

Something wonderful this way comes: Two splendid shows plan summer engagements

If you've been in the ladies lounge of the Lookingglass Theatre, you've already seen a scene from the company's breathtaking adaptation of the ancient Greek myth of Hephaestus. On the watercloset wall, hangs a portrait of a glimmering, gorgeous woman gracefully balanced within the curve of circus hoop (above). That woman is Hera, or rather, Liljana Wallenda-Hernandez as Hera in last year's production of *Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale*.

[We loved the production first time around](#) (click or see below for our 2008 review in the [Windy City Times](#)). Apparently, so did plenty of others: The show is slated for a reprise this spring. The Goodman's Owen Theatre (that's the smaller one) will host *Hephaestus* April 7 through May 23.

Adapted by Tony Hernandez and Heidi Stillman, the tale of the Greek god of the forge features a world-class, Benetton-ad worthy consortium of circus artists (flying Wallendas among them) whose feats of aerial artistry, gymnastics and clowning create as spectacular a spectacle as you'll find this side of Cirque du Soleil.



Also returning (for the umpteenth time): [Lookingglass Alice](#) (click or see below for our 2007 review in the [Windy City Times](#)), an imaginative, wonder-full telling of Lewis Carroll's classic. David Catlin's adaptation has become something of a signature show for Lookingglass, and is a co-production with the Actors Gymnasium. It will run June 16 through Aug. 1 at the Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave.

For ticket information on either show, click [here](#) go to www.lookingglasstheatre.org or call (312) 337-0665;

[Hephaestus soars in a thrilling adaptation](#) (This review originally ran in January, 2008, in the [The Windy City Times](#).)

If you don't find your heart racing with adrenalin in the final, excruciatingly dangerous moments of *Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale*, best to check your pulse. Queen Hera, wife of Zeus, Ares, God of War, Hephaestus, God of the Forge, a silver wire and a golden throne combine to create a jaw-dropping scene where in one false move – or even one quarter of an inch of one false move- would result in a hideous tangle of broken, badly mangled bodies.



It's no surprise that Hera is played by Lijana Wallenda Hernandez, a seventh generation member of the famed wire-walking family, the Flying Wallendas. A cursory glance of Wallenda history shows that the danger inherent to Hephaestus and its dazzling cavalcade of wirewalkers and aerial artists is very real:



Wallenda Patriarch Karl died wire walking in San Juan. Karl's son Mario Wallenda became a paraplegic after a stunt went wrong in Detroit. And while Lookingglass often uses the term "theatre without a net" as something of a precious metaphor, with *Hephaestus*, they really mean it.

The cast is an-all star team of artists from Cirque du Soleil, elite level gymnastics and Ringling Brothers. The Water Tower space is small enough so that you can almost feel the whoosh of displaced air as Iris, god of the Rainbow and Hera's handmaiden, flings herself skyward and then drops down to dangle by her heels from a length of rope set hurtling toward the overhead light fixtures.

Created by Tony Hernandez and directed by Hernandez and Heidi Stillman, *Hephaestus* is as rich with infectious, percussive music and quirky humor as it is with gorgeous stunt work. It's no coincidence that Hernandez – who also plays Hephaestus - was a member of the Wallendas' Guinness Record-breaking 7-man pyramid in 1998. True to the myth of Hephaestus, he literally falls from the sky (well, the fly space) in an early scene, an astounding human gunshot catapulted through a raging thunderstorm. Then, soaking wet as he crawls up from the maw of underground oceans, Hephaestus' journey begins as he encounters a bevy of ethereal sea nymphs, floating on silk waves that twirl far above the ground.

Molding a team of silver men from the forge to keep him company, Hephaestus embarks on a series of adventures that ultimately lead him to vengeance on his estranged mother, Hera. The story is almost beside the point, a coat hanger for an endlessly rich tapestry of dare devilry. But Hephaestus succeeds despite having only a wisp of a story and paper tin characters. This is a piece about gorgeous danger, a spectacle of steely nerves. Unlike so many spectacles, this spectacle is firmly rooted in pure human achievement rather than special effects or extraordinary sets.

Composers Kevin O'Donnell and Josh Horvath and Ray Nardelli's contributions can't be understated. The trio collaborated to create a soundscape that is alternately eerie, winsome, and rollicking and serves to ensure a seamless flow between scenes.

[Lookingglass Alice a wondrous trip through the mirror](#) (This review ran originally in July, 2007 in the **Windy City Times**.)

Deep in the heart of Wonderland, Humpty Dumpty's cataclysmic plummet into thin air becomes a tragically hilarious reminder of the clumsy foolishness with which we mere mortals bumble through life. In *Lookingglass Alice*, the doomed egg's mighty downfall is also gasp-inducing, an eye-popping stunt of great and splattering implications, both physical and metaphorical.

So it goes in the turvy-topsy, ever-transcendent land of Daivd Catlin's wild and wonderful adaptation of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Lookingglass." Also directing the piece for the Lookingglass Theatre, Catlin creates a place where slapstick meets aerial ballet meets metaphysics meets the grandly vexing existential conundrums of life in the millennium that could be our last. Here, garrulous caterpillars and melancholic ova wax philosophic in jabberwockese while oversized hedgehogs shriek at croquet and giantesses set sail in umbrellas through tempests of tears.

Without exception, companies that stage shows geared for younger audiences always insist that their productions are as entertaining for adults as they are for the shorties. Lookingglass Theatre's *Lookingglass Alice* is the rare production for young audiences that actually delivers on that promise. And does it ever:

There's sublime wit and endlessly limber intellectual acrobatics embedded in Lookingglass's ingenious spectacle and physical acrobatics. Once you're whisked down the rabbit hole, you will not want to climb back up.

Alice begins with a quietish, sing-song prelude that abruptly gives way to a literally (and momentarily) blinding dazzle as the audience is transported through the mirror to a not-so invisible world. Cue the White Rabbit. He's running late in this merry kaleidoscope, but that's all right. Time on the other side of the lookingglass bends like silly putty in the hands of Salvador Dali. So does language, as Carroll's brillig and slithy wordfoolery leaps to life in all of its not-so madness.

As Alice, Lauren Hirte reprises the role she created when Lookingglass Alice debuted in 2005. She's extraordinary, projecting the luminous innocence and wonder of a seven-year-old in a role that demands the physical strength and athletic agility of an elite level gymnast.

The cast of five feels like 25, as Alice encounters the a pantheon of fantastical creatures including a fantastically nattering Mad Hatter (Kevin Douglas) , an accordion playing White Knight (Larry DiStasi) , the apoplectically ferocious Red Queen (Jesse J. Perez) and a Cheshire Cat (Anthony Fleming III) who is quite simply the coolest dude on stage anywhere right now. Anywhere.

Wondrously, the simple, heroic heart of Alice never gets lost in all of the production's truly breathtaking displays of circus artistry and ingenious choreography. It is important, one of the denizens of Wonderland stresses without fanfair, to believe in at least six impossible things every morning before breakfast. And so it is.