

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

The Snow Queen

Windmill Performing Arts and Sydney Theatre Company

Adelaide Festival Centre, Dunstan Playhouse

Until 4 October. Bookings at Bass 131 246

Tickets \$ 15 - \$ 23. \$ 68 Family.

The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Anderson is a children's story but it is a mighty complicated one to stage. For one thing, it is not a single story but a series of episodes - involving quests and danger, magical situations and animal helpers. For another, it has quite difficult, shall we say, adult concepts.

It is about two young people, Gerda and Kay, neighbours and devoted friends until one day, the boy, Kay, is struck, in the eye and in the heart, with shards from a magic mirror. After that he cannot feel or see things as they are, and falls under the thrall of the Snow Queen. In the original story he is spirited away on his sled to her castle and Gerda goes on a long arduous journey to find him.

In this adaptation Wojciech Pisarek has created a virtual world for the Snow Queen which has Kay enticed into a video game - and further away from his true self and feelings. Using real-time animation, Pisarek translates the face of actor Elaine Hudson into the hypnotic mask of the Snow Queen. It is a powerful central image and suitably so.

But in meeting the arduous task of the narrative, too many other elements are added which serve only to confuse matters. Windmill and the Sydney Theatre Company have gathered together some formidable talents for this co-production but, in this case, more is too much. Eamon D'Arcy's chirpy picture book designs, warmly lit by Nigel Levings, collide with Mark Thompson's over-zany costumes and both are at odds with, rather than a contrast to, the digital design.

There is a sense that director and dramaturg Julian Meyrick knows that the story line is a handful - from the explanatory synopsis in the program to Nancye Hayes's particular diligence as the stage narrator. But, instead of trying to explain so much, the production needs to be simplified and vivid. It is the same for Verity Laughton's script, which, except for its arch use of

street slang, stays too close to the archaic literary style of the Anderson original.

Nuala Hafner is appealing as Gerda, as is Cameron Goodall as Kay, well supported by Mark Brady as the Crow and the Reindeer and Amber McMahon as the Little Robber Girl. But their efforts are smothered by the intricacies of the production and the mannered and often moralising style of the writing. It is an irony that *The Snow Queen*, a fable about a loss of empathy, should have so little warmth and feeling itself.