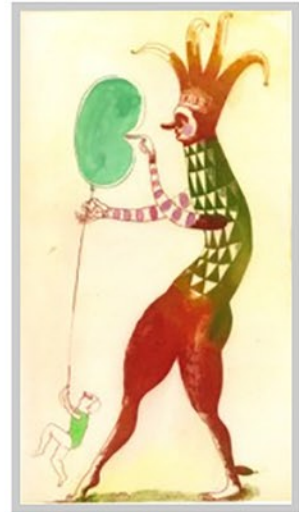


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2008.06.10

is the white rabbit the traveler's father?!

For nine wonderful summers now, the vastly underrated **Axis Company** has sent one person into a violent, terminal coma. Figuratively speaking, of course (although that would be quite the body art event, indeed!).

Much like the birds migrating southward, the Northern Lights, and Burning Man, the annual production of *Hospital* is one of the few reasons to stay in New York for the summer. Despite the morbid premise, this serial performance piece (in four parts over eight weeks) is part soap opera, part Beckettian wasteland (which I wrote about in a previous life of my own [here](#)). It is surprisingly bizarre, heartbreaking, and hysterical.



This year's installment revolves around three "sandhogs," that is, workers for the new water tunnel being built underneath New York City. (Begun in 1970, the project is slated to be complete by 2020.) These three spend their days digging, but today they are caught in a

disastrous collapse, and the action takes place, supposedly, in the consciousness of one of them. Broken into its typical three-strain format, we are plunged into the world of the workers attempting to find their way "out," the wonderful antics of three doctors and a nurse, and a run-in with some characters from *Alice in Wonderland*. Naturally.

Every year, I pray for the return of **Laurie Kilmartin** as the Nurse, and lo!, she has returned, in all her schizophrenic, pencil-loving assistant-ness. And this year, giving her a run for her money, is **Edgar Oliver** as the Mad Hatter. Heebie-jeebies ensue.

What's remarkable about this series is that each episode stands on its own as a solid performance piece. While each one has the same characters and premise, you don't have to tune into to find out who shot J.R., or watch a bunch of lame episodes to get to the Emmy-worthy ones. If anything, *Hospital* delights in its complete lack of resolution; where exactly is the traveler? Is he even in a hospital? How can the lunacy of the medical staff featured nearly every season go on without him? Will he emerge from a coma? This simple performance is striking in its potentially devastating allegory of an existential existence. Of course the choice of a hospital is the perfect locale, although the doctors also believe they run a "hotel," which is a close second, perhaps an airport or shopping mall being third. All of these have in common **Marc Augé's** citations as "non-places": uniform, in-between, foreign-yet-comfortable. Waiting places. This concept is beautifully reinforced by **Kyle Chepulis's** set design, which is a tunnel of dirt and pipes, wearing away to reveal sterile, white tiles.

It's important to note here that, while the *Hospital* series is typically welcoming to all audiences, I'd have to make the geeky analogy that *Hospital 2008* is the *Empire Strikes Back* of the series; it's much darker, much more introverted and subtle than previous incarnations. And while it may be just as brilliant, it's certainly not as easy to dive into as in past years. This is no more apparent than in the Alice section, in which the **White Rabbit**, the **Mad Hatter**, and the **Queen of Hearts** are played not as in the manic Disney film, but rather as listless, confused, and just as lost as the travelers themselves (they are projections of the subconscious ego, after all). And while these projections are made a bit too obvious by the opening film, which shows the audience how we got here, such as the cute girl becoming the Queen of Hearts (even drawing the card from the deck before a game), and the NYC water tunnel-Alice through the rabbit hole connection, I will definitely be returning to Axis to see what doesn't happen next.

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