

## Celebrating childhood with 'Alice' - Toddler inspires acrobatic adaptation of Carroll classics

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### NEW JERSEY STAGE

Lookingglass Alice

Where: Matthews Theatre, McCarter Theatre Center, 91 University Place, Princeton

When: Tuesday through Jan. 28. Mondays-Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 3 and 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 and 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$28-\$53 (\$15 for children). Call (609) 258-2787 or visit [www.mccarter.org](http://www.mccarter.org).

David Catlin got the inspiration for his play "Lookingglass Alice" simply by looking at his daughter, Saylor.

"I didn't expect that just watching her would lead to my writing and directing this 90-minute take on Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Through the Looking Glass,'" he says. The show, which takes about 35 percent of its text from the former source and 65 percent from the latter, starts a three-week engagement at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton on Tuesday. After the McCarter engagement, it moves to the New Victory Theater in New York City for a Feb. 9-25 run.

Once again, Alice will wend her way across a chessboard, trying to outsmart the Red Queen, smooth-talk the Mad Hatter, and outwit the Caterpillar - all so she can progress from pawn to queen.

Catlin recalls being at home in Chicago in 2004, when Saylor was 2, and inspiration hit. "While I was happy to see my child go from crawling to walking, and from making sounds to talking," he says, "she was already moving through life and making me mourn the loss of that little infant in my arms."

Catlin thought about his days at Northwestern University, where noted director Andre ("My Dinner with Andre") Gregory guided drama students in a production of "Alice in Wonderland."

"It was literally 20 years ago this week," he says, shaking his head, finding it hard to believe he's suddenly 40.

"It was back with Andre when I came to realize that I believe that Charles Dodgson, who wrote under the pen name of Lewis Carroll, told his young friend Alice Liddell all these fascinating stories as a way of saying, 'Don't be in such a hurry to grow up.'"

After Catlin and his classmates were graduated, many decided to stay in Chicago, where Catlin still lives, to form the Lookingglass Theatre Company - named in honor of the experience they had doing "Alice in Wonderland."

"Well, some of us went to L.A., like David Schwimmer," he says of the former "Friends" star. "He's still with us, though, and recently spent a week in discussions on how we're going to celebrate our 20th anniversary season." Catlin, who began as director of artistic development, later became managing director, and is now artistic director.

From its inception, Looking-glass centered on physical movement and circus arts. Both disciplines are very much part of "Lookingglass Alice."

"Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi - our choreographer - and her brother, Tony Hernandez, who plays the Red Queen, grew up in the circus as part of the Flying Hernandezes," says Catlin. "They're invaluable. Sylvia's seen to it that when Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she can fly and float."

Special equipment is needed. "Alice must use a lyra, which is a big, round hula hoop made out of steel," he says. "Then there's a triple-cloud swing, made from three ropes. Lauren Hirte, who plays Alice, moves through this equipment always smiling and looking excited. I've gotten up there and found that it just hurts. The spectacular thing to me is not that she's able to do these graceful moves, but that she's able to not wince.

"We all agree on one thing," he says. "Circus is pain. We're very glad that Doug Hara, who plays the Mad Hatter and Humpty Dumpty, has a degree in massage therapy."

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