

WOYZECK (TOM WAITS MUSICAL)

The Pump House, 544 Tuam St, Christchurch
14/04/2023 - 29/04/2023

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Reveals the essential tackiness of much we associate with power and influence

Review by [Lindsay Clark](#) 18th Apr 2023

The dark vision of the nineteenth century original and its uncompromising critique of the powerful in society aligns perfectly with the theatrical strengths of the Free Theatre company. It is the third production of the Waits/Brennan/Wilson trilogy. Those fortunate enough to have experienced earlier seasons (*The Black Rider* and *Alice*) will not be disappointed. It is fertile home territory for director Peter Falkenberg and a familiar ensemble of talented creative spirits.

The plot line itself does not surprise us, even after a century of so-called social reform and progress. Privilege and power signal a hierarchy and the bottom rung is very uncomfortable. A humble soldier, Woyzeck is trying to live virtuously within his little world, tenderly sharing his domestic circumstances with his lover and their infant. He is amenable to the demands of Captain and associated Drum Major even when these are unreasonable and downright humiliating. His dealings with Doctor bring only further wretchedness. The worm is bound to turn.

The wretchedness is both coloured and made compelling viewing by the wry framing of the experience. A carnival barker and monkey patrol the foyer, preparing us for the theatrical make believe to come and confirmed in a sharp introductory scene where

animal nature is explored through animal exhibits, so that we have a satirical hook to human behaviour itself.

Characters are costumed and made up in colourful carnival mode (Jenny Ritchie), tuned in by a fairground band whose role in sustaining the effect is imperative. The venue itself, a heritage pump house (which long ago pumped Christchurch sewage), contributes perfectly to the otherness of the occasion and allows for thrust staging with clever design opportunities (Stuart Lloyd-Harris).

Tom Waits' music and lyrics call for full throated treatment and this, the cast provides. Aaron Boyce is a robustly imposing Carnival Barker and Drum Major, with Tom Trevella in soldier kit as Andres, pumping things along with gusto. Marian McCurdy's pedantic Doctor and Chris Carrow as Monkey, Horse and Captain securely advance the exploration, with Greta Bond as Margret, bringing a female voice to the parade.

Love can usually be relied upon to sweeten the medicine. Here, the excellent central pairing of Marie (Hillary Moulder) and Woyzeck (Hester Ulliyart) does provide some tenderness but is also at the climax of the performance where, in spite of his struggles to follow a righteous path, the hapless fellow becomes a murderer. Played here by a woman, it is somehow more shocking and therefore effective than were it undertaken by a burly bloke.

Truly, as a species, we are best to admit the essential tackiness of much we associate with power and influence. A fairground has its entertainment but we should be aware of the reality behind the trappings.

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