

Lookingglass takes fresh look at 'Alice'

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If you've ever wondered where Lookingglass Theatre gets its name, go no further than the obvious -- Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. It was back in 1987 when David Catlin, David Schwimmer, Joy Gregory and Larry Di-Stasi, then students at Northwestern University, decided to stage a production of Andre Gregory's adaptation of Lewis Carroll's classic story. The production was a hit with the college crowd and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Since then, the now established Lookingglass company has revisited and reworked the story into a new theater piece -- "Lookingglass Alice" -- which will be remounted this summer.

THE ORIGINS

Schwimmer had done a version of Gregory's "Alice" in high school and decided to self-produce the college production. His company rehearsed for six months, employing Viola Spolin's theater games while developing the characters and exploring ideas of how to stage it.

"It was here that we began to develop our idea of a physical theater ensemble," said Lookingglass artistic director David Catlin. "No one was doing this sort of thing at the time. Our first production was our own adaptation of Through the Looking Glass. We riffed on Andre Gregory's ideas of making something not just for kids."

THE ADAPTATION

About five years ago, the company decided it was time to revisit "Alice" and do a new version incorporating the physical circus skills they'd mastered over the preceding years. Catlin took on the new adaptation and found inspiration in his young daughter.

"She was growing up so quickly and that paralleled what Carroll was noticing about the real-life Alice," he said. "I think he was telling her not to grow up too fast, to hang on to her childhood and her ability to play, to invent, to create. That really resonated for me this time around."

THE ACTRESS

Lauren Hirte, who played Alice in the 2005 production, returns as the curious young girl who takes a tumble down the rabbit hole on her way to self-discovery. The fearless Hirte has studied with the Actors Gymnasium for years and has a handle on the physical circus feats that help make the story an acrobatic delight.

Hirte's Alice falls, floats, flies and defies gravity.

- "Lookingglass Alice" (suitable for ages 5 and up) begins previews Wednesday and opens June 26, continuing through Aug. 12 at Lookingglass Theatre in the Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan. For tickets (\$20-\$58), call (312) 337-0665.

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Caption: Color Photo: Lauren Hirte has the look and physical skills for the lead role in "Lookingglass Alice."

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