

Richmondshire Today

REVIEW: A Perfect Likeness at the Georgian Theatre Royal

September 21, 2021 – Reviewer: Barry Jones

Lewis Carroll, the famed author of the much-loved children's classic, *Alice in Wonderland*, has strong links with the area.

Born in 1832 as Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, his family moved to the Rectory at Croft when he was 11-years-old and a year later he was sent to Richmond Grammar School (now Richmond School) before completing his pre-University education at Rugby.

It was therefore particularly fitting to see Conn Artists Theatre Company's touring production of 'A Perfect Likeness' on home turf at Richmond's Georgian Theatre Royal.

The show's title alludes to an intriguing, fictional encounter between Dodgson and the celebrity author Charles Dickens following an offer by Dodgson to photograph Dickens and create "a perfect likeness". What ensues is a 'baring of souls' dialogue between two very different men. Dodgson (deeply reclusive with a stammer) and Dickens (boisterous, extrovert and not adverse to publicly breaking wind).

Ross Muir (Dodgson) and David Stephens (Dickens) are compelling in their roles and execute this two-hander with fluent ease, bringing expertly to life these two great icons of English literature. As Dickens points out, he invented Christmas and Carroll invented childhood!

Dodgson is a perplexing and many-sided figure – mathematician, logician, photographer, poet and story-teller – but he is locked in childhood and is a Peter Pan figure who has taken refuge in his wonderland. The play sensitively touches on his real-life love of the young child, Alice Liddell, and reveals his hurt and confusion as – when she grows up – her parents ban him from seeing her, thus expelling him from their fantasy world. He reveals to Dickens that he is only happy in the company of young girls and in his naivety fails to grasp that his behaviour is seen by others as paedophilic.

A particularly striking scene is when Dickens hypnotises Dodgson who believes he is talking to God. He expresses the strong feelings he has for Alice and the anguish he feels at her loss.

Unlike Dodgson – who doesn't want to leave the security of his childhood – Dickens confesses to a dreadful upbringing, marked by poverty and lack of education. He also reveals the complexities of his dull marriage, secret love affair and fear of scandal. His own confession centres on a train crash that happened the previous year, and the subsequent terror that it might become public knowledge that he was travelling with his young mistress. Indeed, he admits only agreeing to the request to sit for the portrait because Carroll's writings made him laugh – thereby unlocking his creativity and breaking the literary deadlock that had followed this event.

Thus, these two completely different men take on the role of confessor and muse for each other and by the end of the play they part as friends each indebted to the other.

It is a sensitive piece, dealing with hard-hitting themes but it is also light-hearted and humorous. Dickens recital of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* attracts much laughter as does a mock duel with a walking stick and umbrella. There are also plenty of rich extracts from the works of each of the masters.

As well as showcasing fine acting, the set is also worthy of comment. It beautifully conveys the rooms of the Oxford academic Dodgson – with a wallpaper screen through which images of the illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland* and photographs of Dodgson's young muses are artfully projected. A bookcase is skewed across to one side with gravity defying angles that nod at the disorientation of falling down a rabbit hole and the world of Dodgson's vivid and colourful imagination.

This is a well-crafted piece of drama, excelling at all levels.