

WEIRD TALES OF MIDWINTER: A CHILLING THRILL

Review by Faustina Paustin

Ferrymead Heritage Park, Sunday 19th June 2016

Winter is the best time for a good scare. The cold, crisp air, the bare, skeletal branches that seem to reach for you as you walk past; it all lends itself to a delicious backdrop for a spine-tingling ghost story. And no one knows this better than Nataliya Oryshchuk. She and her acting troupe, NO Productions Theatre Collective, treated Christchurch residents to their eerie trademark style once more in *Weird Tales of Midwinter*.

Having attended their *Danse Macabre* production in 2015, I was excited for the thrilling degree of realism that NO Productions infuses in their performances.

The day was brisk, and the audience, greeted by a maid at the entrance, gathered by the water fountain, rubbing their hands and awaiting the puppet master. When he finally arrived Ferrymead Park had almost sunk into darkness. The puppet master, played by Michael Adams, greeted us with a flourish, introducing himself as Dr. Coppelius. His demeanour, though welcoming was tinged with something sinister. He led the expectant crowd to the Lodge, bringing our attention to his "wax figures" which hovered behind windows and came to startling life with keen gazes and explosive noises. The puppets, just as sinister as their master, collaborated to present the audience with two tales of unease: *Carmilla (Blood Ties)* and *The Sandman*.

CARMILLA

In *Carmilla*, the sensitive Julia Harker (Yvette Bensemman), and her short-tempered husband, Henry Harker (Jonathan Briden) receive an unexpected visit from Julia's strange and alluring distant relative, Carmilla Karnstein (Nataliya Oryshchuk). Julia, having suffered abuse at a young age, is prone to living in her preferred Gothic fictional worlds, reading aloud excitedly from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to a very uninterested Henry Harker. Her husband has only two moods for her: disinterest, or cruelty. Briden's success lies in the degree of hatred he inspires for his character. Julia's plight is pitiable, and as an audience member I only wished for her escape from a poisonous marriage. Carmilla's arrival seems to herald just that, though the means hinted at are less than wholesome. Taking inspiration from Joseph Le Faridan Shanu's novella of the same name, and its allusions to *Dracula*, the vampiric undertones are hard to miss. When the human world fails to ensure Julia's safety, she finds help in the monstrous. Bensemman's performance of Julia's alternate distress and descent into madness is heart-breaking and chilling, while Oryshchuk's Carmilla simultaneously entrances and repulses. Like all vampire stories, the tale engages the audience's fascination, even as it shocks.

THE SANDMAN

The Sandman tells the tale of Arthur Arnold (David Allen), an artist and sculptor seeking inspiration for his next masterpiece. Receiving an abrupt visit from a Mr. Coppoloff (Michael Adams), he is invited to make the likeness of Coppoloff's daughter, Tillie (Nataliya Oryshchuk), who is extremely ill and on the brink of death. It comes as a shock then for Arthur, when years later, he meets Dr. Coppelius, and his wife, Olympia, who seems to bear an uncanny resemblance to Tillie. David Allen plays Arthur's confusion well, and his increasing agitation is palpable as he becomes convinced that Olympia and Tillie are one and the same. The most heart breaking scene comes with Arthur's recognition that Olympia is merely an animated version of his own wax figure of Tillie, without emotion and without presence of mind. And the

most terrifying scene comes with his realization that his fate is to join Olympia, as another addition in Dr. Coppelius' strange collection.

The ingenious touch of NO Productions Theatre Collective lies in its intimacy with its audience: the close quarters of the Lodge, the personal greeting by the puppet master, the wax figures' unsettling welcome. The weirdness of it all spills out and stain the grounds of Ferrymead Park. Lighting, shadow play and sound effects are used to maximum and startling effect. The tales seep into your mind, and remain firmly entrenched long after you leave the venue. Christchurch, and the arts, are the richer for these productions and I can only hope that we will be treated with many more of such weird and ingenious creations.

Find NO Productions Theatre Collective on [Facebook](#)