

Theater



Edited by
Kris Vire
theater@timeoutchicago.com

STATE OF PLAY
Curious Theatre Branch
gets ready.

The artist is in

Jenny Magnus's year of conversations with MCA patrons helped form her new work there. By **Kris Vire**

"I'm actually at the beach with the kids," Jenny Magnus says when she calls on a recent Friday afternoon. "It's our one day off from the museum. So you'll hear the birds in the background."

Magnus, the cofounder of avant-garde stalwarts Curious Theatre Branch, has been spending a lot of time at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Her new work, *Still in Play*, which debuts this week at the MCA Stage, is the culmination of her yearlong residency at the museum. And *residency* is a word Magnus took seriously.

"I thought it was very interesting, if I'm going to be in residence for a year, to find really innovative ways to actually reside," Magnus, 50, says. To that end, she established *Office Hours*, setting up a booth in the museum's galleries where she made herself available for conversation with museum visitors for an hour a day, four days a week, over multiple periods of the year. "You can picture the booth from Lucy in *Peanuts*," Magnus says. "The doctor is in." That was the reference I was working with."

Magnus says the conversations she had with patrons were often remarkably personal. "I wasn't predatory; I didn't demand that people sit, but I was available was the word that was really important to me," she says. "Among the most interesting were the people who just said, 'What are you doing? What is this?' And we'd have these intensely personal, very real, not social kinds of conversations. Very depthful about philosophy and art-making and people's place in the world, and age, and what it's like to deal with one's children."

Those conversations informed Magnus's work on *Still in Play*. Subtitled *A Performance of Getting Ready*, the play endeavors to convey the energy backstage prior to a performance. "The people backstage are kind of anxiously preparing and leaning in toward the curtain—Will they like it? Is it going to go okay?" Magnus says. "And the people in the audience are also leaning toward the

curtain, going, Am I gonna like this? Will it work? Am I sorry I came? Do I wish I was at dinner instead? I was thinking of them as two halves leaning toward this boundary of the curtain."

Magnus says her first conception involved two people having a conversation behind the curtain just before it goes up, but when the MCA asked her to create a new work, she decided to expand it. "I thought, Maybe I'll try to do something I've never done before, which is make a really enormous show," Magnus says. "I was also thinking of that stage, which is quite large, and Curious is pretty chamber. We do small and intimate; we're not stilt-walkers, we don't breathe fire."

"You can picture the booth from Lucy in *Peanuts*."

Part of her goal in the residency, Magnus says, was to embrace uncertainty. "My work is normally very formal, very control-tripish. I've got my grip on it like a vise," she says of her often highly structured plays, driven by precise language. "I really embraced not

knowing everything about [*Still in Play*] conceptually, not knowing what it was going to turn out to be. That was very psychically painful, actually, but tremendously liberating. I do feel like my work will be different from here on out."

Still in Play runs Thursday 15–Saturday 17 at the MCA Stage. See *Fringe* & storefront.

Alice's Adventures Under Ground



City Lit Theater (see Resident companies). By Christopher Hampton. Music by Richard Peaslee. Dir. Terry McCabe. With Emily Garman, Nick Lake. 1hr 20mins; no intermission.

Lewis Carroll's brilliant and ambiguous legacy drives Hampton's play, here in its Chicago premiere. This 1994 work sustains 80 minutes of antic charm with condensed scenes from the two *Alice in Wonderland* books, music beautifully sung by the ensemble and choreography that channels the books' thrilling anarchy. The young Emily Garman, in her stage debut, stands Tenniel-straight and sasses the absurd adults in her midst with brio; her Alice is satisfyingly petulant by play's end.

Hampton, the British playwright perhaps best known for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and the English translations of Yasmina Reza's plays, distinguishes his *Alice* with the very adult addition of Carroll, a.k.a. Charles Dodgson: As the mathematician spins tales for his child visitor in 1860, scenes from the book take over the room. Dodgson's either odd or not-odd preference for the company of children is further addressed via passages from the writer's correspondence and a brief but ethically confounding scene with no high jinks at all: the big-hearted clown Dodgson turned a defensive, tightly prim supplicant to the parents of children he wants to photograph in the buff.

Dodgson has a noble representative in the molasses-voiced Nick Lake, whose role as master of ceremonies of this drawing-room farce is enhanced by ingenious magic from set designer Ray Blackburn. Broad-comedy broads and baggy-pants comedians Morgan McCabe, Edward Kuffert and Lee Wichman—as the Duchess, Mad Hatter, March Hare and numerous others—delight with slapstick and droll pun delivery, despite only occasional accent slips and overly knowing winks.—*Emily Gordon*



WONDERS NEVER CEASE Lake and Garman go underground.

Theater