

OVER THE RAINBOW

Renowned for their imaginative and exhilarating theatre for young people, Windmill return to Sydney Theatre in October with their spectacular new production of The Wizard of Oz. Back Stage spoke to director Rosemary Myers about why she decided to re-visit this classic musical.

What attracted you to re-visiting *The Wizard of Oz* on stage?

This year is the 70th birthday of the MGM film, starring Judy Garland and the book is around 100 years old. It is incredible that the story is so enduring. It is known and loved by grandparents, parents and children alike. The story has been interpreted in so many ways and has been a big influence on lots of artists including David Lynch and Neil Gaiman (whose work I love). Overwhelmingly, I love the 'rites of passage' story; the design and music are lush and fantastical and it doesn't shy from darkness but is overall a very uplifting work.

How did you approach directing such a famous musical?

We were interested to see how the work resonated for a contemporary audience. We began our creative development by taking the settings and characters and seeing how they had the most potential to engage us. We played in the rehearsal room asking how we could make the story live and that process involved finding contemporary references without being too didactic and still retaining the magical otherworldliness of the land of Oz. The storytelling in the play script is quite protracted, uses lots of puns and can feel quite heavy handed. We updated the humour and made the story more succinct, so editing the original play script was a big part of the process. In a similar way Jethro Woodward, our Musical Director gave the music some great new arrangements to bring the well-loved tunes into the 21st Century.

What did you look for when casting the show?

The most difficult role to cast was Dorothy, mainly because Judy Garland's Dorothy is so iconic. There were only a couple of people that I felt would be right for Dorothy, and it took a bit of campaigning to get Ursula Yovich on board as she was juggling lots of things at the time. When we secured her that really

meant we were going ahead with the show and the rest of the casting fell into place from there. One of the things that really impresses audiences about this whole cast is that they are so multi-skilled and that was something I was really looking for. They play instruments, dance and sing and in fact are all busy every minute of the show. If they are not on stage, you can guarantee they are either making their way down to the orchestra pit or manically changing costumes and gluing on facial hair. The cast were very involved in the development of the production and they are fantastic roles to play so they are all having a great time.

The visual style of the show is very strong - what was the design process like? Were there any particular references and inspirations for the style?

The design process was probably the most complex aspect of realizing this work. We needed to do lots of very big things including; creating cyclones and flying witches and houses, transporting people in time, and having a yellow brick road magically appearing, just to name a few. Jonathon Oxlade, the set designer is incredibly inventive and so the collaboration with him was intense and enormously exciting. We also worked with animator Chris More who animated Jonathon's design, particularly in the first half which is the road trip through Oz to the Emerald City. The aesthetic is quite pastiche, very beautiful and colourful. In the process with the design team, which also included lighting designer Geoff Cobham, we referenced lots of artists including; Chris Johanson, a bit of Tim Burton, Michel Gondry and Lee Bowery. A lot of Jonathon's own visual art uses collage and that is very reflected in the design.

Can you talk about your rehearsal process for *The Wizard of Oz*?

We had been developing the show over an eight-month period so by the time we came to rehearsal we had clear vision for the work. As the set is raked we needed



to rehearse on it from the beginning, which was a great advantage for really playing on it, exploiting all its potential and building up the actors' calf muscles. The rehearsal process was quite exhilarating as the show came together really well and all of the team is a lot of fun to be around. When we took the show into the theatre, the production week was really intense finally integrating the lighting, the full sound mix, the flying and the projections but our first preview audience was full of raucous receptive teenagers so that was a good confidence boost that our instincts were right, and we were on to a good show.

How has the show been received in Adelaide? What have the reaction of young audiences been like?

The show has been really well received with great reviews and most importantly great word of mouth and Windmill's biggest ever audience attendance. It really is a great show for the whole family and I think I have been most surprised by how much teenagers and twenty-somethings have also really responded. We have received lots of letters from children, many addressed to the different characters, and the Wicked Witch

is a favourite. One particular piece of amazing audience feedback was from one of our visually impaired patrons who wrote tell us that the show made her feel like she could see - that was certainly one of the most rewarding letters I have ever received.

Why should audiences in Sydney come to see *The Wizard of Oz*?

Even though this is a very contemporary telling of this fantastic story, the experience of watching the show feels to me a bit like an old time trip to the theatre, in the best sense. I guess it is work that is proudly theatrical, it feels very interactive with the audience and it has fun with the machinations of theatre. It is a real celebration of imagination. *The Wizard of Oz* is a brilliant palette for artists and I think our show celebrates that absolute pleasure. It is very funny, the music is pumping, the design is sumptuous and certainly the heart of the story is very retained, without being schmaltzy. It is just a cracker of a night out!

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SCRIVANO

The Wizard of Oz plays from 22 October at Sydney Theatre. For bookings phone (02) 9250 1777 or visit sydneytheatre.com.au