

Backstage Christchurch - Theatre Reviews

NEW REVIEW

On a cold winter's night, Liam Stretch had his soul warmed - and examined - at the Free Theatre's production of *Woyzeck* (The Tom Waits Musical) at The Pump House.

Liam said, "Look, this is not going to be everyone's cup of tea. It is in your face; it is gritty. But overall, it's fun, weird and strangely entertaining. It's absurdly Tom Waits."

FULL REVIEW:

Woyzeck (The Tom Waits Musical)

Free Theatre

The Pump House

April 14-29

Reviewed by Liam Stretch for Backstage Christchurch

Woyzeck, the Tom Waits musical performed at The Pump House on the city's fringe, is an immersive experience that transports the audience into a world of esoteric steampunk fever dreams.

Let's start with the performance space. This was my first visit to The Pump House, a heritage industrial building complete with a precarious ceiling-mounted crane. The intimate size of this recently restored space wastes no time in thrusting the audience into the action. The arena-like staging further brought the audience into the mix.

The Pump House's abandoned Indiana Jones warehouse vibes alongside a versatile set by Stuart Lloyd-Harris – plus a healthy (probably not so healthy for the audience) dose of smoke from a very hardworking team of smoke machines – led me on the path to venture inside the misty mind of the lead character, *Woyzeck*. And what a chaotic journey it was.

I'll be honest, 15 minutes into this show; I wasn't sure whether I was enjoying it. But then I started to think of everything I knew about Tom Waits, and the man just is a bit damn weird, so with that in mind, I actually started to get a bit excited by what was before me. I also had to remind myself of my experiences with fringe theatre. Often unbridled weirdness is key. You often have to make yourself part of that weirdness to make sense of a performance.

I'm not sure whether the unusual timing of lighting was intentional. Initially, I thought it was a distraction, but as we went further down the rabbit hole, it made sense and accompanied the unnerving chaos of *Woyzeck*'s descent.

The vocal abilities of the performers, led by Hester Ulyart's portrayal of the titular character, are actually very impressive and did work convincingly to provide a haunting soundtrack to the performance.

The mix of experienced local performers, including actors Hillary Moulder, Tom Trevella, Aaron Boyce, Chris Carrow, Marian McCurdy, and Greta Bond, and musicians Reuben Derrick, Sam White, Nicole Reddington, and Doug Brush, work together to create a frankly fascinating show. Director Peter Falkenberg has done a good (albeit a bit weird) job of bringing the unique world of Woyzeck to life, and the costume and make-up by Jenny Ritchie invoke 1960s Swedish horror films.

Hillary Moulder's portrayal of Marie is rather haunting, and Aaron Boyce's transformation into the Carnival Barker and Drum Major is impressively Tom Waits-y, also a little Captain Hook from Shrek 2 (who happens to be played by Tom Waits). Marian McCurdy's performance as the Doctor is also noteworthy, bringing a Frankenstein-meets-Frankenfurter-meets-House-meets-Chris Warner vibe to the show.

Look, this is not going to be everyone's cup of tea because the original isn't either. It is in your face; it is gritty. But overall, it's fun, weird and strangely entertaining. It's absurdly Tom Waits. So with that, it's actually a rather brave choice for Free Theatre.

I've learnt to approach all my reviews with an open mind, and I'm so glad I left the house on a very cold Wednesday night to be presented with a flagon full of joyous chaos.