

## Play about Rockford deacon who had performed in drag portrays LGBT struggles

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By [Georgette Braun](#)

Staff writer

The girl who was supposed to play Alice in "Alice in Blunderland" got tonsillitis and couldn't perform.

So the teacher at the Garden Prairie grade school where Bill Carlson was a third-grader in the 1940s rewrote the role so Carlson would be the lead.

He'd play Alex in the play, a parody of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass." Trouble was, Carlson wanted to play the part of Alice. And he wanted to wear a dress. But that didn't happen.

It wasn't until the 1970s that Carlson was able to channel his desire to be a female impersonator into "Miss Seaway Rose," a role he performed at The Office Nightclub's former location in Rockford and elsewhere.

Carlson continued his drag queen shows until he became an ordained deacon at St. Chad's Episcopal Church in Loves Park in the 1990s, a post he held until the early 2000s, Rufus Cadigan told me.

Cadigan wrote the screenplay and is directing "Blunderland," a one-man comedy-drama about the trials, tribulations and triumphs of Carlson, who died in 2012.

It will be on stage next month at Emmanuel Lutheran Church. Cadigan is a retired professor at Rockford University, who still teaches playwriting at the college.

Cadigan came to know Carlson at St. Chad's, a diverse congregation where Cadigan and his wife attended. St. Chad's has since closed.

"He had been rejected for so long," Cadigan said. "He was a very shy man, except when he was performing." Carlson often would lip-sync onstage to Dionne Warwick songs. "He would go around the audience, and people would give him dollar bills," Cadigan said.

In the 1960s, Cadigan said, Carlson lived in San Francisco and attended a church for gay people. He returned to Rockford that decade because his father was ill.

"'Blunderland' reveals our city's recent past from Bill's perspective, sometimes difficult and often uplifting," Cadigan said. "It portrays the struggle of local LGBT people in past years."

Andrew Harth said Carlson was "confused" for much of his life. Harth works for Rockford Public Library as theater manager at the Nordlof Center and is portraying Carlson in "Blunderland." Carlson often asked himself, "Where do I fit in?" Harth said.

The Rev. Pam Gregory, a retired Episcopal priest, who lives in Rhode Island, was at St. Chad's when Carlson began studying to become a deacon.

"We were known in the gay community as a gay church, the place that was open and welcoming," she said.

Among Carlson's talents, she said, were that he could "read people extremely well; was very, very compassionate; had a wicked sense of humor; and was an old soul in that he was very wise."

Because Carlson faced discrimination himself, he was warmly accepting of others, Cadigan said.

"Bill would often say, 'I know what can be lost if the stranger is not welcome.'"

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If you go

What: "Blunderland" play

When: 8 p.m. March 3, 4 and 10 and 2 p.m. March 11

Where: Auditorium of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, 920 Third Ave.

Run time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Presented by: The Center for Arts & Spirituality at Emmanuel Lutheran

Sponsor: The West Side Showroom

Cost: \$10; tickets available in advance or at the door

Information/website: [thewestsideshowroom.com](http://thewestsideshowroom.com)

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