

# Chicago Theater Review: LOOKINGGLASS ALICE (Lookingglass Theatre Company)

Lawrence  
Bommer

## CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER MADE BETTERER AND BETTERER

A signature work ripe for revival, the eponymous *Lookingglass Alice* is back for the holidays and New Year, brilliantly tricked-up with the most aggressive and interactive make-believe this side of Disney. In 100 minutes, adaptor David Catlin's hip and arch, sine qua non staging of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Lookingglass* (hence the proprietary name) goes beyond John Tenniel's original illustrations to deliver a circus masquerading as a children's classic.

With in-your-face irreverence and broad-based zaniness, it's a trenchantly 21st-century take on the author's sendup of adult absurdities as seen through the guileless eyes of a wondering child. But any pretense of Victorian innocence is sacrificed to a very knowing subversion: Lookingglass's version (in association with The Actors Gymnasium) mocks its origin just as Carroll's satire spoofed chop-logic and grownup pomposity.

The first deft illusion is to divide the audience and the stage with a double mantelpiece and pier-glass "mirror" leading from Alice's demure parlor, shared with her mischievous cat Dinah, to Carroll's ever-enchanting Wonderland. Suddenly the stage opens up, shimmering blue fabrics depict a roiling ocean, and Alice falls through the proverbial rabbit-hole. Always game for adventure, the spunky girl finds herself in a topsy-turvy, mock-manic world of opposites. Here time and etiquette are very relative and groaner jokes freely mix with Carroll's paradoxes and quiddities. Ahead of Carroll's time but true to his driven nonsense, it's vaudevillian and anarchic, with enough physical wit to equal the original verbal humor.

Alice, whose instant desire is to become a queen, must negotiate "square by square" a huge and hidden chessboard where at the eighth square she'll become a queen, just like the silly-ass White Queen or the imperious, very vertical Red Queen who rolls across the runway stage like a runaway train. Of course, Alice instantly dislikes this world of "all rules and no play" and strikes back with her own implacable common sense.

Scrambling over scaffolding and encountering trap doors and flying props, swinging on hoops, ropes, a cloud swing and a trapeze, Alice meets a rogue's gallery of curiosities. These rapid-fire oddballs include a ubiquitous, cross-eyed



Cheshire Cat, the contagiously clumsy White Knight on a unicycle who has an addlepat scheme for getting over a fence, the White King who progressively grows younger, the Red King who balances on a ball, and a Humpty Dumpty whose fall is truly frightening and whose inevitably shattered eggshell is placed in a tiny white casket.

As Alice crosses a starkly lit chess board, she runs a goofy gamut of everything but the Jabberwock or Snark. She enjoys a hip-hop Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum(b), a sassy three-person caterpillar, strenuous fun with folding chairs and falling shoes, a demented croquet match with pliable hedgehogs and temperamental flamingos, a row of literal egg plants, giant beach balls, and a pair of ruby slippers shamelessly stolen from another classic. Catlin's creation, with a thrill a minute and surprises springing from floor and ceiling, is indeed "all game and no rules."

Lauren Hirte (who alternates with Lindsey Noel Whiting in the demanding part) makes a very athletic, costume-changing Alice who decisively earns her eighth-square queendom. Swirling around her are, among many hit-and-run cameo caricatures, Kevin Douglas' epicene Mad Hatter, Anthony Fleming III's felonious feline, Molly Brennan's bloodthirsty Red Queen, and Samuel Taylor as a Lewis Carroll truly bewildered by his own renegade imagination.

*Lookingglass Alice* amounts to a pell-mell, death-defying, non-stop volley of stunts and skits. It's impossible for live theater to be more so than this crack-brained carnival.

photos by Liz Lauren

Lookingglass Alice  
Lookingglass Theatre Company  
in association with The Actors Gymnasium  
Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.  
scheduled to end on February 15, 2015  
for tickets, call (312) 337-0665  
or visit [www.lookingglasstheatre.org](http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org)

for more info on Chicago Theater,  
visit [www.TheatreinChicago.com](http://www.TheatreinChicago.com)

35 57



