

Arsht Center's big summer show, 'Lookingglass Alice,' has as many layers as the surreal, classic tale

By Christine Dolen
cdolen@MiamiHerald.com

The creation story of *Lookingglass Alice*, the big summer show at Miami's Arsht Center, has nearly as many layers as Lewis Carroll's famous tales of the girl who tumbles down a rabbit hole into a surreal, fantastic Wonderland.

Going *all* the way back, it involves a young David Schwimmer (yes, the guy who became the *Friends* star). Inspired by director Andre Gregory's storied 1970 production of *Alice in Wonderland*, Schwimmer ponied up \$500 of saved bar mitzvah money so he and friends from Northwestern University could create an *Alice* that they took to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Molly Brennan wears a three-foot-tall wig and huge skirt as the Red Queen in 'Lookingglass Alice.' | Liz Lauren

In 1988, after graduation, the actor and seven others launched the ensemble-based Lookingglass Theatre Company. Its name was a nod to their first show, an adaptation of Carroll's *Through the Lookingglass*.

Then in 2003, when the peripatetic Lookingglass had settled into a permanent home at Chicago's renovated Water Tower Water Works after it had become a celebrated company with such successes as Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*, the Lookingglass artists decided to create another version of Carroll's story. That's the one that will bring a small group of actor-athletes and some 400 people per performance together on the Arsht's Ziff Ballet Opera House stage.

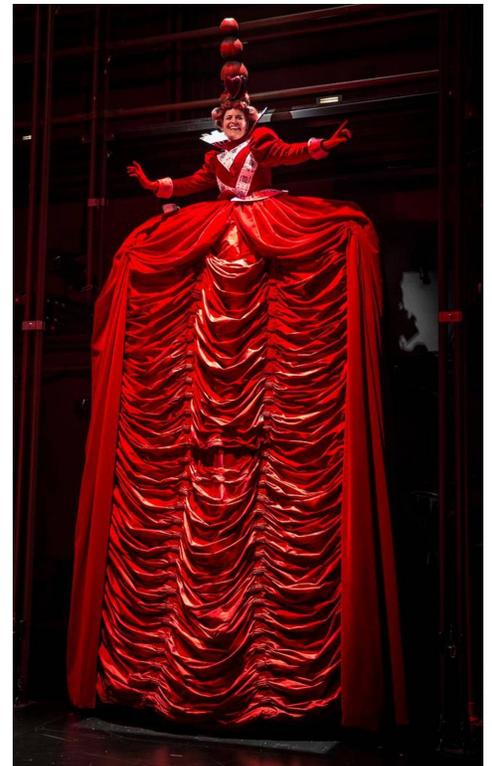
Director David Catlin, one of the founders of the Tony Award-winning company, was commissioned to write what became the circus-infused *Lookingglass Alice*. He pored over Carroll's books, of course, but for insight into Alice herself, he didn't even have to leave home.

"When my daughter Saylor was 18 months old, she said her first sentence: 'When can I get my ears pierced?'" Catlin says, remembering a moment he has shared in many rehearsals since *Lookingglass Alice* premiered in 2005. "She couldn't wait to grow up ... I thought that maybe this could be my gift to her, telling her not to be in such a hurry."

Catlin credits author Charles Dodgson — aka Lewis Carroll — for the multiple layers of a story the mathematics lecturer made up to entertain young sisters Lorina, Edith and Alice Liddell as they picnicked along a riverbank in 1862.

For Catlin, as Alice moves around and above a chess board Wonderland, each square represents a different stage of life as she goes on a quest to transform from pawn to queen.

"When she falls down the rabbit hole into a sea of tears, it's like being in amniotic fluid. If you listen, you'll hear a noise that sounds like a fetal heartbeat," he says. "One of the first people she meets is the [huge] Red Queen. With the scale of her, it's like an infant looking up at her parent. The Caterpillar, the pupal stage of a butterfly, is like Alice's



toddler stage. Meeting Tweedledee and Tweedledum is preadolescence, the idea of a crush.”

The Mad Hatter’s tea party makes Catlin think of how anxious he was to go to grownup parties, only to discover in college that being at a fraternity party was “like Sartre’s hell.” Humpty Dumpty’s fall is, he says, “a moment that’s inevitable, when somebody we care about passes away; for Alice, that moment of facing mortality is when she grows up.”

The circus elements in *Lookingglass Alice* were created by award-winning choreographer Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi, co-artistic director of The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, Illinois, where she has taught circus arts for two decades. For Catlin, utilizing circus arts in *Lookingglass Alice* embodies the nature of the show.

“When I first went to see Cirque du Soleil, I was sitting on the edge of my seat, and I thought, ‘Theater should do this too, leave us a little breathless.’ Then I saw [the dance troupe] Pilobolus, and the same thing happened,” Catlin says. “I thought we could use that theatricality and dance language to tell a compelling story, that it would be thrilling.”

Says actor Samuel Taylor, who plays the White Knight, author Charles Dodgson and others in the show, “There’s something really magical about seeing real people do impossible things.”

For all the tricky complexity of *Lookingglass Alice*, even with its episodic nature and multitude of characters, the show runs not much over 90 minutes and involves just five performers. Lindsey Noel Whiting plays the key role of Alice, but her fellow actors — Molly Brennan, Kevin Douglas, Adeoye and Taylor — become masters of the quick change as they appear in multiple roles.

All have done the show before, many times before. Taylor has performed it more than 250 times and jokes that the actors call themselves “the Aliceholes.” So has Molly Brennan, whose role as the Red Queen was originally played by a male actor walking on 10-foot-high stilts. Kevin Douglas, who plays the Mad Hatter, Humpty Dumpty and others, has done more than 400 performances of *Lookingglass Alice*, though at the beginning he was puzzled about why he was chosen for the show.

“I watched it on DVD, then I saw it live, and I thought, ‘Why did they cast me? I’m afraid of heights!’” Douglas says. “But this isn’t circus for circus’ sake. David uses it to tell the story.”

Rehearsing first in Chicago and then in Miami, Whiting says of the company, “We’re starting to get our *Alice* bodies back.” When she’s performing the show she lives what she calls a “nerd” life, not drinking alcohol, sleeping a lot but, because of the physical intensity of the show, eating whatever she wants. The circus elements, she says, make the play riskier but more real.

“You can’t pretend. In the middle of the show, she climbs up three ropes and spends six to eight minutes in the air,” Whiting says. “Right before it happens she has a breakdown and says, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore.’ But then when she gets to the top, you have a real feeling: I did it!”

Though the cast is intricately trained and safety is paramount, *Lookingglass Alice* is a tough show to perform.

“*Alice* is the gold standard of hard. The circus is hard, the running and screaming is hard, and you almost never stop moving even when you’re backstage,” says Taylor. “There are a lot of needles to thread. There are also a lot of ways to fall off the knife edge, like when you’re riding a six-foot-tall unicycle while carrying a picnic basket.”

Mara Blumenfeld worked with a team of designers to create the whimsical yet movement-friendly *Lookingglass Alice* costumes.

“The *Alice* stories have so much iconic about them that whether you’re looking at the Disney movie or the original [John Tenniel] illustrations, as a designer it’s fun to fulfill expectations and to surprise the audience by subverting them,” Blumenfeld says.

Just as the show has evolved in the decade since its debut, so have the costumes, thanks to the availability of moisture-wicking clothes and new ways to put print on fabric.

“Some of the costumes, they go through like toilet paper. The show is so physical, and the costumes take a real beating,” Blumenfeld says. “For the White Knight, we used Sharpie markers to hand-draw on his costume, but when we would wash it, it would fade and we’d have to draw on it again. Eventually, we took the old costume apart, digitally scanned it and had the fabric printed. Now he has three sets of doublets and pants.”

As the Red Queen, Brennan wears several costumes, but the most striking one is the largest: She stands on a rolling platform concealed under a massive skirt, sporting a three-foot-high red wig.

“I do a lot of acting from the waist up,” she says. “I have full range of motion with my arms, so I make grand gestures.”

Like most in the cast, Brennan can have moments of audience interaction. If people arrive late or neglect to turn off a cell phone, the rules-obsessed Red Queen busts them. Once while doing the show in Chicago, she noticed that a woman’s cell phone rang during a scene where the Red Queen and Alice play croquet — and the woman *answered* it, ducking her head inside her sweater to carry on a conversation.

“I stood and looked at her, and the whole place laughed,” Brennan says. “Her teenage son sat there humiliated. I said ‘I think you could learn some manners from this young man.’”

Actor Adeoye (he uses just one name), who was at the Arsht earlier this season as the strong man in the House Theatre’s *The Magnificents*, likes that the show has room for spontaneity.

“We’re such a tight-knit family, and trust is very, very key. But there’s room for improvisation and ad libbing, and it comes easily. No two performances are ever the same,” he says.

Having worked on *Lookingglass Alice*, with its elements of circus, its “delicious wordplay and its fantastical characters” for so long, Catlin really does believe that the show speaks in different ways to audiences of all ages.

“Kids enjoy the characters. For people in their 20s, it seems trippy and crazy. But if you’re a parent, it has a whole new meaning,” he says. “I love Shakespeare and plays that are language-based, but also theater that taps into more than that. I love plays that make you a little dizzy.”

If you go

What: ‘Lookingglass Alice’ by David Catlin.

Where: Ziff Ballet Opera House stage at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami.

When: Previews 8 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday, opens 8 p.m. Friday; regular performances 8 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday, 2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, through Aug. 16.

Cost: \$55 to \$85 (VIP White Rabbit Experience is \$35 additional, includes backstage tour, meet-and-greet plus photo with cast, special merchandise).

Information: 305-949-6722 or www.arshtcenter.org.