

ONE MORE REFLECTION ON 'ALICE' // PHYSICAL CIRCUS VERSION GOES THROUGH LOOKINGGLASS

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Author: Hedy Weiss

'Lookingglass Alice'

*Previews begin tonight; opens Feb. 13, through March 27

*Lookingglass Theatre in the Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan

*Tickets, \$10-\$58

*(773) 337-0665

"The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

"Who are you?," said the Caterpillar.

Alice replied, rather shyly, "I -- I hardly know, Sir, just at present..."

-- from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland

As David Catlin tells the story, it all began with David Schwimmer's bar mitzvah money.

The year was 1987. And Catlin, Schwimmer and fellow Northwestern University performance students Andrew White, Joy Gregory and Larry DiStasi decided to mount a production of Andre Gregory's "Alice in Wonderland," based on the Lewis Carroll classic.

"Schwimmer had put his bar mitzvah cash in the bank some years earlier, and ambitious guy that he was, he decided it was now time to self-produce a show," recalled Catlin. "So we rehearsed for what felt like six months -- delving into Viola Spolin's theater games and developing characters, and really going at it with all the terrific sense of play that you find in Carroll's writing and, I hope, that you still find in our work at Lookingglass Theatre."

The show was staged at various campus spots to much excitement, and then Schwimmer decided it should go to the Edinburgh Festival. It was there, high on their experiments in physical theater and the fun of working together, that the actors decided to form a company. It would be named in honor of their inaugural show (Ironwood Ensemble and Liquid Wave were considered).

The formalized company debuted in 1989 with "Through the Looking Glass" (newly adapted and directed by David Kersnar). Fast-forward to now -- there's just something about "Alice" -- and the troupe is at it again, this time with "Lookingglass Alice," adapted and directed by Catlin.

Starring as Alice will be Lauren Hirte (who played Sissy, the endearing little circus performer in Lookingglass' "Hard Times"), with DiStasi, Doug Hara, Anthony Fleming III and Tony Hernandez morphing into all the other eccentric Wonderland characters. The troupe's circus ethic will continue courtesy of high-flying choreography by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi of Evanston's Actors' Gymnasium. Lookingglass' stage will be configured as an alley space with the audience seated on two sidesto create, as Catlin put it, a "mirror effect."

"I now have a 2-year-old daughter," said Catlin. "And watching her, I can more than ever

understand what Charles Dodgson [Lewis Carroll's real name] was trying to say to Alice Liddell, the little girl who inspired these stories. I think he was warning her about racing so fast to become a grown-up -- encouraging her to hang on to her childhood and her ability to play, to invent, to create. It's really very bittersweet in that way.

"And Carroll never talked down to kids. He gave them much more than the usual moral instruction in so many Victorian-era books. He mixed the fun with a real darkness and complexity."

For Hirte, 24, who has studied with the Piven Workshop and Actors' Gymnasium for years, the chance to play Alice is "a dream."

"I actually re-read the book on my own a year or two ago because all I could remember was the Disney version and I wanted to get back to all those surreal characters," Hirte said. "Then I was thrilled to discover Lookingglass was planning to do a very physical circus version of the show. I would have played any part, so when David asked me to do Alice, I was overjoyed."

Though generally fearless (she grew up climbing trees on her grandparents' farm in Wisconsin), Hirte admits she is a bit nervous about her rope "cloud swing" routine in "Alice."

"It's higher off the ground than I've worked before," she said.

There are no safety wires, either. But then Alice always did live a little on the edge in Wonderland.

Caption: Lauren Hirte, who plays Alice, flies high with Larry DiStasi in "Lookingglass Alice," an acrobatic take on Lewis Carroll's classic.

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