



## Review: Woyzeck – an avant-garde musical about misery

Posted on ~~April 15, 2023~~ April 17, 2023 by [erinharringtonnz](#)

Erin Harrington reviews Free Theatre's production of the avant-garde musical *Woyzeck* (<https://www.freetheatre.org.nz/woyzeck.html>), directed by Peter Falkenberg, at The Pump House, 544 Tuam Street, Friday 14 April, 2023.

Free Theatre's production of *Woyzeck* is an adaptation of Robert Wilson, Kathleen Brennan and Tom Waits' musical adaptation, first performed in 2000, of Georg Büchner's fragmentary, unfinished 1836/7 play. Layers within layers: each strange and dreamlike gap in narrative and form, and between works, is ripe for exploration and exploitation. This production, directed by Peter Falkenberg, belatedly completes the company's presentation of a trilogy of Wilson / Brennan / Waits musicals. The latter's expressionist, grotesque, carnival sensibilities are a compelling match for Free Theatre's interest in the avant-garde, Brecht, German theatre, the absurd (and the Absurd), and interdisciplinary collaboration. The crazed black and white patterns of the long thrust stage and the design's askew, stripped back sensibility directly recall the sets and design of earlier productions of *The Black Rider* (2017) and *Alice* (<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/production/alice-2/#evocative-intelligent-and-effective>)(2018), both staged at the company's previous home in The Gym at The Arts Centre Te Matatiki Toi Ora, just as recurring cast and musicians maintain a line of creative relationships. And there's a line further back, too; Büchner's *Woyzeck* was the first work staged by Free Theatre in 1980.

*Woyzeck* offers a cruel and odd story, which originally drew from a 'ripped from the headlines' murder. A conflicted and impoverished soldier-barber, Franz Woyzeck (Hester Ulliyart), is abused by those around him, belittled by his Captain (Chris Carrow), and subjected to medical experiments by a doctor (Marian McCurdy). His friend Andres (Tom Trevella) sees that he is having apocalyptic hallucinations. Woyzeck, mad, eventually kills his common-law wife and mother of his child (Hillary Moulder) for having an affair with a handsome Drum Major (Aaron Boyce). Neighbour Margret (Greta Bond, also operating the lights) watches on throughout. Wilson's musical adaptation offers much more narrative coherency than the open pieces of the original play. Waits and Brennan's music and sardonic songs, here performed with cantankerous energy by a ragged military band (Reuben Derrick, Nicole Reddington, Sam White, Doug Brush), bookend scenes and eventually bleed into the action proper, as Marie and Woyzeck sing both to and past one another in Marie's tragic final moments ("All the World's Green").

*Woyzeck* is as stylish, assertive and focused a production as you would expect from Free Theatre. This production is pitched as a carnival in an army barracks, and is staged in the large central heritage building of The Pump House, once the city's waterworks pumping station and now the city's most interesting demoyard. The recently restored building is utterly transformed into a warm foyer and large performance space. The brick walls have been lined to the very high ceilings with military banners, weapons, and shields, and heavy chains hang above the stage; it's quite something. Jenny Ritchie and Stuart Lloyd-Harris's creative design work, across set, makeup, costume, and lighting, beautifully render an unkempt, uneven world that's held together through force of will, or maybe spite. Cast members roam around the long thrust stage, lit by bare footlights and hanging strings of bulbs, introducing scenes and settings with signs as if we're sitting in our chairs and pews watching rounds at a wrestling match. Roll up, roll up, and see the amazing fragmenting man.

I am a little bemused by the production's self-framing as "the story of a good man who is turned by society into a murderer". What are we to see here of Woyzeck as a specifically good man? From the start Ulliyart gives a remarkable, powerfully physical rendition of Woyzeck as someone already existentially tortured by the world, an overwhelmed man with the blunted, stilted affect and electric twitches of a somnambulist who is unsure if he is the dreamer or the dream. The play offers us cruelty and violence: the violence of the military, of men, of a brutal school of experimental medicine designed to discipline the body, of blades held to necks, all in a large space decorated with the trappings of war. What a piece of work is man, in the more contemporary parlance. All

this masculine violence is channelled into the play's climactic femicide. It is effectively staged with the tension and sudden release of a whip cracking, and the play's ludic pace suddenly spasms. The world literally tilts around Woyzeck as it all comes undone; Aaron Boyce as a carnival barker maniacally reprises the terrific 'everybody row!' chorus of "Misery's the River of the World"; we're all fucked. It's grim business.

I understand the play's identity as a grotesque and violent tragedy, but I can't discern the attitude of *this* particular production, with its layers of adaptation and interpretation, towards that violence, in the present moment, especially in its gender-switched casting of Woyzeck. Some performances, like Hillary Moulder's nuanced and passionate performance as Marie, bring us in and hold us close; most others push us out, propelled by the production's stylisation and various distancing techniques. I'm not averse to a downer ending (if anything I quite like them), or stylised accounts of man's inhumanity to man, but when one man's existential crisis is another woman's slit throat I like to know why I am being asked to watch.

*Woyzeck runs until Saturday 29 April, 2023.*

Posted in [musical](#), [review](#) Tagged [free theatre](#), [musical](#), [review](#), [the pump house](#), [tom waits](#)

## Published by erinharringtonz

---

[View all posts by erinharringtonz](#)

### 1 thought on “Review: Woyzeck – an avant-garde musical about misery”

1. [Review: The Deadbeat Opera – a low-life comedy about crime, grime, and uncertain politics – Flat City Field Notes September 7, 2024 Reply](#)  
[...] Free Theatre's 2023 adaptation of Woyzeck offered misery on tap, their new companion work, The Deadbeat Opera, is presented to us overtly, in [...]

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)