



Alice big fun for cast, stimulating for some, perplexing for others

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The Christchurch Free Theatre's production of *Alice* is an interesting, provocative evening of theatre.

NOT-FOR-SYNDICATION

REVIEW: The cast of Free Theatre Christchurch's new production of *Alice* obviously had huge fun in bringing Tom Waits' contemporary musical to the stage.

The same couldn't be said for some perplexed members of the first-night audience who sat like stunned mullets when the house lights went on and the production came to what appeared to be a rather perfunctory end (although it was actually the intermission). You could tell that for them an evening of experimental theatre had been a complete mystery.

Judging by the buzz of conversation in the foyer, it had also been a stimulating experience for others.

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Admittedly, *Alice* is no Sunday in the park with Sondheim. The result of an original collaboration between theatre director Robert Wilson and one of contemporary music's presiding geniuses, Tom Waits, it was first staged in Germany in 1992.

At the heart of this dark, slightly sinister work is a free adaptation of Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson's stories of Alice in Wonderland underpinned by another story – Dodgson's obsession with befriending and photographing pre-adolescent girls.

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While Victorians saw nothing strange in this odd predilection, today's cynical world views these things in a murkier light.

Director Peter Falkenberg's Free Theatre production immediately created the mood of a European cabaret. A highly flexible stage design (by Stuart Lloyd-Harris) and a small but polished musical ensemble enhanced a suitably louche setting inhabited by a cast of eccentrics.

The production's dominating force was unquestionably George Parker who acted and sang with his usual innate sense of light and shade, especially in the haunted character of Carroll/Dodgson.

While there was nothing tentative about this performance, others displayed varying amounts of confidence. Chris Reddington's marvellously manic Mad Hatter gyrated through the part while Pascal Ackermann performed a stylish slither as the Caterpillar.

My chief disappointment was Emma Johnston in the title role of Alice. She emerged as a strangely pale spirit, wafting around the stage waving arms aimlessly while speaking and singing in a high-pitched child's voice, which at times was virtually inaudible. As the pivotal character, she should have the confidence to stamp her character into the imagination.

Overall an interesting, provocative evening of theatre where everything was engagingly curiouser and curiouser.

Alice runs at The Arts Centre's Gym until May 19.

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