

Waaaaay Off Broadway

A bizarre bunch of original productions lead New York's most adventurous theater-goers to the oddest places—from an abandoned hospital to an old graveyard. A bonus for unshy sorts: You'll be part of the show

By TONY PERROTTET

Sure you've got the right address?" the cab driver asked dubiously as we pulled up to a gloomy building on a back street in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood. I shared his skepticism. It was indeed my destination—Kingsland Ward at St John, a century-old hospital—but it looked entirely abandoned. When the unmarked door creaked open, however, a woman dressed as a nurse checked my name off her list and ushered me inside. For the next two hours, 14 fellow "inmates" and I were led through 22 decorated rooms, the sprawling stage of "Then She Fell," a dreamlike theatrical piece inspired by "Alice in Wonderland." We jumped between seats at a Mad Hatter's tea party and watched acrobatic couples climb the walls together. At one point, I lay on a cot alongside the White Queen as she told me a bedtime story, while I tried not to look painfully self-conscious.

Call it the "Sleep No More" effect. Since 2011, when the creative reworking of "Macbeth" opened in the McKittrick Hotel in Chelsea to huge acclaim and financial success, New York has thrown itself into immersive theater with gusto. The city now offers dozens[ck] of live events that abandon traditional theater settings and grab audiences by engaging all the senses. Some ladle out gourmet food or craft cocktails, others waft fragrances or host interactive magic shows or poetry readings. All cater to an untraditional desire to become part of the action. "Audiences today would rather have their own experience than sit and watch one passively from a seat," said Arthur Karpati, producer of "Sleep No More."

These site-specific events offer travelers a bonus benefit—an opportunity to visit restricted or forgotten corners of New York, from Gilded Age mansions to historic graveyards or (as with "Then She Fell") ghostly hospital wards that leave cab drivers concerned for your safety. I've lived in Manhattan for over 20 years, but I recently decided to see what other secret portals the latest immersive shows might open. I would have to be discerning: The bewildering variety of options ranges from the genuinely moving to the comic and downright hokey. "Whenever I hear the word 'immersive,' I roll my eyes," said DeeDee Luxe, an actress and producer at Manhattan venues including the McKittrick Hotel. People bandy the buzzword about so freely in the theater world now,



IMMERSION DIVERSION Clockwise from top: An actor at 'Then She Fell,' a sprawling theatrical piece inspired by 'Alice in Wonderland,,'; 'Carmen: To Havana and Back,' performed in a basement bar; 'Nightfall,' at Greenwood Cemetery.

she said, that it risks losing its meaning.

Some venues are hidden in plain sight. On night, to experience the less-than-reverent "Drunk Shakespeare," I climbed an anonymous stairwell in Times Square and stumbled into a large room furnished like an antique library, save for the bar set up in back. Each performance features a different play. The night I was there both the audience and the performers imbibed liberally, an ac-

trix knocking back shots while channeling Lady Macbeth and presenting a hilarious, fractured—and by the end of the night—slurred slice of "the Scottish play."

A few nights later, I was transported to 1950s Cuba, reimagined at the Public Hotel on the Lower East Side for the musical drama "Carmen: To Havana and Back." The hotel's very new basement had been converted into the Tropicana nightclub, where I ended up dancing with

actors on the bar.

Often, the experience relied on its New York location. Last fall, I ventured to Brooklyn's 478-acre Greenwood Cemetery for "Nightfall," an annual event. It was uniquely spooky to wander the candle-lit grounds after dark, slipping at will between the tombstones to encounter circus acts, storytellers and even a classical concert in the catacombs.

Other immersive shows distinguish themselves with a decidedly

high-tech edge. At the "hands-on" Spyscape, in Times Square, for example, visitors can dodge green lasers "Mission: Impossible"-style, break spy codes and practice their lying skills. Clearly, technology is the way of things to come. Recent advances in VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality) and AI (Artificial Intelligence) offer new possibilities in immersive theater. To get a sense of it, I hopped a ferry at Battery Park one crystalline morning to visit the Future of StoryTelling Summit (FoST), an annual, experimental-theater festival that incorporates the latest gadgetry into its performances, many happening simultaneously. It was held at a New York attraction I'd never heard of, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Gardens in Staten Is-

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land, a complex that began life as a 19th-century home for retired sailors and is now run by the National Park Service. As I wandered through it, I stopped to take a VR tour of an Amazon tributary, then later, exploring the site's gardens, I found myself sipping a cocktail with an actress in Edwardian dress who was channeling Mrs. Dalloway, the heroine of the eponymous Virginia Woolf novel.

The most memorable moments blended the traditional and futuristic. I wandered into a tent for "The Annabelle Lee Experience," a reference to Edgar Allen Poe's last poem about a doomed young woman, to find a mysterious, elfen grotto of babbling fountains, ancient herbs and dangling crystals. Creator Ava Lee Scott put me through a "cleansing ritual," with incense and melodies wafting around me; I then put on a headset to meet an avatar for a virtual tarot reading. "Nothing will ever replace live theater," Ms. Lee said later, when she had stepped out of character. "But technology is providing the tools to go further into the intimate experience."

Charles Melcher, FoST's director, sums up the appeal of immersive theater another way: "To explore beautiful sets and see stories unfold and choose how to navigate them—it brings all your senses alive. And that doesn't get old."

► For details on a few immersive theater shows currently on offer in New York City, see wsj.com/travel

The Next Frontier

Tourism is on the rise in Greenland, but that doesn't mean it's easy to visit



THE WORLD'S LARGEST island and recently the subject of a much publicized real estate proposal, Greenland gets less than a tenth of the visitors that neighbor Iceland does, despite being home to an even wilder environment, a wider variety of wildlife, and arguably more dramatic scenery. From polar bears to Viking settlements, northern lights

and icebergs, Greenland is well worth the effort, but it does require some extra logistics. Here are five things to know before you go:

1. There are no roads between towns. With a population of less than 60,000 and a harsh climate, Greenland doesn't have much use for roads. You'll find some (paved and not) within

towns, but not connecting them. So visiting even neighboring settlements will require travel by foot, water, or air.

2. Speaking of air travel, expect to stop in either Iceland or Denmark first: Speaking of air travel, expect to stop in either Iceland or Denmark first: These are the only two countries offering direct

flights to Greenland (which can still be hard to come by). Even coming from nearby Canada and other Scandinavian countries will require a layover. Also many towns have short runways that can only accommodate smaller planes, meaning flights may take slightly longer due to aircraft limitations: A flight from Icelandic capital Reykjavik to Nuuk, Greenland's largest city, is nearly three and a half hours, longer than a flight to London.

3. Be flexible. Weather, even during the summer, can change quickly, an issue that climate change is exacerbating. This means a guided tour or a flight can be cancelled with little notice. And while this summer brought near-record ice melt and temperatures, leaving the majority of the Greenland ice sheet exposed to above-freezing conditions, be prepared for winter conditions any time of year. The average high in Nuuk in July, the hottest month, hovers below 50 degrees, while falling to less than 24 degrees in February.

4. Don't discount a DIY trip. Don't discount a DIY trip as opposed to an organized tour. With Greenland's huge size and paucity of infrastructure, a group trip may be easiest for first-time travelers. Yet it's not the only option. You can easily book your own flights and accom-