

# From Olympus to Neverland

*With rare style, Lookingglass flies in the face of time*

BY JULIE YORK COPPENS

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Lauren Hirte as Alice and Molly Brennan as the Queen of Hearts in Lookingglass Alice, remounted this summer by Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company.

ALL CHILDREN, except one, grow up, according to *Peter Pan* creator J.M. Barrie, who ought to know. So do most theatre troupes—at least, the ones that survive infancy.

When *Dramatics* last dropped in on Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company, in January 2004 (with an article by Jessica Royer Ocken), the group had reached something like a comfortable maturity. Seventeen years after a madcap adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, largely improvised by six Northwestern University classmates including David Schwimmer, Lookingglass had achieved international fame with such stage coups as Mary Zimmerman's *The Arabian Nights* and *Metamorphoses*, and was settling into a permanent home on the Magnificent Mile, in the city's historic Water Tower Water Works, a castle of stone and steel where the pipes still hum.

Now, with a budget approaching four million, about a hundred employees (twenty-four full-time), and a big board of corporate types looking over the artists' shoulders, Lookingglass has become a bona fide institution—though the Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf, and a few other giants still dwarf it in some respects. "It is without question one of the top-flight Chicago theatres," says *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones. But it remains young in the ways that matter. This fall Lookingglass flies to new heights of production size with a fresh adaptation of *Peter Pan*, by thirty-something director Amanda Dehnert.

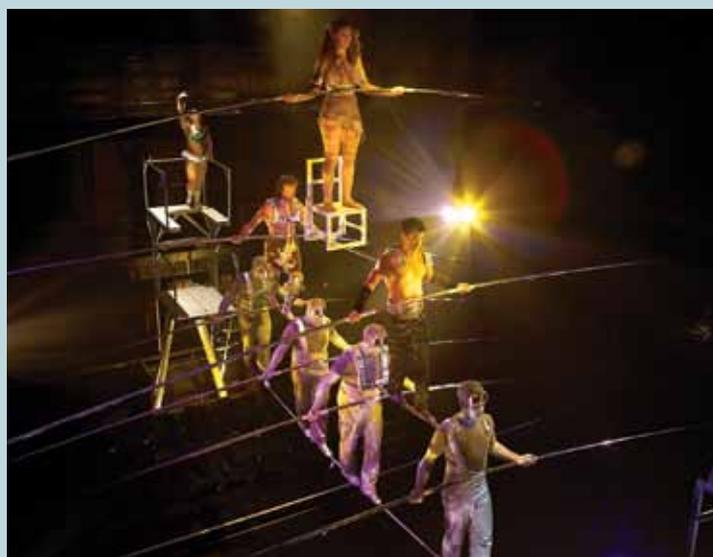
"I am addicted to seeing seemingly impossible things happen in the theatre, and the best thing is to engage the imagination of the audience as the last piece of that particular puzzle," Dehnert says. There will be no hidden wires or other technology taking Peter, Tinkerbell, Wendy and the rest airborne. Viewers will have to participate in the magic of this *Pan*, though a company of stunt daredevils, genius designers, and rigging experts will do most of the heavy lifting: "It's rugged, it's rough,

## Pure balance

WHILE REMOUNTING *Hephaestus* for a special engagement at the Goodman Theatre earlier this year, Tony Hernandez kept a blog on the show's many challenges. Here he writes about the climactic seven-person pyramid, representing the seven gods of Mount Olympus, whose tandem tightrope walk (at right) had audiences literally holding their breath:

"I am trying to push the limits of human achievement, and storytelling. This is neither digital, nor CGI. There are no lines or magnets; it's pure balance, trust and teamwork... We have been training for about six to seven hours a day, six days a week. The balancing poles weigh about fifty pounds each, so it takes a lot of conditioning just to be able to hold the pole properly with your wrists curled for the six minutes it takes to complete the

pyramid. The wire is also steel and only five-eighths of an inch in diameter, so it takes awhile to get your feet comfortable walking on it, with the weight pushing down on you. The bottoms of our shoes are only fine leather, so it is quite uncomfortable at first. Then of course there's the balance, which takes months and months of just walking laps, back and forth, learning to properly sway your pole to keep yourself centered. Once the pyramid starts to be put together, everything has to be precise. Everyone's foot placement has to be just



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right, and everyone has to kind of lean into one another, to keep pressure, or else you get pulled apart, or pushed over.

"I find it incredible what the human body and brain can achieve when we get off of our butts and push ourselves to our own limits."

it's exposed, and it's all about playing around with gear."

## Firing up the imagination

Acrobatics and other old-school "special effects" often drive the storytelling at Lookingglass. One memorable 1998 production, *The Baron in the Trees*, played almost entirely off the ground, with the "leaves" of old books making up a rebellious boy's arboreal home. *Metamorphoses* plunged actors into an enormous pool of water.

"We're definitely continuing to push the limits of physicality—it's what drew me to them," says ensemble member Tony Hernandez. An actor/director who grew up in the circus, Hernandez co-created, with Lookingglass stalwart Heidi Stillman, *Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale*, marrying a lesser-known myth with a stunning series of physical feats. As Hephaestus, the crippled God of the Forge,

Hernandez displays Herculean intensity, agility, and upper-body strength, while others, as the immortal ironworker's various helpers or enemies, spin like gyroscopes, balance like statuary, contort their bodies, or hurl themselves through space.

*Hephaestus*, first produced in 2005, is one of several Lookingglass properties (*Lookingglass Alice* is another) whose frequent remounts and tours help pay for the company's chief business of world-premiere stage originals and adaptations. With "floating" sea nymphs, frolicking gods, and one nine-year-old flipping phenomenon painted silver, the show truly is "a buffet of awesomeness," as Hernandez puts it. That's a pretty good summation of the Lookingglass m.o.

"They were the fusion of what you might call a Chicago style of working—low budget, ensemble-based—with a different style, where how the

show *looked* was important, where storytelling was important, where they were looking at other kinds of literature," Chris Jones says. He points to Frank Galati and Robert Breen at Northwestern as two key sources of the group's epic sensibility and improvisational approach.

"Now, not everything has worked. There were some bombs," adds Jones, who needs no prompting to remember *S/M*, a 1996 co-production with Steppenwolf, and one for adults only: "That was just horrendous."

But overall, the company's record is remarkable. Audiences have responded, in Chicago and around the country as Lookingglass has extended its reach. For current artistic director Andy White, as much as for the Olympian tightrope walkers in *Hephaestus*, keeping the whole mountain from crashing down is a balancing act.

"It's more of a coordinating position; it's certainly not a decision-

## Second star to the right

IT'S A GOOD TIME to be a kid—or a theatre lover of any age—in Chicago. Here are a few current stage productions with strong story appeal:

- *Peter Pan (A Play)* runs Oct. 20-Dec. 12 at Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave. The company's season continues with Edith Wharton's *Ethan Fromme* in February, and in June, an original story called *The Last Act of Lilla Kadison*. Details at [www.lookingglasstheatre.org](http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org).
- Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, directed by famed Lookingglass alumna Mary Zimmerman, through Oct. 24 at the Goodman Theatre; [www.goodmantheatre.org](http://www.goodmantheatre.org).

- The return of Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*, running through Nov. 27 at the Cadillac Palace Theatre; [www.broadwayinchicago.com](http://www.broadwayinchicago.com).

- *Wuthering Heights*, through Oct. 31, and *Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type*, Oct. 16-Dec. 5, at the small-but-mighty Lifeline Theatre (accessible by train from the city's main theatre district), [www.lifelinetheatre.com](http://www.lifelinetheatre.com).

- A revival of *Big River*, the musical adaptation of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, through Oct. 10 by BoHo Theatre at Theatre Wit; [www.bohotheatre.com](http://www.bohotheatre.com).

—J.Y.C.

making position," White says of his job heading up the Lookingglass ensemble. "We're coming up to the hard part now," he adds—selecting shows for next season by company vote, just like in the early days—"so you're in a room with a lot of strong-willed, strong-minded, really, really smart people, and you're trying to get to some kind of consensus."

### Focused on emotion

Recent theatre grads are always launching new companies in Chicago, White says; most flame out before their fifth season. Did White, Schwimmer, and their cohorts have any idea, back in 1988, where Lookingglass would be in 2010?

"I don't think any of us [could] dream that far ahead," White says with a laugh.

"If you can get over that [four-year] hump, get your administrative house in order—that continues to be something we struggle with here, honestly. Our budget is close to becoming stabilized," he adds, after seasons of sometimes sharp growth, "but it's still not where it needs to be in terms of being able to produce three to four full productions a year, including several world premieres, while we cultivate the next season of shows;

and being able to pay our artists what we really should be paying them to do what they do... There's still a gap."

That's not what Lookingglass audiences see, lining up at the All-You-Can-Eat Buffet of Awesomeness. White chalks up much of the company's success to Chicago itself, home to "the most amazing, generous, broad-minded audiences in the world," he says. No doubt the fortune some ensemble members have enjoyed elsewhere, beginning with Schwimmer's stint on NBC's *Friends*, has enriched Lookingglass as well. But basically, the company has succeeded the same way Alice does: by remembering who she is.

"They've stayed very true to a collective aesthetic. They're still taking risks," Jones says. "And they've always been very focused on emotion. They've always been about touching their audience more than anything. There's a bleeding heart at the center of their work."

The most spectacular moments in Lookingglass productions—like Hernandez's plummeting entrance from the rafters, representing Hephaestus's mythic fall to Earth—are more about the heart than the eye. Hephaestus is falling because his mother, Hera, conceived him in spite and then decided the baby was too ugly to keep around. But the guy picks himself up,

becomes a fine craftsman, gets back at Mom, and then wins the love of Aphrodite as a bonus. It's a powerful tale of rejection and hard-won triumph, which we can relate to as adults even if, as Hernandez says of himself, we had loving parents. And we soar vicariously with every stunt.

"Older people come out teary-eyed," Hernandez says, surveying the lobby crowd after a performance of *Hephaestus* in May. "They say, 'Thank you for making me feel like a kid again.' When you see their joy, that's like our gasoline. That's our fuel."

With this, her first Lookingglass gig, Dehnert intends to inspire that same joy, in her own way, with *Peter Pan*.

"I don't know that people realize both how beautiful and sad the story is, how quickly it turns from funny to frightening and then back again. And I'm not sure we always remember that the infinite capacity we have to dream and play isn't just something we completely leave behind when we grow up," Dehnert says.

"J.M. Barrie wrote once that we have a tiny hair tying us to the person that we were at all the ages of our life," the director adds. "I truly do hope this story (*Pan*) helps us all remember the exciting and terrifying time we had when we were children." ▼