Afternoon of the Elves
based on the novel by Janet Taylor Lisle
adapted by Y York

Windmill Performing Arts
and State Theatre Company of South Australia
Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre.
24 August until 4 September.

The Seattle Children’s Theatre has been an important model for the establishment of Windmill Productions and so it is entirely fitting that Linda Hartzell, the company’s artistic director since 1985, should be invited to re-stage her repertoire piece, Afternoon of the Elves, for young Australian audiences.

Adapted by Y York from a novel by American writer for children, Janet Taylor Lisle, the play focuses on Hillary, a near-teen who has been taken up by the popular girls, Alison and Jane (Katherine Fyffe and Ursula Yovich) but discovers that dressing in triplicate and singing the group song is not as interesting as being with the off-beat, oddly self-possessed Sara-Kate Connolly. Not only is she Alison’s neighbour, but Sara-Kate matter-of-factly announces that she has elves at the bottom of her garden. When Alison crawls through the hedge to see for herself, she finds a there is a lot to more to the world than her own suburban comforts, and that loyalty and friendship can make unexpected demands.

This handsome co-production from Windmill and the State Theatre Company has many strengths. Firstly there is a strong and intriguing story as Alison discovers that not only is there an elf garden (about which no-one is the slightest bit empirical) but her new friend is trying valiantly to care for her demented mother. The mix of the magical and the tough realities of Sara-Kate’s predicament is nicely balanced and readily communicated to a young audience.

Linda Hartzell’s production has a pleasing stillness, inviting the audience into its reflectiveness rather than pandering to impatience. It helps greatly that Mary Moore’s detailed set (sumptuously lit by Mark Shelton) is so engagingly detailed. Alison’s front verandah, surrounded with abundant
garden, then revolves to the spooky, over-grown and run-down yard at Sara-Kate’s house, reminding us all of how the other half live.

As Alison, Emily Hunt is earnestly determined to understand things outside her experience and Amber McMahon, already well-regarded in previous Windmill roles, is excellent again as Sara-Kate, bringing freshness, wit and tenderness to the part.

The text sits uneasily between its American origins and its re-setting in Australia and some imported phrasings jar on the ear, as do local particulars. But the play’s themes of friendship and loyalty have a sturdy directness and, with its high production values and accomplished performances, Afternoon of the Elves not only honours it audience but takes them into its confidence.