

New spin on old tale

It's The Wizard of Oz like you've never seen it, writes Kate Leaver.

Dressed in a billowing white dress with deathly white skin, Geoff Revell is in a role he never expected.

He is the Wicked Witch of the West, complete with white "crazy eye" lenses covering his pupils.

"Let's get away from the green face and black hat," says Revell, who wanted to totally redefine the Wicked Witch character.

"You know when someone is walking down the street and a kid pulls on their mother's dress because they know something's wrong and she'll say 'Don't stare'? I wanted the character to be like that."

When Revell auditioned for this production of The Wizard of Oz, he had heard there were only two roles left to be cast and didn't expect to snag the role of one of the world's most infamous witches.

With the help of thick make-up, many children have been fooled from afar by this cross-dressing villain: scared and delighted in equal measure. Revell has received letters from school kids addressing him as a man and as a woman, as an actor and as the character. One blind young man loved the show because he could tell exactly who each character was by sound.

The show has had success in Adelaide, with critics praising The Wizard of Oz as more frightening than the Judy Garland movie.

"We've made the show quite dark; it's what kids want," Revell says. "They don't want us to be happily skipping down the yellow road; they want something more Tim Burton-style."

Director Rosemary Myers has made some unconventional decisions to revamp this classic tale. One hundred years after the book was written and 70 years since the film, Myers has breathed new life into the story, playing with staging and casting. Acclaimed Aboriginal actress Ursula Yovich plays Dorothy and Myers opted to have Hamish Fletcher play Toto for comic appeal.

"There were some really good points of reference in the story for a modern audience," Myers says. "We thought that because the Scarecrow doesn't have a brain but he has a cute face, we could make him a model."

Some of the performers even rock out as part of the band. Glinda plays the drums and the Scarecrow busts out a saxophone. Jethro Woodward was given permission to rearrange the music, giving the show a unique element of rock'n'roll bravado.

And while there may already be a very green, very Wicked witch in town, Geoff Revell's portrayal of a male, albino Wicked Witch of the West wins hands down in the originality stakes.

Kate Leaver, SMH, 2 Oct 2009