

## Meet the new Alice: Tougher, stronger and defying gravity

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article, written by DCPA Senior Arts Journalist John Moore, originally appeared in the current fall issue of [Reign Magazine](#).*

*Design courtesy of Reign Magazine.*

Girls have always loved [Alice](#). The heroine of [Lewis Carroll](#)'s popular series of books has inspired generations of young women around the world to be smart, brave and unafraid. But despite having just turned a spry 150 years



old this year, the Alice who is catapulting onto the [Denver Center](#)'s Stage Theatre right now is not your great-great-great-grandmother's Alice.

She's greater.

Specifically, she's tougher. Faster. And definitely stronger.

The old Disney Alice may have stood up to the decapitating Queen of Hearts. But this new Alice actually carries the White Knight on her own shoulders. She's no damsel in distress.

This is the Alice of [Lookingglass Alice](#), a traveling stage phenomenon created in 2005 by Chicago's appropriately named [Lookingglass Theater Company](#). This gravity-defying stage production, which is launching the DCPA Theatre Company's 37<sup>th</sup> season through Oct. 11, reinvents Carroll's timeless magic carpet ride using acrobats, trapeze artists and even stilt-jumpers.

This innovative new production demands an Alice of incredible athletic agility – in the tiny body of an actor who can also play a 9-year-old convincingly. It is such a physically rigorous acting exercise that actors Lauren Hirte and [Lindsey Noel Whiting](#) split the show's eight weekly performances.

And by the time the audience gets done watching sci-fi's original worm-hole traveler do her trippy thing for 90 minutes, the young women in the audience don't approach the stars to ask about Alice's party dress.

"They want to know, 'How do I get to do those things that you did?'" said castmate [Molly Brennan](#), "which is such a great step forward for all of us."

What captures their imagination, says Hirte, who has been playing Alice onstage for 10 years, is the circus storytelling aspect of the performance. It's the spectacle. It's Alice free-falling down the rabbit hole through aerial hoops.

"I definitely think this show puts the audience in Alice's shoes, where (no one knows) what to expect next," Hirte said.

Alice, Brennan confirms, "spends very little time with her feet on the ground." And that makes performing the role, Whiting added, "a little bit like climbing Everest."

*Lookingglass Alice* is the signature show of the Lookingglass Theatre Company, which launched the careers of actor [David Schwimmer](#) of the hit TV series *Friends* and Tony Award-winning [Mary Zimmerman](#), best known for [Metamorphoses](#) - Greek and Roman myths staged in a pool of water.

Kent Thompson, the Producing Artistic Director of the DCPA Theatre Company, said he is excited to kick off his new season by bringing the unique magic of the acclaimed Chicago ensemble to Denver. "This is a captivating production that allows audiences of all ages to join Alice as she literally tumbles down the rabbit hole," he said.

*Lookingglass Alice*, adapted by Director David Catlin, features familiar narratives from all three of Carroll's *Alice* novels: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Lookingglass*, *What Alice Found There*. Which means the character of Alice spends most of her time reacting to bizarre and often life-threatening circumstances. She shrinks. She expands. She encounters Humpty Dumpty and a headless cat.

You can imagine what fun that must be for the women playing Alice. They dangle on silks and maneuver through ropes suspended from the ceiling. Why, they have a huge dance party with Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

"As both actors and acrobats, Lauren and Lindsey have a super-high level of proficiency in their physical work to make it look as if they are the victim of things happening to her character," Brennan said. "But the actors are operating at a pro-athlete level in terms of the physical capacity. Alice appears to be a victim - but she's actually in control of everything."

Hirte has described her job as not so much playing the role of Alice but attacking it.

"It is such a difficult show to do," she said. "While playing on the outside, you also have to be so precise on the inside, and know exactly what is going to happen. It's 90 minutes onstage, so you are gauging during that time – 'How much strength do I have left for this?'"



'Performing the role of Alice is a little bit like climbing Everest.'

Lindsey Noel Whiting

The moment *Lookingglass Alice* has the White Knight stand on Alice's shoulders and they tumble together like a rolling human ball is meant to send a powerful visual message to the audience, Hirte said.

"In that scene, things get turned on their head where the small Alice is the one who is carrying the bigger White Knight who is typically supposed to save her," Hirte said. "She is the one on the bottom literally carrying him.

"I am not a tiny little stick of a person by any means but, by general standards, I am a fairly small person. But when David asked, 'Can you be on the bottom and 'base' the actor?' I said, 'Yeah. That's great. Let's do that.'"

*(Photo at left: Samuel Taylor and Lauren Hirte. Photo Credit: Adams Visual Communications.)*

In the gender-bending spirit of the production, Brennan is now the first female actor to take on the actor track that includes the Red Queen, Tweedledee, the Door Mouse and the Caterpillar Trio. But she's used to defying gender expectations on stage, having previously played Smee in *Peter Pan* at the Lookingglass Theatre and Harpo Marx in *Animal Crackers* at Chicago's Goodman Theatre.

"So this show goes along with my trend of taking the boys' parts away," Brennan said with a laugh. Pulling off that uncommon feat, she said, requires a full performing skill set that includes brute strength.

"I have pretty aggressive energy, both in my life and onstage, which is typically a sign of masculine people," said Brennan. "Overall, I would say I have an audacity."

And Hirte has an endurance. Her visit to Denver marks the start of her second decade playing Alice.

"It's been an amazing journey over the past 10 years," she said. It's a journey she hopes to continue, she said, for as long as her back holds out.

"When I started out, my friends came and saw the show, and now they are bringing their kids. And watching the show through their children's' eyes is an amazing experience.

"This is a really hard show, but that audience reaction is so completely worth it. We put them on a journey that hopefully they won't forget."

That's a sentiment shared by her fellow Alice.

"It's very hard work," Whiting said. "And you don't work that hard for something unless you really love it."

*John Moore was named one of the 12 most influential theater critics in the U.S by American Theatre Magazine in 2011. He has since taken a groundbreaking position as the Denver Center's Senior Arts Journalist.*

### **Quick sidebar: Tread lightly around these women, ye cads**

You would think, given the evident strength and confidence the women of *Lookingglass Alice* exude onstage, no man would be fool enough to the mistake of disrespecting them offstage. You would be wrong.



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Molly Brennan

“Yeah, we’re women in America,” said actor Molly Brennan, “so it happens, what ... every 20 minutes?”

But Brennan has no trouble taking care of herself.

“I am tattooed, I have a man’s haircut and I dress like I am trying to survive in *Mad Max*,” she said with a laugh.

“But actually when I find myself in situations of being disrespected because of my gender, I try to not yell but rather to actually speak intelligently. In fact I recently had a situation where someone made a comment that was not welcomed (by me).

“I said to him, ‘I want to let you know that when you say that to a woman, it doesn’t make her feel good, or complimented. It makes her feel unsafe. Please don’t do that.’ So I try to lean on the side of speaking peacefully before engaging in anything.”

Castmate Lauren Hirte said that most times, “just being strong and presenting yourself as a strong person” diffuses any dicey situation.

And if not, Brennan said, they can always employ the physical skills they have developed to perform *Lookingglass Alice*.

“I think both Lauren and I have enough strength - or at least speed - to get out of the situation,” Brennan said.

*Lindsey Noel Whiting in 'Lookingglass Alice.' Photo by Liz Lauren.*

**Ticket information: *Lookingglass Alice***

Performances through Oct. 11

Stage Theatre

ASL interpreted & Audio described performance: 1:30 p.m. Oct. 3

Call 303-893-4100 or [BUY ONLINE](#)

TTY: 303-893-9582

Groups of 15 or more: 303-446-4829

Also: Purchase in person at The Denver Center Ticket Office, located at the Helen Bonfils Theatre Complex lobby. Buy and print online at [Denvercenter.org](#).

*Please be advised that the Denver Center for the Performing Arts – [denvercenter.org](#) – is the only authorized online ticket provider for the Denver engagement of 'Lookingglass Alice.'*

**Previous DCPA NewsCenter coverage of *Lookingglass Alice*:**

[Photos: Opening night of \*Lookingglass Alice\* in Denver](#)

[Lookingglass Alice: A tumble through time, childhood in tow](#)

[Perspectives: 5 things we learned about \*Lookingglass Alice\*](#)

[Casting announced for Theatre Company's fall shows](#)

[DCPA Theatre Company giddily going down rabbit hole in 2015-16](#)

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[Official show page](#)



**'Meet the Cast' profiles:** Adeoye, the Cheshire Cat  
Molly Brennan, the Red Queen  
Kevin Douglas, the White Rabbit  
Micah Figueroa, understudy for White Knight, others  
Samuel Taylor, the White Knight  
Lindsey Noel Whiting, Alice



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Lauren Hirte

