

From Brooklyn Warehouse to '70s Tropical Resort

Piña coladas, tiki huts and five tons of sand set the stage for Third Rail Projects' 'The Grand Paradise'



A beaded curtain is part of the set for 'The Grand Paradise,' which has a '70s resort vibe.

By **DARRYN KING**

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Mounds of snow may still be hulking on many New York streets, but inside one Bushwick warehouse, there are more than a few signs of a swinging tropical Shangri-La.

It isn't a hallucination. Opening this weekend, "The Grand Paradise" is the latest work from Third Rail Projects, a dance-theater company whose work breaks down barriers between audiences and the action, as in their long-running production "Then She Fell."

In these 360-degree theater experiences—where audience members inhabit and explore the same space as the performers—the transporting powers of set dressing and design play an especially important role.

"Any fault in authenticity, whether in the paint treatments or décor, could take the audience out of the experience," said set designer Elisabeth Svenningsen. "The deeper you look, the more you discover other layers and details."

In “Then She Fell,” visitors found themselves in a sinister psychiatric ward overrun with the characters from “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and decorated with somewhat seedy Victorian accouterments. This new production whisks its guests to a fantasy-island-like environment of tiki huts and massage rooms where they can meet and mingle with lifeguards, cabana boys and mermaid performers.

This time around, the mood is permeated more by piña coladas and suntan lotion than opium.

But the experience isn’t just a fun-in-the-sun reverie. Over two hours, “The Grand Paradise” inspires a loose meditation on forbidden desires and the passage of time. Its interwoven narrative threads draw inspiration as much from the ancient myths of Midas and Venus as by the real-life entanglements between the band members of Fleetwood Mac.

To a shifting soundtrack of breezy Polynesian Muzak, disco and the Bee Gees, up to 60 audience members wander through a variety of scenes, occasionally being coaxed into the action, from conga lines to intimate bedroom encounters.

In Ms. Svenningsen’s set, visitors will pass through both familiar-seeming spaces and eerie dreamscape locales, as when a hidden doorway in a beach cabin leads to a cavern under the dunes.

They are also encouraged to snoop around the set, which is rife with authentic ephemera from the late ’70s and early ’80s—sourced largely from yard sales and thrift stores—including stacks of vinyl, an Atari videogame system, a 1977 “Star Wars” fan magazine and vintage pornography.

“The Grand Paradise” also boasts an indoor beach with five tons of sand. Evidence of Third Rail’s literally granular attention to design detail: It isn’t just any sand.

“You want it to not stick to performers’ bodies, to not be too dusty, to not give anyone sinus infections,” said Zach Morris, one of Third Rail’s three co-artistic directors, who are involved with the production at every level, including design. “Volleyball sand is apparently the answer.”

A few months ago, the warehouse, now locatable as “The Grand Paradise” on Google Maps, was immersive theater’s equivalent of a blank canvas, said Mr. Morris: an empty steel and concrete box.

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—Zach Morris, one of Third Rail’s three co-artistic directors

It took around 75 people—carpenters, scenic painters, set dressers and designers of all stripes—to transform the disused space into a performance venue, including the installation of air conditioning and fire sprinklers.

“As a company, this is our first opportunity to quite literally build everything from the ground up,” Mr. Morris said. “We’ve not only been building a show, but building a venue.”

Since Third Rail began creating site-specific and site-adaptive work in 2006, their productions have been inextricably tied to the spaces in which they are performed. With “Then She Fell,” the creative team remapped the show’s narrative to the topography of each of its venues, from an abandoned Greenpoint hospital to its current home in a former school.

This time, because the show and the space have evolved together, Mr. Morris, his co-artistic directors Tom Pearson and Jennine Willett and the rest of the creative team have been able to fine-tune every aspect of the experience. That ranges from practical concerns such as sight lines and audience flow to the audience-performer interactions themselves, including a potentially steamy one-on-one session with a lifeguard.

“The protagonist is truly the audience,” said Mr. Morris. “It’s more about the audience’s journey through these scenes than a single character’s journey. So every scene and environment is engineered designed with their experience in mind.”



