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# Madness at Tea in the Brumder

By Russ Bickerstaff



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The Dodo greets you at the door to the mansion. He's played by Tom Marks. It's a congenial atmosphere. There are pre-show refreshments. There is tea. (This *is* a tea party after all.) The Hatter shows up not too long afterwards. He's been played by many over the years since *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* first popped into the popular dreamscape. At the Brumder this month he's played Evan James Koepnick. If there's something a bit off about his characterization of the classic character, it just might be that the Hatter himself isn't feeling...quite himself.

One has an opportunity to interact with the hatter and the rest of the characters before the show begins. The show is called **Hatter Madness**. It's been written and directed by Amanda J. Hull. The Hatter is the center of the show's plot. Audience and various characters from the book arrive to try to figure out what might be wrong with the Hatter, who is behaving quite a bit...madder than usual.

The cast of characters is quite colorful. Amanda Eaton Sinko is sharply narcoleptic and nerve-janglingly nervous in the role of "Dory" the dormouse. It's a pleasant imbalance that adds to the experience. She and Hatter are largely present throughout the lead-in to the show. My big disappointment was that I didn't take full advantage of the opportunity to interact with them. They're there at show's opening to help bring-in the feeling of the madness of wonderland--a service they would be quite excellent at providing. They're solidly talented actors. If they aren't allowed to bring-in the madness the pre-show minutes feel a bit like a waiting room with light snacks. Here's hoping that they get the opportunity to set the mood a bit better over the course of the run of the show. Their ability to do this relies rather heavily on the audience's interaction with them.

Corey Jefferson Hagen is quite charming as the White Rabbit. He's so often depicted (by Lewis Carroll himself) as someone rushing about in a hurry. *Everyone* is in a hurry at some point in their lives I suppose. Nice to see him in a more casual posture here. His interaction throughout the story is kind of heroic. Hagen plays the Rabbit as a concerned party who is interested in aiding an old friend in getting his wits about him.

Megan Kaminsky is resplendently delightful as Alice. The central character of a couple of books and the subject of a great deal of concern, Alice takes a very prominent role in Hull's script here as well. It would be a daunting task for anyone to pick-up the role. Kaminsky handles the challenge of making herself Alice quite well. Kaminsky has a remarkably warm presence onstage that does considerable justice to Alice. Evidently she's been whisked away from her home on the day of her wedding to a man she quite loves. She's been summoned to the mansion in order to aid in a courtroom-style attempt to diagnose what might be wrong with the Hatter.

Presiding over the investigation is Michael Keiley as the King of Spades. (He took over things when the Queen of Hearts lost her head.) Keiley is suitably authoritative in the role. He is handed the task of navigating through some of the script's denser text. He does so quite well. It would have been nice to see him given more of an opportunity to explore the character of the King, but the story isn't about him. It's about a mystery. It's a mystery that gets really, really complicated. It's a mystery that deals with other-dimensional portals and magic and things of that nature. It's interesting stuff to follow, but it all goes by so fast that it ends up feeling like background chatter. This is a strange state of affairs as the background chatter truly is the center of the plot.

Actually, the plot of *Hatter Madness* might prefer to be left alone while the rest of the play is going on around it. The characters themselves are much more engaging than what they're doing. At its best, *Hatter Madness* is a fun synthesis between sharp dialogue, endearing acting and lifelong readers' familiarity and love with and for the characters. We're left watching talented actors being interesting people while talking about things that we don't completely understand. So as an audience, we're a bit like Alice at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party in Lewis Carroll's original book. It's pleasantly confusing.

And I don't think that I'd mentioned that Michelle Paura plays the severed head of the Queen. I don't think that I'd mentioned that. *That* was a bit weird. *She's good* as a severed head, though...it's a fun performance.)

And as long as I'm handing out spoilers...the Hatter's madness stems from a duplicity/multiplicity in his head. (To explain it in more specific terms in this review would be mildly criminal.) The issue I have with this is that Koepnick doesn't or won't or hasn't been allowed to or hasn't had the opportunity to render more of a definition between the forces at war within the hatter's mind. It all comes across as manic and unpredictable craziness. Nothing we wouldn't necessarily expect from the Mad Hatter. It's a fun performance, but it would be a bit more engaging with a bit more definition between the forces at work in his madness. Render this in *too* much detail and it becomes all too obvious what's going on from the start. The challenge would be to give the different forces more definition without making it too obvious what's going on and robbing the overall production of a degree of subtlety.

Milwaukee Entertainment Group's **Hatter Madness** runs through Mar. 1 at the Brumder Mansion on 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For ticket reservations, visit [milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com](http://milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com).

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