

THEATER REVIEW

'Alice' has new look — same verve

By Chris Jones
Tribune arts critic

We're happy to announce the family-friendly rescue of Alice — that pugnacious explorer, demure deconstructionist, woman unfazed by Jabberwock or hedgehog — from the customary cutesiness.

Worry not. Adapter David Catlin and Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company have kept the dress. And it's all still the black kitten's fault. Entirely. Oh, and the White Rabbit has the usual trouble with his cue. But in the remarkably talented Lauren Hirte, the Lookingglass Alice is a bona fide, rope-loving acrobat.



Lauren Hirte is energetic and athletic in Lookingglass Theatre's new production of "Lookingglass Alice."

The Victorian verse and prose of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, as adapted and directed by Catlin, lands somewhere between the writings of J.M. Barrie, Stephen Hawking and Monty Python.

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'ALICE': Family-friendly play for creatures of all ages, sizes

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His books have abided because they are weirdly complex — reflecting the author's obsession with math and logic.

Alice's journey through the looking glass is a consequence of her intelligence and inquisitiveness. Carroll treated kids as little pre-digital computers. And at the Water Tower on Saturday night, pint-size creatures were nodding their post-digital heads in full understanding of his aphorisms, even as adults scratched their heads as adults have always scratched their heads.

There's a refreshing lack of pretension to Catlin's sincere little show — a reprise of the project that first gelled the Lookingglass ensemble together some 18 years ago. It lacks the self-conscious angst of some of this company's later projects and recaptures the sense of physical play that was their early signature.

But although Alice's trips (both "Through the Looking Glass" and "Alice in Wonderland") here are told with a cast of only five (Lawrence DiStasi, Anthony Fleming III, Doug Hara and Tony Hernandez play the rest of the fanciful critters and whacko), the show shows off the full and spectacular capabilities of the small Water Tower space — really for the first time.

I'd argue that Alice's overall journey metaphor, which holds all that episodic Carroll whimsy together, needed more emphasis and attention so as to boost the dramatic stakes and the sometimes-sagging tension. And a couple of more performers would have been preferable.

But the gents of the cast pop up with such frequency and diversity that they feel bigger in number.

With the help of the Actors Gymnasium's circus tricks, this 90-minute show for all ages is full of highly physical but clever invention of a gutsy and droll sort, and it features some jaw-dropping costumes from Mara Blumenfeld, whip-flash lighting from the superb Chris Binder, and any number of physical tours de forces. Although disinclined to pander, it will be very popular with progressive family audiences — and deservedly so.

For Catlin and his cast find a fine balance between the pleasures of familiarity and the challenges of newness. One recognizes the familiar and marvels at the strange. Just as Carroll would have liked.

"Lookingglass Alice"

When: Through March 27

Where: Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.

Running time: 90 minutes

Tickets: \$20 to \$58 (\$10 for children) at 312-337-0665

Certain writers' works are practically constants on Chicago stages. Shakespeare, obviously, and Chekhov. But no fewer than three adaptations of Lewis Carroll in five months? Curiouser and curiouser.

Following two wildly different interpretations in autumn of Carroll's most mercurial Wonderland, now comes a third take: "Lookingglass Alice." Speaking of threes, this world premiere will be the third time Lookingglass has tackled Carroll's fabled creations. The Feb. 13 opening marks the 18th birthday of the company — whose first show, another "Alice," happened when its founders were students at Northwestern University.

"It made us want to start a company," says David Catlin, adapter and director of the current production. Eighteen years ago he was on the other side of the stage, portraying the Mad Hatter and Humpty Dumpty.

It also inspired the company's name. Carroll actually wrote two fantastical tales involving the intrepid young protagonist, both of which have inspired other artists for more than 130 years — but often, the two stories become fused into one odd hybrid. The first tale, of course, is "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." Although many elements from the second story are equally famous — characters such as Tweedledum and Tweedledee — that second title is not: "Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There."

The company's initial "Alice," with a script by Andre Gregory and direction by co-founder David Schwimmer, went quite well.

"The very first time we did this," Catlin recalls, "Schwimmer took \$500 from his bar mitzvah savings and helped produce the show. He made his money back, and we blew the profits on a big sushi dinner for the cast."

Dreaming as big as Alice, the recent graduates decided to become a company. In 1989 they officially inaugurated themselves with a new adaptation of "Through the Looking Glass," written by their own David Kersnar and again featuring Catlin and co-founder Lawrence DiStasi, who will complete his "Alice" trifecta in the current production.

Despite the same source material and even some of the same players, this third time will be its own creation. For one thing, the two men who've been a part of each production — Catlin and DiStasi — bring new sensibilities to the stage today, perspectives earned through adulthood and becoming fathers of young children. Another sign of change: The Actors Gymnasium's billing as a co-presenter with Lookingglass. The Evanston school, founded by DiStasi and his wife, teaches circus arts; Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi's involvement as a choreographer signals an acrobatic "Alice."

During warm-ups for a recent rehearsal in the company's Michigan Avenue home, three of the cast members play hat tricks. Literally. Spinning bowler hats from hand to hand across their shoulders, flipping them up their raised arms, doffing and un-doffing them with a flourish. And that's just the easy stuff.

A crew member approaches DiStasi with a request: "The prop guys would love for you to ride the high unicycle with the basket." Ten minutes later, he



Alice is played by Lauren Hirte in the new "Lookingglass Alice."

does it. The unicycle's as tall as he is, and the basket's gigantic — you could fit a dozen Totos in it (if Oz and Wonderland were permitted to mingle).

"Preparing for theater is like a bunch of adults getting to play," DiStasi says. "We're trying to have as much fun with it as possible."

"I always have been salivating at being in the next production of 'Alice,'" says ensemble member Doug Hara. "It's a really tasty opportunity to get into any of these characters. You can bring so much madness and imagination to it — and kind of jump off a cliff with it, a little bit."

Clearly, there's something about Carroll that inspires risk-taking. The two recent Chicago productions, which both closed in October, are excellent examples. The Neo-Futurists presented an ambitious mosaic of an "Alice," executed as a walking tour around Andersonville, performed in six venues and involving multiple theater companies. Umalleniay Productions performed Jim Hornor's "Enter Alice," which re-envisioned Wonderland as a burlesque show.

What quality do Carroll's stories possess that make them so irresistible to other artists? "One chapter heading [in 'Looking-Glass'] is called, 'It's My Own Invention,'" Catlin says. "As a group of theater artists who are always seeking to try to invent something, it's really appropriate."

"His ideas in this book careen around. It's so hard to trace angles of the geometry of his brain, and how it goes from one thing to the next," says Hara. "So it does inspire. When you think about the story, you remember it in a different trajectory than he wrote it, because 'Alice' is this kinetic moving sculpture."

"Lookingglass Alice," now in previews, opens Feb. 13 and runs through March 27 at the Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-337-0665 or www.lookingglasstheatre.org.