**Lyrics by Jack Murphy**

**Music by Frank Wildhorn**

**Choreography by Marguerite Derricks**

**Directed by Gregory Boyd.**

**Marquis Theatre**

**1535 Broadway at 46th Street**

**(877-250-2929), [www.wonderlandonbroadway.com](http://www.wonderlandonbroadway.com)**

**By Scott Harrah**

Have your kids been behaving badly? Punish them by taking them to this mind-numbing mess of a Broadway musical. The White Rabbit has laid one big, stinking rotten egg of a show just in time for Easter, loosely based on Lewis Carroll's classic children's book, *Alice in Wonderland*. It is a shame indeed because so much could be done to make an imaginative, innovative musical adaptation of this timeless kid's story, but book writers Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy and Broadway veteran composer Frank Wildhorn (of *Jekyll & Hyde* fame) fail on so many levels. The result is an excruciatingly painful, cringe-inducing show that makes one's jaw drop in stultifying amazement by how ill conceived the story is from beginning to end.

We know we are in trouble in the show's opener when grown-up Alice (Janet Dacal, last seen on Broadway's *In The Heights*) appears on stage sporting dark leggings, a smock top with 1980s-style cinch belt and boots, and a frizzy hairstyle that makes her resemble pop-rocker Pat Benatar in her MTV heyday. There is no doubt that Ms. Dacal is a gifted actor and great singer, but the material she is given with here wastes her talents. The same holds true for her daughter Chloe (the winsome Carly Rose Sonnenclar), who has one of the best singing voices of anyone in the show.

*Wonderland* shamelessly rips off the film version of *The Wiz* by setting the story not in England but New York City; Queens, to be exact. It is as if book writers Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy tossed in every cliché about urban America to make it "hip" for modern audiences, in a lame attempt to be multicultural. The Cheshire Cat is revamped as El Gato (the often amusing Jose Llana), a Latino hipster who refers to himself as "Che" and rides around in a pimped-out car that is not going to win any points for breaking Nuyorican stereotypes. The Caterpillar (E. Clayton Cornelious) is an African-American who croons such songs as "Advice from a Caterpillar." Amongst all these silly attempts at "urban" humor are several half-baked endeavors to put the show in a 21st century context, with references to the "Tea Party," but any divisive, dim-witted speech from a certain former female Republican VP presidential candidate from Alaska would be far more exciting and entertaining.

Much of the rest of the show falls flat, especially Darren Ritchie's squeaky-clean Jack the White Knight, who performs absurd boy-band production numbers such as "One Knight." The choreography by Marguerite Derricks is, alas, pedestrian at best.

Only two actresses truly stand out here: The wonderful, seasoned musical-comedy veteran Karen Mason as The Queen of Hearts (best known for her roles in *Hairspray* and *Mamma Mia!*). Ms. Mason has fluid comic timing, a soaring voice, and some of the show's best costumes (courtesy of Susan Hilferty) and lavish production numbers, including "Off With Their Heads."

Finally, Kate Shindle, a former Miss America who delighted Broadway audiences in *Legally Blonde*, *Cabaret* and Frank Wildhorn's own *Jekyll & Hyde*, commands the stage whenever she appears as the female Mad Hatter, decked out in dominatrix-style outfits and belts out such songs as "The Mad Hatter" and "I Will Prevail" with malevolent aplomb. Ms. Shindle is a fine singer, and although she lacks the multi-octave vocal range of Ms. Mason, she is still a rare delight in nearly every scene, with a menacing presence and a quick-witted delivery of dialogue.

The book by Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy is literally all over the place, but goes absolutely nowhere, and one wonders what could have been done if someone other than Mr. Boyd had directed this atrocity and tweaked the narrative into something more palatable and meaningful. As is, there's very little "wonder" in the myriad glaring flaws of *Wonderland*, and the result is an amateurish evening that defies logic and bastardizes one of the most ingenious children's stories in the English language.

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