

'Lookingglass' creates magical moments

Daily Herald (Arlington Heights, IL) - Thursday, June 28, 2007

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Location: Lookingglass Theatre, Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.,
Chicago

Times: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday; 7 p.m. Wednesday and Friday; 3 and 8 p.m.
Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday, through Aug. 12

Running time: About 95 minutes, no intermission

Parking: Paid lots nearby

Tickets: \$20-\$58

Box office: (312) 337-0665 or www.lookingglasstheatre.org

Rating: For all ages

Watching two little girls with sparkling eyes and face-spanning grins sit spellbound at Tuesday's opening of the remarkable "Lookingglass Alice" proved almost as enchanting as the show itself.

Almost.

If, like me, you missed the 2005 debut of this Lookingglass Theater/Actors Gymnasium collaboration, you have another chance to experience the fanciful, funny and very physical show remounted here following a successful East Coast tour earlier this year. Take advantage of the opportunity, for "Lookingglass Alice" 'tis brillig indeed.

Inspired by Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" and incorporating circus arts, Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics and dance, it's a magical show with a gifted cast.

Credit for the magnificently executed production goes to director/adaptor David Catlin. Catlin reveals "Alice's" artificiality (via Dan Ostling's exposed set and audible stage cues) without sacrificing its whimsy. We see the nuts and bolts, yet the images still fascinate.

The most poignant involve the winsome Lauren Hirte who literally soars as Alice, a young girl eager to grow up. A captivating actress and accomplished acrobat, Hirte brings pluck and grace to the role. Her unfettered joy tumbling down the rabbit hole lifts the spirit, and the eloquent aerial ballet - a metaphoric rite of passage - leaves a lump in the throat.

Joining Hirte in reprising their roles from the original production are Anthony Fleming III as the sly, sawy Cheshire Cat and the manic March Hare and Larry DiStasi, endearing as the bumbling White Knight. DiStasi also delivers a wistful, heartfelt performance as Charles Dodgson (who wrote the stories for the real-life Alice Liddell under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll). Rounding out the cast is the stilt-walking Jesse J. Perez in a near scene-stealing turn as the imperious Red Queen (memorably attired in one of Mara Blumenfeld's eye-catching costumes) and the engaging Kevin Douglas as the self-important Humpty Dumpty and sharp-edged Mad Hatter.

"Alice" beguiles with its wordplay, visual puns and striking stage pictures, but it's more than that. It's about growing up. It's about freeing oneself to soar. And it's about discovering that the world is muddled, maddening and magical - and that it often conforms to neither our expectations nor desires.

It's about life.

Edition: All

Section: L&E, Suburban Life & Entertainment

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Record Number: 921672

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