

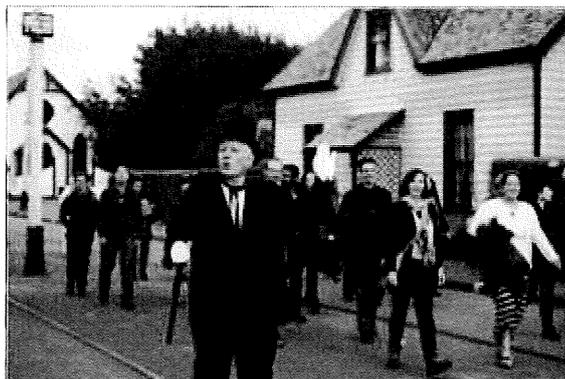
REVIEW

DANSE MACABRE

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DECEMBER 8, 2015

Last week, Ferrymead Heritage Park came alive when Nataliya Oryschuck, and her acting troupe, NO Productions, presented their Gothic thriller for Christchurch audiences. To say it was an experience is an understatement. *Danse Macabre* was a presentation of two Victorian ghost stories, brought to eerie life in the periodic surroundings of the Ferrymead location, an inspired setting which immensely added to the experience.



Michael Adams as The Puppeteer

For two hours, you were not in Christchurch, but transported elsewhere, where the line between reality and the supernatural was as negligible as an evaporating thread of candle smoke. Waiting by the water fountain, day dipping further into twilight, it felt as if anything could happen.

Soon a suited and top-hatted gentleman appeared, claiming to be the puppeteer. He promised a thrilling night, brought to life by his “collections”. Played with a suave confidence by Michael Adams, the puppeteer sets the tone for the rest of the evening. He’s smooth, and he’s persuasive, but there’s something not altogether right.

Following him, I expected curtains to twitch, imagined eyes watching our every move from behind the window panes. To the puppeteer’s irritation, and the audience’s quiet glee, his puppets picked their way across the audience, entirely ignoring our curious glances, or darting away further behind the bushes.

The puppeteer welcomed us into the Lodge, its atmospheric dimness and historic past an exciting aspect that helped flesh out the story we seemed to be have stumbled into. We weren’t simply the audience, but the puppeteer’s personal guests. The interior was intimate, the stage area practically at our fingertips, the precipice of the world we were already keen to fall into. The crackling music, which harked back to another era, seemed to be the final touch. Once seated, there seemed no going back.



Gwilym Wogan as Mr. Harrington & Michael Adams as Mr. Karswell

The first play was a re-working of the short story *Casting the Runes* by M.R. James, directed by Nataliya Oryschuck. It was a nail-biting number about the villainous Mr. Karswell (played to a loathsome perfection by Michael Adams) and those whom he takes as personal slaves with the help of evil enchantments. His long-time prisoner, the poor Mr. Harrington, played with stuttering and stumbling tragedy by Gwilym Wogan, tugged at the heart strings.

Mr. Karswell’s newly recruited servant is Miss Dunning, who originally enters with a clear head, and what looks like the upper hand. Mr. Karswell’s alchemical powers work a little too well, however, and soon she too joins Mr. Harrington in his imprisonment. The manifestation of Mr. Karswell’s powers are depicted through an eerie silhouette which looms against the white backdrop of the stage area. It’s a reminder that there’s more to the story than meets the eye.

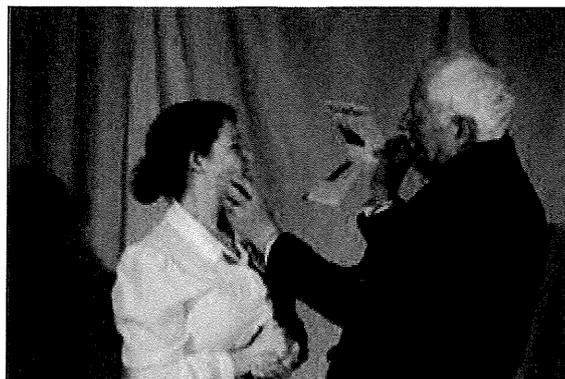


Figure 1 Yvette Benesmann as Miss Dunning, & Michael Adams

Between the mumbles of Mr. Harrington, and the high-handed deviltry of Mr. Karswell, Benesmann brought some clarity of mind and hope which helped alleviate the anxiety of the play. Mr. Karswell holding sway over his prisoners was fascinating, but not as satisfying as watching them plot, and eventually bring about, his demise.



Mr. Karswell facing his doom

The second half of the night brought W.W. Jacob's, *The Monkey's Paw*, its direction a collective endeavour by the creative team at NO Productions. The original story is tweaked to accommodate a struggling actor, Ron Hunter, in emotional and economic straits, and his endearing partner, Marika Toom. David Allen, playing the despairing Ron, has a face so expressive that it almost breaks your heart. What does deliver the final blow, however, is seeing Marika try repeatedly to lift his spirits, and yet be so resolutely beaten down each time.



David Allen as Ron Hunter, & Nataliya Oryschuck as Marika Toom

Oryschuck is mesmerizing on stage – her character's oscillation between childlike optimism, quiet doubts, or crushing despair are all equally absorbing. The energy she exudes seemed to suffuse the entire theatre. More than the underlying evil of the story – Marika requests her husband's success of the monkey's paw, only to be rewarded with his suicide, which then catapults him to literary fame – it is, in fact, the heart-wrenching sorrow of Marika that truly stands out.



Nataliya Oryschuck

It was a truly memorable night, and one I didn't want to end. The amalgamation of talent, and ingenious ideas blended exceptionally well to make it a wholly immersive and unforgettable experience.

Actors: Nataliya Oryschuck, Michael Adams, David Allen, Yvette Benesmann, Gwilym Wogan

Sound: Daniel Webster, Sven Balvan, Jo Whitlow

Lighting: Bjorn Gruenber

Photography: Theuns Verwoerd

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