

## All About Alice Rebecca Brodney, Staff Writer



illustration by John Tenniel

Every four years the public enjoys such monumental events as the Olympics, the World Cup and presidential elections. At Meredith College, a performance of Alice in Wonderland is the special quadrennial occurrence that brings the most excitement. On the nights of January 20th and 21st of 2012, the Meredith community found a new favorite rendition of one their most beloved childhood stories.

Alice in Wonderland was performed for the first time at Meredith College on March 15, 1924. According to Meredith legend, the first performance came in the wake of an epidemic that left the students, faculty and staff quarantined on campus. To improve the morale of their students, the professors decided to hold a production of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Dr. Jean Jackson, a member of the class of 1975 and director of all Alice productions since 1992, says that she has asked alumnae who attended Alice for the first time in 1924 about the rumor of an epidemic and subsequent quarantine, but none can recall such events. What is known for certain is that Alice was the idea of Gertrude Royster Sorrell, who was director of physical education at the time.

A great deal of work goes into each Alice production that requires months of preparation. Beginning in the fall of an Alice year, Dr. Jackson must oversee the casting, costume and make up, technical aspects, sets and invitations to alumnae. Fortunately, she is not alone in managing all of these elements of Alice. Others are in charge of every one of the varying tasks, as it is "very much a production of the whole community." By far the most interesting part of Dr. Jackson's job as director is casting the roles for the beloved Alice characters. According to Dr. Robin Colby, Meredith alum and professor of English, Dr. Jackson sends an e-mail to the faculty inviting them to participate in Alice. From there, those who are interested identify which role they prefer. The fate of their Meredith College acting careers rests in Dr. Jackson's hands. Admittedly, she does consult with the faculty in her decision-making. It is not strange to ask an interested faculty members if they have any qualms about roller-skating across a stage. But once they're in Alice, most of the time the faculty members remain in the same role until they retire.

While the script is the same with

each production, as time goes on, actors have been permitted to take more creative liberties. When Dr. Jackson first saw Alice as a freshman in 1973, she felt that it was a very "straight" performance, much like what the students would have seen in 1924. According to Dr. Colby, the Alice in Wonderland of today is a very different production each night. Dr. Colby further explains that the variations in performances make it fun and challenging for all.

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Some of the contemporary touches of this year's production included the opening scene, in which Dr. Jackson made references to celebrities like Lady Gaga and Beyonce. And keeping up with technology, Alice took pictures of Wonderland with her phone. While the play certainly reflects the trends of our time, the audience will surely recognize trademark quotes such as "Off with her head!" or "You're just a pack of cards!" And of course, no Alice production would ever be complete without the famous tea party scene.

The rehearsal schedule was grueling for the faculty, who during the week of the production practiced a minimum of two hours nightly while still working on campus. It seemed to be worth it, though, especially when Dr. Colby explains that it is "the closest we have ever come to being Disney characters." The Meredith teaching community grows very close during this process,

making it all the more sentimental when retirees participate in their final Alice. This year's Alice saw the loss of two well-loved members of the production, Dr. Becky Bailey and Dr. Jack Huber. Dr. Bailey has made and designed all costumes worn in this past production, and Dr. Huber has been performing in Alice for about 40 years. Both Dr. Bailey and Dr. Huber's admirable dedication to Alice will be missed.

When Dr. Colby and Dr. Jackson were asked about which Alice character was their favorite, they both struggled to choose just one. However, Dr. Jackson observes that it is always interesting to see how each actor makes the performance his or her own. She hopes that students will leave this very special tradition knowing "it is possible to see it simply as a children's story or narrative. All of us could use the lessons with facing adversity, fears, and making much of ourselves regardless of circumstance."

In looking forward to the next production of Alice in 2016, President Jo Allen explains that Meredith College is a Wonderland and each student herself is Alice: "it [Meredith] is a place of wonder and a place of fear. There are times of great confusion and times when friends and mentors step in to offer clarity . . . the circumstances and serendipity of our lives challenge us constantly to find balances between logic and imagination and discipline and reality and whimsy . . . 'oh my,' as Alice would say." In the face of daunting challenges that students face as they continue to grow, Dr. Allen reminds us "Meredith offers a 'safe haven' to test our dreams, cultivate friends, and mentors who will help with interpretations and recalibrations when we make missteps, and help us find balance between all the competing notions and opportunities and risks we face . . . life is, indeed, a Wonderland."

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