

Review of *Weird Tales of Midwinter* by “No Theatre Productions” at Ferrymead Park, 16-19 June 2016.

by Fiona Dalzell, PhD candidate in Philosophy, University of Canterbury.

Recently, there was controversy in The Christchurch Press over a production of *Hairspray*. This was a syndicated production, run and re-run time and time again in a formulaic – all be it successful – manner world-wide. It ticketed at over a hundred dollars, yet claimed to be “amateur” and in keeping with this admirably egalitarian spirit, chose to not to pay the actors, some being school children. The actors gave up many hours in rehearsal and obviously also donated their time for the fee generating performances. Moreover it is American, a depiction of the Civil Rights movement, and a commentary on race relations, and thus a challenge to cast in Christchurch.

And then, in the same city at around the same time, there was the *Weird Tales of Midwinter*. The question must be asked: why on earth would anyone pay over a hundred dollars to see a syndicated American rehash when you can see an original, authentic, utterly engaging piece of theatre in a beautiful, historic kiwi setting and have a totally transcendental experience?

The venue of *Weird Tales* is the historic village of Ferrymead. Parking is abundant and close by, well organised and free, and surrounded by native bush. Quaint during the day, at night this place is transformed. It is far enough out of town to be mercifully free of human-generated noise. There is an eerie silence broken only by the odd bird call, the flapping of heavy nocturnal wings. We are met in the entrance by a Victorian-garbed guide, who instructs us to “wait at the wishing well”. Delightfully, many of the audience have turned up in steam punk costume. There are lanterns at the wishing well, so we wait in long flickering shadows. The church looms behind us, built by my English ancestors who were so keen to escape England, yet so reluctant to leave behind its traditions.

The audience mingles, talking in hushed tones befitting of the setting and apparel, until the arrival of our ‘host’ Dr Coppelius / Mr Coppoloff, ably played by Michael Adams. In a very dapper top hat and tails, he escorts us through the deserted streets. Listening to a tale of supposedly mindless automatons that lurk amongst us, the audience follows him obediently. A figurine (Nataliya Oryshchuk) sits in a window like a porcelain doll, but as we pass by Dr Coppelius gestures and the mannequin unfreezes, and stares at us chillingly from behind the glass as we move on, following the tramlines through the village. The main hall and theatre awaits, brightly lit and alluring, but the last shop we pass erupts as the mannequins within (Yvette Bensemman and David Allen) wake up. They see us and leap at the doors, wrench at the sash windows, trying to escape. We hurry ahead into the hall, to escape the night of the walking dead.

Once inside the hall, the doors are locked, and we are safe within, for the moment. A maid silently glides between us in ankle length skirts, offering sherry in exquisite, individual crystal glasses. Sherry consumed, we move through to the theatre.

The first of two plays was ‘*Carmilla: Blood Ties*,’ a spookily modified reading of domestic violence and a more than bite sized sample of revenge. As the writer, Nataliya Oryshchuk delivered a suitably satisfying bloodthirsty script which the cast, under the direction of David Allen, admirably sunk their incisors into with just the perfect amount of relish. Yvette Bensemman was superb as the oppressed wife, Julia, who branched out and found herself with the love of a good book (and a distant cousin, *Carmilla*, played by Ms. Oryshchuk). How her expression changed towards her husband from one of fear and appeasement to blood lust was

deeply unsettlingly to say the least. Jonathan Briden was unpleasantly convincing as the chauvinistic husband, Henry. As Julia fondled her cut-throat razor as if it were a much-loved cat, she was joined by the audience in willing the blade towards her husband's neck.

An interval of supposed normality delivered another delicious and spiritual return to Downton Abbey. Seated on the furniture of the Charlotte Jane, with some tiny, delicate handmade cakes, on antique porcelain plates (although I could not partake, the strawberry conserve looked a touch too realistic at the time for my delicate sensibilities) we were mercifully served with more heart-warming and calming sherry.

The second play, 'The Sandman,' introduced the fabulously creepy David Allen, who was clearly born to play roles like the duped Arthur Arnolds. He has a face begging to be tortured, a face desperate to express a life endured full of supernatural atrocities. He came to his calling in this play, and I sincerely hope to see him suffering considerably more in the future. My only hope is that Ms. Oryshchuk sets Ms Bensemman and Mr Allen up in a consensual marriage of the delectable infliction and deliverance of such red blooded psychological pain for our future excited anticipation.

The audience was incredibly mixed. It ranged (from my sherry lubricated investigations) between manual workers in factories to university lecturers. Yet it held all of us in its thrall. The script was skilfully sculptured for an inclusive appeal. Subtle allusions to past literary works melted into a crock pot of boiling blood and guts. The whole ultra-modern question of bio-enhancement was questioned in a resoundingly modern manner, whilst dressed demurely in Victorian skirts. Appeal that spanned time and people.

Although a small production, the technical aspects were flawless. The lighting and sound technicians used the shadow effects as an integrated narrative to perfect effect. The timing was impeccable. A huge demand on the technical crew, but they delivered a performance which looked highly professional, and yet delivered a deeply intimate feel.

This was a brilliant performance, written by local people, delivered by local actors, performed in a beautiful and fitting local setting. It totally captured the audience. For a whole night every one of us was transported beyond ourselves in a total out of body experience. I walked back to my carriage (I mean car!) thinking how like the Pankhurst sisters Ms Bensemman really was.

We need so much more of this type of theatre, theatre that reminds you of huge political issues, but gets you at the visceral level, theatre that leaves you changed. Appropriate theatre that talks to your heart about New Zealand issues, the extreme but buried sexism towards women that inhabits the bones of New Zealand, the systemic cultural oppression of women in New Zealand, male, capitalist domination of our society. Our consumer US-driven puppeteer behaviour. But send the message like the slice of a razor, so sharp you would never know you had been cut at the time, and you just go home and realise you are really bleeding out in the privacy of your own home. And it is up to you now, how you deal with the real person, not the actor, the person in your house, your work, your society, your local government who inflicts the real but non-sanguineous wounds in your life every day, the wounds that really do kill you. And kill our society. This is why we need more from NO Theatre Productions, and less from the corporate likes of Hairspray.