

Review: 'The Lookingglass Alice' by Lookingglass Theatre

Nov 22,
2014

Some of us must have been "dreaming as the days go by," but the "Lookingglass Alice" is now, well, older than Alice herself.

Lewis Carroll's adventurous traveler declares herself to be 7-1/2. David Catlin's adaptation of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (along with bits from "Through the Lookingglass and What Alice Found There" and other Carroll stuff) was first produced in 2005. Therefore, the Lookingglass Alice, curious and curiouser, is 9.

Ka-Christmas-ching! There's a whole new market now, there being an Alice born every minute, but there not being a show quite like this created every minute — or anywhere, ever, really, outside of Chicago.

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Remarkably, the cast of the Christmas attraction at the Lookingglass Theatre has remained pretty much the same. Lauren Hirte, who still plays Alice, originated the role. Lindsey Noel Whiting, who shares the role and played Alice at the Saturday performance I saw this year, has been knocking around this show since 2007. Anthony Fleming III, the show's designated catcher and robust moral anchor, has been, I believe, in every production.

A note about Whiting: This diminutive and athletic actress emerged first at the Chicago companies, such as Redmoon and Lookingglass, known for doing physical theater. In those early years, she seemed to work at a certain remove. But in the last couple of years Whiting has become a far more present and vulnerable — and thus far better — actress, now capable of marrying her formidable gymnastic, rope and trapeze skills to an intense emotional journey. It was a transformation devoutly to be wished, and it makes "Alice" really great now.

I just re-read my first review; there have been many between. In 2005, I saw the show's acrobatic sensibility as an emancipation of sorts for the heroine, a rescue from tea parties and cloying Disneyfication. Still true. But what is different now is that there is an intensified, improvisational joy about the piece.

Catlin's own daughters — whose early presence, I suspect, were a big part of what was in his heart as he made this show — have become older, and so has the show. The "Lookingglass Alice," is lighter, wittier, looser, freer than before. The presence of Molly Brennan, very funny here, helps with that. But it suffuses the entire enterprise, which has a design sensibility (from Daniel Ostling, Mara Blumenfeld and Christine Binder, among others) that has not lost its panache.

Samuel Taylor, a relative newcomer to this rabbit hole, is an ideal White Knight and authorial stand-in, and Kevin Douglas' Humpty Dumpty gets some tough love from a funny, clever actor.

All holiday shows try to be distinctive and appeal to more than one generation. But the "Lookingglass Alice" does that far better than most, especially now. It is not the kind of Christmas entertainment you can find in other cities. It is joyous and smart, playful and wise. It is a reminder that when you believe six impossible things before breakfast, like Alice, you have a better day. Nothing has yet bettered "Metamorphoses" and "The Arabian Nights." But aside from that, the "Lookingglass Alice" is my favorite Lookingglass anything, getting better (although costlier to see) as she grows.

cjones5@tribpub.com Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

4 STARS

When: Through Feb. 15

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

Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes

Tickets: \$45-\$85 at 312-337-0666 or lookingglasstheatre.org

plays the title role

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