

## 'Lookingglass Alice' counts on audience imagination

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**Author:** Bert Osborne ; For the AJC

No matter how spectacular the computer-generated special effects in Tim Burton's new movie "Alice in Wonderland" are, Chicago theater director David Catlin maintains that nothing compares with seeing such a classic story told live.

Over the past several years, Catlin has mounted successful productions of "Lookingglass Alice," his stage adaptation of two Lewis Carroll books, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass," at Chicago's aptly named Lookingglass Theatre (where he is artistic director), and elsewhere. After its current run at Syracuse Stage, the next stop is Atlanta's Alliance. (Previews begin March 31.)

Catlin freely admits that "Lookingglass Alice," featuring the acrobatic "circus choreography" of Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, draws considerable inspiration from the highly physical and stylized flair of Cirque du Soleil. For a magical fantasy that begins with its young heroine falling down a rabbit hole, "It's only appropriate that the show would include characters literally flying through air," he says during a recent telephone interview from Syracuse.

Catlin concedes there are inherent limitations to what a director can depict onstage. As he explains it, "We may be limited in terms of budget, sometimes -- sure, it would be great if every theater came equipped with its own hydraulic lifts or whatever -- but that only challenges us to be more creative and inventive.

"Our goal is really to keep to the text. It's actually pretty simple. We let the audience see the wires. In Carroll's books, he's asking Alice and his readers to use their imaginations. The willing suspension of disbelief is a big part of the show. Rather than trying to overcreate, we let our audience fill in some of the gaps, which tends to make those 'aha' moments so much more fun and exciting for them."

For Catlin, whether those audiences are young or simply young at heart is almost beside the point. "There's a lot of silly nonsense in the story that the kids can enjoy, and that's fine, but if they're looking, the grown-ups can dig a little and uncover layers of deeper meanings," he says. "The genius of Lewis Carroll, and why his work is so enduring, is that it isn't important everybody get exactly the same thing out of it."

Theater preview

"Lookingglass Alice"

March 31-May 5. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays; 7:30 p.m. Sundays. \$30-\$50. Alliance Theatre, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-733-5000, [www.alliancetheatre.org](http://www.alliancetheatre.org).

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