

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge

Windmill Performing Arts Company

Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre

Until 20 July. Bookings BASS 131 246

What happens when you can't remember your memories? That is the problem faced by Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper. Fortunately, she is about to be helped out by her new little chum from next door. He is also blessed with four names - in fact, Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge is the unfurling title of Mem Fox's much beloved children's book, first published in 1984 and featuring the fabulously vibrant watercolours of illustrator, Julie Vivas.

In its premiere production the newly formed Windmill Performing Arts Company has created a sheer delight for audiences of any age. Creative Producer, Cate Fowler has been a leading figure in the development of quality children's theatre - first in Adelaide as a program manager with the Festival Centre and the highly regarded Come Out festival, then in Brisbane with the Out of the Box festival and the Queensland Arts Council. She has now returned to Adelaide to head up Windmill, a project dear to the heart of former Arts Minister Diana Laidlaw, and now, a jewel in Labor's arts program.

Windmill is spinning proof of what can happen when you get together a first rate creative team and you give them enough budget to succeed. When the curtain rises - yes, a curtain! - to reveal the set of Wilfrid, we don't know where to look first. It is a giant pop-up picturebook. Eamon D'Arcy's design, a green-as-green canopy framing a cosy looking federation house with a bullnose verandah, has a boy-high, chook-peeking (PEEKING) fence separating it from the neighbouring house, the large downstage area consisting of six enormous wicker armchairs.

Those familiar with the title page of the book will instantly recognise the Julie Vivas figures, six elderly people in the old folks home next door to Wilfrid's place. But master puppet maker Al Martinez and puppetry director Peter Wilson have made them larger than life. It is perfect that Mem Fox's text, which honours the dignity and liveliness of the elderly (the book is literally named after her own father, to whose memory this production is dedicated) should be staged to give them such stature. When they stand up they are ten feet tall.

The idea is, of course, that the ginger-thatched Wilfrid, energetically and nicely underplayed by former Meryl Tankard dancer Ninian Stephen, should only be kneehigh to a whatsaname. But in their scale, and with Peter Wilson's stately choreography, the mischievous Mrs Jordan, Mr Hosking with his scary stories and Mr Tippett with his medals and his cricket scores, are godlike in their twilight. Certainly they are in the affections of a small boy, and with their huge expressions, wonderfully etched by Al Martinez and his team to register kindness, comic curiosity and wistfulness, and the costumes by Kathryn Sproul and Vanessa Ellis - wool cardies, cricket pullovers, spotted and Fauve-bright old lady dresses - they capture not only the spirit of the Vivas drawings, they are triumphs of puppetry.

Director Neill Gladwyn and dramaturg Verity Laughton took on a large task translating such a crisply and distinctively verbal text into wordless theatre. But as in his 1995 triumph for Magpie Theatre, *Verona - Romeo and Juliet*, via Buster Keaton - Gladwyn's singular, dotty form of gentle comedy is just what is needed to bring together Nigel Levings' peachy lighting, D'Arcy's technicolour set, the splendid puppets and the story of a small boy taking a seashell, a medal, a marionette and a warm brown egg to provide cues for an old lady's Remembrance of Things Past. With its whimsical soundtrack of beautiful dreamers, birdies on sycamore trees and happy days being here again, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* is irresistible in both its accomplishment and its charm. It deserves to become a classic all over again.