

## Looking for 'Wonderland'? Ask Northbrook native Alice

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It takes a unique combination of talents to play the title role in "Lookingglass Alice." You have to be a polished actor, diminutive enough to pass for a child, and willing and able to do daring circus feats.

The part is a perfect fit for Lauren Hirte of Northbrook.

Hirte has won critical acclaim for her star turn in the Lookingglass Theatre Company show, which runs through April 17.

It's a magical experience for the 24-year-old, who became fascinated by "Alice in Wonderland" when she was a child. "I grew up with it," Hirte said.

Lookingglass is known for the physicality of its shows, and this one is particularly demanding. Hirte has been well trained, though, and is comfortable with the high-flying demands, but keenly aware of the need for total focus. "You never lose respect for anything you're doing," she said.

Neither does the audience. Hirte sometimes hears a "gasp" when she is performing on the cloud swing, a rope suspended at two ends to form a swing without a seat.

Although she never participated in gymnastics as a child, Hirte always enjoyed physical activity -- including climbing trees in her back yard.

Her interest in theater was sparked early. "My mom (Judyth Hollub) was doing community theater and she would take me with her to rehearsals," Hirte recalled.

When she was 8, Hirte began taking classes at the Piven Theatre Workshop. "I had been around the workshop for years prior to that because my brother took classes there and my mom taught classes there," Hirte said. She continued studying at Piven through her senior year at Glenbrook South High School, then worked as an assistant teacher there for a couple of years.

Hirte said that her Piven training "helps me tremendously, especially with this show. This is the first time I've had a lead in a show. I was kind of terrified that I was going to be onstage the entire time and everybody was going to be watching me."

It was particularly frightening because "Lookingglass Alice" involves improvisation and interaction with the audience, Hirte said. But early on, she recalled her Piven training and that helps her remember to "stay in the moment."

Hirte was in many musicals when she attended Winkelman Elementary School and Field Middle School in Northbrook, but scaled back during high school. After graduation from Glenbrook South, Hirte decided to take a year off to pursue her interest in art, music and theater.

She began taking classes at the Actors Gymnasium, where circus skills are taught. A couple of months later, Hirte was selected to appear in the Gymnasium's "Flying Griffin Circus."

Shortly after that, Hirte came to the attention of Lookingglass, which was seeking "someone who looked pretty young and could do circus stuff and could act, for their show 'Hard Times.'" She played the role of Sissy in three runs, one in Philadelphia.

When it came time to cast "Lookingglass Alice," the company called Hirte.

"It's an amazing character to play," Hirte said. "It's incredibly fun to be a 7-year-old in Wonderland."

'Lookingglass Alice'

Through April 17.

Lookingglass Theatre Company, 821 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago

\$20-\$58; \$10 for children 5-16.

(312) 337-0665

[www.lookingglasstheatre.org](http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org)

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