

# Wizard of Oz

## Windmill Performing Arts

**Writer** L. Frank Baum  
**Director** Rosemary Myers  
**Designer** Jonathon Oxlade  
**Musical Director** Jethro Woodward  
**Video Designer** Chris More  
**Lighting Designer** Geoff Cobham  
**Movement** Ingrid Voorendt  
**Additional Dramaturgy** Julianne O'Brien  
**AV System Designer** Pete Brundle  
**Performers** Luke Clayson, Hamish Fletcher, Patrick Graham, Jude Henshall, Ezra Juanta, Geoff Revell, Ursula Yovich, Alirio Zavarce, Jethro Woodward and Paul White

It's been 70 years since MGM immortalised L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* with a young Judy Garland wishing upon a rainbow. Since that time we've seen Michael Jackson strut his stuff late '70s style in *The Wiz*, a Japanese anime series *Oz no Mahōtsukai*, Kermit and Miss Piggy's rendition in *The Muppets Wizard of Oz* and most recently Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* and *Son of a Witch*. Now Rosemary Myers had put together a talented creative team to deliver Windmill's unique and quirky take on the material. It was a bold choice, reinventing a classic and following in Jackson and Piggy's footsteps...but it worked and it worked brilliantly. As I stepped out into the foyer with Jude Henshall's sultry tones and Geoff Revell's mad cackles still ringing in my ears, a young girl jumped around the crowd crying 'Mummy, I wanna see that again, and again, and again!' I felt exactly the same way.

Rosemary Myers clearly understands and respects the youth audience. Where many productions in this area condescend to the young and send teenagers flocking back to the cinema, *The Wizard of Oz* wasn't afraid to be scary (Revell leering from a TV monitor brought on flashbacks to *The Ring*). All of the alluring ingredients were there; darkness and danger, thematic depth, emotional honesty juxtaposed with a fantastic world and well-rounded characters a contemporary audience could empathise with. Nothing has been lightened or dumbed down. This was a brand new and dynamic journey down the yellow brick road.

If theatre is going to prove itself culturally relevant to the youth audience it needs to embrace the kind of daring imagination, inventiveness, light and shadow, modern aesthetic and sheer boldness of productions like this one. The dialogue was witty, the references current and the characters had depth and edge (Aunty Em certainly wasn't the kindly old duck we remembered from the silver screen). The bouncing toddlers, teens leaning forward in their seats, and twenty-somethings applauding and laughing raucously suggested that theatre *can* be thrilling and, most importantly, *relevant* to the emerging generations when in the hands of artists who respect youth culture. Windmill is in very safe hands.

The show succeeded on many levels. The musical score was magical. Jethro Woodward had done a superb job revamping the old tunes. With Paul White playing the organ, as well as many of the actors doubling as musicians, Woodward created a mesmerizing soundscape that stayed with you long after the curtain has gone down. The music and live performance wove together seamlessly.

The design team of Jonathan Oxlade, Chris More (video design) and Geoff Cobham (lighting design) transformed the playhouse into an alternate dimension of vivid colours, surprise appearances and disappearances, and imaginative reinventions of the play's central settings, including a trailer park Kansas and an Emerald City straight out of Studio 54.

Hamish Fletcher's sublime puppetry complimented the settings and beautifully recreated Tin Man's tragic past in one of the production's strongest moments (yes, I kinda had an urge to cry.)

All of the performances were solid, but special mention must go to four.

Ursula Yovich made an adorable Dorothy Gale and once again showed off her impressive vocal skills. A wistful and melancholy Judy Garland she was not. Her Dorothy was feisty, quick-thinking and not afraid to stand up for herself or whip her friends into line. This cleverly updated Dorothy was a lead that contemporary audiences could relate to easily, and her rendition of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* was stunning.

Alirio Zavarce went through more costume changes than one man should bear to portray the Wizard in all his many guises, flowing easily from bouncer to beautician in a series of off-beat and wonderfully bizarre appearances.

Jude Henshall was effortlessly cool and obviously having fun, her bubble-brained Glinda, Good Witch of the North, transforming into a soulful sister whenever the band struck up. *Optimistic Voices* ('You're Outta the Woods'), one of the underrated songs from the film, haunted thanks to Henshall's resonant interpretation.

But, as with the original film, the show belonged to the Wicked Witch of the West. Geoff Revell was born to play the witch. In the hands of a lesser performer this could have slipped into pantomime dame or one note drag, but Revell was nothing short of deliciously evil. He flowed about the stage adorned in a sweeping spider web gown with a dusty broom at his side and his body contorted into an arthritic, ghoulish physicality. Sure, he was funny, and occasionally sympathetic, but he was also chilling and that's what made his performance so memorable. Within seconds of his arrival, you'd forgotten that this was a man in a dress. This was the Witch in Rosemary's Oz.

Windmill have set the bar high with this production. The buzz in the auditorium and the foyer during interval was electric. It had been a long time since the Playhouse had hummed with this much energy. ☺

**Alex Vickery-Howe** is an award-winning playwright currently completing his PhD in Drama at Flinders University, with a focus on global youth culture. His most recent work was the bilingual Japanese/Australian rock musical *Once Upon a Midnight* (which enjoyed seasons at the 2008 Kijimuna Festival in Japan and 2008 OzAsia Festival in South Australia).

SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Photo: Tony Lewis.