

It's a wizard journey for Dorothy and her hip pals

THOM DIBDIN

The Wiz ****

Forth Children's Theatre, Inverleith Church Hall,

EASING on down that Yellow Brick Road, Forth Children's Theatre offer more than creditable performance of the mid-Seventies musical version of the Wizard of Oz.

The original Tony-winning Broadway production was pitched into full-on soul territory.

In this Oz, L Frank Baum's original characters are given a hip-to-the-jive makeover that Judy Garland would not have recognised.

Without trying to parody what is, in itself, something of a parody, FCT succeed in getting right down into the meat of the songs. Without the facilities for high-tech production values, they have ensured a show in which the music carries the story - even if it doesn't always tell it.

This works for two solid reasons. Firstly, in a company made up exclusively of 11 to 18-year-olds there are a good handful of the soloists who have voices that far outreach their ages in both power and inflexion.

So, if the show gets off to something of a slow start with Catriona Hewitson as Aunt Em singing The Feeling We Once Had, she doesn't allow the pedestrian pace imposed by the band to hold her back a note. Her big, strong voice carries the tune impeccably.

Secondly, the chorus is made up of individuals who give the ensemble routines all the attention to detail you would expect of soloists - while being fully aware of the need for a group dynamic.

The result is a chorus that work so well together that they can, when called upon to do so in the scenes with the big Wiz himself, act so well in concert that they are essentially performing as one character.

It's a feature of the production that plot development and dialogue is basic at the most.

Which might free up the pace, but when combined with a bare open stage means that co-ordination between band and direction needs to be much tighter if the performers are not to be left dangling as the band moves into gear for the next number.

It also means that each song needs to be a journey.

So while Katie Renton has a strong and clear enough voice to sing the part of Dorothy, and enough presence to sustain the role, there are times when she needs to focus on the overall structure of the song, rather than just its individual notes.

There is no such problem for Cameron Dyer as Scarecrow.

His big number, I Was Born on the Day Before Yesterday, with Sarah Armes, Julia Carstairs and Niamh Smith as crow backing singers, is excellent and a standout moment of the show.

Moving on down the road, Mathew Smith as Tinman and Ronan Radin as Lion ensure that there is a strongly comic element to their performances, both vocally and in their characters.

Providing the forces of good and evil are Hannah Scott as hapless good witch Addaperle and Jill Pender as wicked witch Evillene.

And they go right into the heart of what makes this show so good, as they combine big songs with a great sense of fun.

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