

At Miami's Arsht Center, 'Lookingglass Alice' conjures a multilayered Wonderland

By Christine Dolen
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Lookingglass Alice, this summer's in-the-spotlight show at Miami's Arsht Center, is something of a departure from the spectacle-driven productions of summers past. And at least in the case of this time-tested play from Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, that's not just a good thing: It's delightful, rewardingly rich art.

That's not to say there isn't plenty to satisfy the spectacle-obsessed in *Lookingglass Alice*. Just watch as Lindsey Noel Whiting's Alice, a Victorian girl bent on leaving childhood behind as rapidly as possible, soars high above the stage after tumbling down a rabbit hole ring into a strange Wonderland. Or consider Humpty Dumpty's heart-stopping fall, which begins high above the stage and ends beneath it.

Lindsey Noel Whiting soars over the stage in 'Lookingglass Alice' at Miami's Arsht Center. Justin Namon

But the magic of *Lookingglass Alice* comes from its combination of theatrical elements: director-adaptor David Catlin's insightful script, with its touchstone characters from Lewis Carroll's stories; five highly-trained actors who are as adept at handling the show's considerable physical demands as they are at memorably delivering dialogue and creating myriad characters; the clever use of simple theater techniques and devices to spark an audience's collaborative imagination.



In other words, if you go to see *Lookingglass Alice*, you aren't bombarded with flashy images, thundering music or in-your-face effects. You're taken on an entertaining, involving journey by a Tony Award-winning regional theater company, one that will take you as deep as you let it.

The show brings the performers and audience together on the stage of the Arsht's Ziff Ballet Opera House, which theatergoers enter by climbing special stairs from the leading from the regular elegant seating area to pass through a massive "looking glass" portal into a far plainer space. Along with 200 or so others, you're seated on risers facing a black velvet curtain and a few simple set pieces: a fireplace and mirror, an armchair, a toy piano, a clock, a chessboard.

But then, after Alice peers into the mirror and sees not her own reflection but that of Charles Dodgson — the man who, as Lewis Carroll, published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* — the tah-dah moment happens. The heavy curtains fall, revealing a mirror-image audience on the other side of the stage (actually, there are 200-plus additional people), and the story unfolds on (and above) a long swath of stage between the two groups of spectators.

The configuration leaves each half of the audience free to observe the other. That's hard to resist when latecomers arrive (on opening night, some showed up at at 8:30 and 8:50 p.m. for a play scheduled to start at 8 — c'mon, Miami) and still get ushered to their seats.

Actually, throughout *Lookingglass Alice*, we're deliberately reminded that we're watching a play. We hear a stage manager calling cues. A stagehand emerges to swap out props with Alice. The actors open and close trap doors, exposing (and utilizing) the hidden area underneath. A "river of tears" consists of two lengthy pieces of delicate, rising and falling blue cloth. Mara Blumenfeld's crazily imaginative costumes get the whimsical tone of the piece just right.

Still, over the course of the show's 90-minute running time, the five actor-athletes deliver work so versatile and dazzling that it's easy to surrender to the world of *Lookingglass Alice*. Whiting is the audience's tour guide through Wonderland, a child determined to race from one lighted chess board square to the next as she transforms from pawn to queen. Her real journey is through life, of course, and Whiting is beguiling as she evolves from girl to not-quite grownup.

Her four cast mates are dizzying in their ability to create distinct characters at warp speed.

Samuel Taylor, for example, is the stuttering and genteel Dodgson; the playful, poetry-spouting White Knight; the backwards-aging White Queen and others. Molly Brennan is the imperious Red Queen, a sleepy Dormouse, a third of the Caterpillar, a half of Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Kevin Douglas is the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, Humpty Dumpty and more. Adeoye is a cool Cheshire Cat, the much-abused wicket in a game of flamingo croquet, the March Hare and others. All four deliver assured performances that are as dramatically cogent as they are physically spectacular.

Though Carroll's stories were invented for children and are often done for young audiences, *Lookingglass Alice* offers a multilayered Wonderland that will entertain kids even as it speaks in different, clever, poignant ways to adults. That's the achievement of Catlin, five fine actors and the Lookingglass Theatre Company.

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.