

## Modern take on a timeless tale sure to bring the house down

IT is 70 years since, in the MGM movie, Judy Garland's Dorothy was mysteriously transported from her monochrome midwestern farm to the Technicolor land of Oz. Now Windmill theatre director Rosemary Myers has given the L. Frank Baum classic story a fresh spin with an updated production and an energised creative team.



Kansas - the home there is no place like - has become a caravan park, Aunt Em is a bottle blonde in hotpants, the farmhands are dubious "uncles" and Miss Gulch wears a twin-set and rides an invalid's scooter.

But Dorothy, winningly played by Ursula Yovich, and Toto (the lanky Hamish Fletcher) are, as ever, at the centre of a story about tribulation, persistence, kindness and safe return.

The Scarecrow (Luke Clayson) is now an addle-brained fashion model, the Tin Man (Patrick Graham) looks like a Chinese tomb warrior, and the not-very-brave Lion (Ezra Juanta) has a white fur mane and an orange Vegas jumpsuit.

As for the Wicked Witch of the West (Geoff Revell), she is all in Narnia white and has the eyes of Marilyn Manson.

Myers has gathered an excellent crew. Jonathon Oxlade's design, much of it expertly managed as video projections by Chris More, is inventive and illustratively original, while Geoff Cobham's lighting - from the cyclone sequence to the Haunted Forest and the Emerald City nightclub - is also terrific fun.

The music, arranged and performed by Jethro Woodward (with Paul White on Delightful: Jude Henshall, left, and Geoff Revell in the lively update of The Wizard of Oz Hammond organ) retains the vim and verve of EY Harburg's witty lyrics and, with some electric guitar here and some beats added there, adds grunt to some of the Harold Arlen tunes that the composer would surely approve. No one could resist Yovich's soulful version of Over the Rainbow, which she has definitely made her own.

All the performances are strong, from the feckless trio of Clayson, Graham and Juanta, to Revell's wickedly witchy turn, the versatile Alirio Zavarce's Wizard and bouncer, and Jude Henshall's ditzy Glinda and racy Aunt Em. But it is Yovich, keeping close to the verities of the text, who assures the success of this remake.

For that reason Myers may reconsider blemishes such as the distracting cosmetic surgery send-up in the Ozmetics scene and the needlessly flippant treatment of the Wizard's speech at the end on bravery, brains and empathy.

The reason The Wizard of Oz is a proven classic is it has the brains to know where its heart is.

This delightful production follows the yellow brick road to Sydney in October.

Murray Bramwell, The Australian, 2 July 2009

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It's been 70 years since MGM immortalized 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 70's 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 has 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 works. It works 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* isn't afraid to be scary (Revell leering from a TV monitor brought on flashbacks to *The Ring*). All of the alluring ingredients are there; darkness and danger, thematic depth, emotional honesty juxtaposed with a fantastic world and well-rounded characters a contemporary audience can empathize with. Nothing has been lightened or dumbed down -- this is 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 is witty, the references current and the characters have depth and edge (Aunty Em certainly isn't the kindly old duck we remember from the silver screen.) The bouncing toddlers, teens leaning forward in their seats, and twenty-somethings applauding and laughing raucously suggest that theatre *can* be thrilling and, most importantly, *relevant* to the emerging generations when dealt by the hands of artists who respect youth culture. Windmill is in very safe hands.

The show succeeds on many levels. The musical score is magical. Jethro Woodward has 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 creates a mesmerizing soundscape that stays with you long after the curtain has gone down and you're making breakfast the next morning. The music and live performance weave together seamlessly.

The design team of Jonathan Oxlade, Chris More (video design) and Geoff Cobham (lighting design) transform 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 compliments the settings and beautifully recreates 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 makes an adorable Dorothy Gale and once again shows off her impressive vocal skills. A wistful and melancholy Judy Garland she is not. Her Dorothy is feisty, quick-thinking and not afraid to stand up for herself or whip her friends into line. This

cleverly updated Dorothy is a lead that contemporary audiences can relate easily to, and her rendition of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* is stunning.

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

But, as with the original film, the show belongs 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 is nothing short of deliciously evil. He flows 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's funny, and occasionally sympathetic, but he's also chilling and that's what makes his performance so memorable. Within seconds of his arrival, you've forgotten that this is a man in a dress. This is 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's been a long time since the Playhouse has hummed with this much energy.

This is an Oz that audiences should flock to. I've already booked my return ticket!