

A PERFECT LIKENESS

Four Stars ★★★★★

It is not known if Charles Dickens or Lewis Carroll ever met but they do in Daniel Rover Singer's play. His very fertile imagination has produced an enthralling piece of theatre. It is full of lively arguments between the two of them. It is a witty and poignant play of lost childhoods and a growing friendship between two great writers.

It contrasts the personality of these two literacy giants. Dickens is a rumbustious extrovert with an enormous ego who is not beyond making crude jokes about his bodily functions. He eagerly courts publicity. Whilst the Reverend Charles Dodgson is a prudish and very private person who dreads his name being revealed as the writer, Lewis Carroll, and of being the centre of attraction.

Having learnt that Dickens is not satisfied with the image that his publishers are using, Dodgson, a keen amateur photographer himself, writes to Dickens inviting him to his residence at Christ Church, Oxford to be photographed for a "perfect likeness".

Dickens turns up, claiming to having read "Alice in Wonderland" on the train, berates Dodgson for writing such rubbish but is fascinated by Carroll's use of fantasy and his new language.

In answer to Dickens recreating a speech from his acting days Carroll recites his hilarious pastiche of Longfellow's Hiawatha complete with actions that drew thunderous applause from the audience.

Carroll opens up and says that "he is only happy when in the company of young girls" and likes to photograph them undressed." In his naivety he fails to grasp that his actions are seen by others as pornographic and perceived as a pedophile. He dismisses these as wicked gossip and seeks to defend

himself by arguing his work is art that nudity plays such a large role in art.

Taking Dodgson into his confidence Dickens talks about his dreadful childhood – poverty and lack of education.

By the end of the act they have shaken off their hostility to each other and moved in the embryonic stage of friendship.

In the last act Dickens wishes to mesmerise Dodgson to help him release his demons.

Before doing so Dickens opens up about his own terror that has beset him for the last year. It concerns a train crash and a young actress accompanying him. He earns the second biggest laugh of the evening with his account of surviving.

Under hypnosis Dodgson believes he is talking to God, in fact it's Dickens. He talks of having strong feelings about the real Alice which he believes are reciprocated by her. But her mother has stopped him from visiting and seeing her daughter. He realises that he has lost her and releases his anguish by berating the mother. "God" praises him for inventing a world of childhood and urges him to write a sequel.

Back from hypnosis he only remembers "God's" words and turns the tables on Dickens and forces him to confess his relationship with the actress.

By the end Dodgson is seen emotionally as a Peter Pan who does not want to grow up but to stay in the happy days of his childhood. Dickens believes he has the passions and strength of a 30 year old but his body tells him otherwise.

They part as friends. Each indebted to the other.

Nick Young brings his usual style of direction to Conn Artists Theatre production. It is sensitive and unobtrusive and, in this case avoids the danger of the two actors becoming static talking heads, by subtle movements and slight changes of position.

The set and costume designs are the work of Laura Kimber.

Again simplicity is the keynote and convey well the rooms of a college don. I liked the use of a lopsided wall hanging at the back of the stage which then becomes a screen for slides depicting Victorian scenes and other characters.

Of course, the success of the play relies on fine performances and Ross Muir (Dodgson) and David Stephens (Dickens) provided them. Their portrayals, assisted by Young's direction, made them living pulsating beings. Muir had you believing Dodgson's naivety and feeling for his loss. Stephens relished his role and made it a full bloodied one but never going over the top.

Barrie Jerram - Reviewer for Brighton Argus.