

## Acrobatics, whimsy blend as 'Alice' returns - Mischief, mayhem reign at Lookingglass

Chicago Sun-Times (IL) - Thursday, June 28, 2007

**Readability:** >12 grade level (Lexile: 1440L)

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'LOOKING GLASS ALICE'

Highly Recommended

When: Through Aug. 12

Where: Lookingglass Theatre in the Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan

Tickets: \$20-\$58

Phone: (312) 337-0665

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Magic. Pure, unadulterated magic. And you might as well add this: Endlessly witty, rashly whimsical and awash in nerve-jangling daring.

What's more, if you have no more patience for riddles, here's the key: Whether you move backward or forward in time, possess answers to life's nonsensical philosophical questions or not, or have kids in tow (or just yourself), failure to catch a performance of "Lookingglass Alice" means missing a rare chance for summer fun. In fact, the best short vacation you can plan is a trip down the shape-shifting, time-warping, mind-altering rabbit hole so memorably conjured by writer Lewis Carroll (a.k.a. Charles Dodgson) for his favorite young muse, Alice Liddell.

Lookingglass Theatre's production -- which debuted here early in 2005, sold out during several extensions and earlier this year toured to New York, Philadelphia and Princeton, N.J. -- is back home at the company's Water Tower Water Works space. And it looks and sounds better than ever, with three of the five performers from the original cast (Lauren Hirte, Anthony Fleming III and Lawrence E. DiStasi) still doing eye-popping work, and two new additions (Kevin Douglas and Jesse J. Perez) goosing things terrifically.

Adapted and directed by David Catlin, whose masterful blend of storytelling, circus and choreographic panache is custom-made for this material, the show features the most ingenious, playful work from every contributor. That includes designers Dan Ostling (sets), Mara Blumenfeld (costumes, whose egg-beater helmet for the White Knight is a prize-winner all by itself) and Chris Binder (action-packed lighting). Composers Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman, along with soundman Ray Nardelli, put a special accent in every tango and waltz. Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi has devised richly original circus choreography, and Scott Osgood has engineered rigging with truly life-or-death ramifications.

"Lookingglass Alice" is, above all, a unique coming-of-age-story -- one in which Alice's perceptions, desires and emotions undergo the most puzzling and contradictory alterations as she moves confusingly but unavoidably from girlhood to womanhood. And Hirte, a tiny, luminous, amazingly strong 26-year-old (who looks not a day older than 12) has claimed this role as her own from the start -- stamping it not only with her remarkably fearless gymnastic and circus skills, but using her unaffected, altogether beguiling (though never sweet) spirit to give it heart.

For sheer mischief, mayhem and madness there are the four men who play countless roles: DiStasi as the reckless, self-deflating, unicycle-riding White Knight; Fleming as an

impossibly devilish, high-flying Cheshire Cat; Perez as a campy Red Queen with motor-mouth Spanish, and the remarkable actor-dancer Douglas as a Humpty Dumpty who risks life and limb at every performance.

Finally, there are those folding chairs that pop out of a trap door like so many slices of toast from a toaster. But as I said at the start: Miss this at your own peril.

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**Caption:** Photo: Alice (Lauren Hirte) shoulders the White Knight (Lawrence E. DiStasi) in "Lookingglass Alice" at Lookingglass Theatre. ;

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**Edition:** Final

**Section:** Features

**Page:** 46

**Index Terms:** Review

**Record Number:** 200706280060

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