

What is more frightening than a queen consumed with chopping heads off for the most minor infractions? Little else, most would probably say – unless it's an obsessive-compulsive Mad Hatter addicted to tea or a frazzled, anxiety-riddled White Rabbit who can't seem to get anywhere on time. More nightmare than dream, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* has more than its share of alarming characters, these three included, which gave the Young Nomads plenty of dramatic and comedic fodder to play with in their July production.

Directed and choreographed by Fiona Maguire and Lauren Hobbs, this three-act *Alice in Wonderland* was a psychedelic, surreal fantasia, set against some magical scenic painting that took audiences right to Wonderland's forests and waters. The production incorporated original music by Joseph Hall, imaginative lighting effects and costumes that looked as though they popped right out of a storybook.

Playing Alice were three performers -- Alice Cournane (Act 1), Elsie Palmer (Act 2), and Faye Dower (Act 3) – which helped demonstrate the different facets of confusion, then curious and then resoluteness that the girl experiences during her adventure down the Rabbit Hole. Each successive girl was physically bigger than the one previous; was this to show the growth of Alice's bravery or strength or was it coincidence? Whichever, it worked well as a means of illustrating her development and maturing throughout her ordeal.

Truly frightening was the very shrill, red-headed Queen of Hearts (Ailish Collins) who ruled Wonderland with her menacing whims and her smirking Executioners (Lisa Distill and Emily Jackson). The Duchess (Laurel Beach), the White Rabbit's boss, was also one to be feared, but less so than the Queen, as a disdainful, self-absorbed Helena Bonham Carter look-alike. The Mad Hatter, in a frenetic, larger-than-life performance by Thomas Wilson, exemplified the madness in the air in Wonderland, living up to his moniker with his wild eyes, manic utterances and can't-stand-still jitteriness.

Favourite scenes? A water-bound Act I scene set to a psychedelic, watery soundscape in which Alice is caught in the Pool of Tears with an unhelpful Mouse (Mia Barnes) and Adventure 8, Act 2, in which Alice meets the tears-prone Mock Turtle (Anneka McFarland) and a caustic Gryphon (Ella Briggs).

NODA review

*Alice in Wonderland* – Young Nomads, Newmarket – July 2019

Review by DeeDee Doke

Other colourful characters met along the way include the White Rabbit (Joseph Wall), the Caterpillar (Rose Ssemakula) Cheshire Cat (Charlie Wilson), the March Hare (Phoebe Spurgeon), the Dormouse (Cassie Byford), Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Abbie Good, Ruby Massuard), Humpty Dumpty (Grace Brighty), and the King of Hearts (Thomas Wishart), who seems to be the only Wonderland resident with any sense. There are also a Red Queen (Emily Jackson) who likes to run, and a mystical White Queen (Lucy Young) caught up between past and future.

A little under 90 minutes long, including interval, *Alice in Wonderland* took time to get into full gear, with pacing in the first act generally sluggish and too thoughtful. In the second and third acts, the momentum built, along with the energy and quicker cue pick-ups.

At the beginning of the show, the music, which I think was live, was too loud, overwhelming the voices of the performers, and the otherwise fun Pool of Tears scene, the volume on the sound effects made it difficult to hear the conversation of Alice and the Mouse. The sound balance did subsequently improve, however.

This was an ambitious production, with high staging and technical demands, not to mention characterisation challenges for the young performers, which the Young Nomads company mostly met. Audience and cast alike clearly enjoyed their adventures down the Rabbit Hole on a hot summer night.