

# LIMELIGHT

## Music, Arts & Culture

Review

### **Boojum! (State Opera of South Australia)**

The 1986 opera by Martin and Peter Wesley-Smith returns as part of SOSA's The Lost Operas of Oz in a brilliantly conceived production.

Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre

Reviewed on 5 July, 2019

by [Vincent Plush](#) on 6 July, 2019

It has taken precisely a third of a century for *Boojum!* to return home to Adelaide. The question: was it worth the wait. The answer: a resounding yes!

*Boojum!* is a two-act, two-hour fantasy opera by identical twins, Martin and Peter Wesley-Smith, born in Adelaide (about 30 minutes apart) in August 1945.

(Disclosure: I've known them since around 1968. We were composition students together at Adelaide University, and have remained close friends since that time.) So, I might be a wee bit biased when I declare that I think *Boojum!* is a true musical and theatrical masterpiece.



**Brock Roberts, Katrina Mackenzie and Adam Goodburn.**  
Photograph © Soda Street Productions

In 1984, the twins travelled to the USA and saw a few Broadway shows. With characteristic modesty, they thought they could do “something like this too”.

Fortuitously, they had a commission from Anthony Steel for a new music theatre piece for the 1986 Adelaide Festival. This would be Steel’s fifth and final festival, which would also present two other notable premieres with local resonances, the long-awaited *Voss* by Richard Meale and David Malouf (still waiting a second airing!) and my own musical pageant *The Wakefield Chronicles*, whose sheer noise brought down parts of the roof of St Peter’s Cathedral. Delivered in the 150th year of the State of South Australia, Steel’s last festival hurrah also entailed a visit by the Queen.

A production of the State Opera, *Boojum!* opened in the Scott Theatre at the University of Adelaide on March 10, 1986. The director Gale Edwards ramped up the pizzazz and glitter, the conductor Andrew Greene wrote new music, most of the technology was eviscerated (Martin Wesley-Smith is universally recognised as a pioneer of computer music) and the twins disowned the production. They refused to join the curtain call, but did appear in the royal reception line backstage. Standing behind them, I can report that Her Majesty was more bemused than amused, having been required to sit through the caterpillar-antics of a male stripper, whereas His Royal Highness immediately saw the references to Tweedeldum and Tweedeldee. “Which one of you is which?” enquired he.

Despite this inauspicious start, *Boojum!* lumbered east to performances in Newcastle and at the Brisbane Expo, across the ocean to brilliant concert performances in La Jolla, California, and an inspired theatre production in Chicago. Aside from a full recording made by the Sydney Philharmonia, and snippets performed by Wesley-Smith champions like Simone Young and Roland Peelman, *Boojum!* has remained mysteriously silent for 33-plus years. But now, it has a short season as part of a program at State Opera of South Australia called The Lost Operas of Oz.

The ‘opera’ – can it be called that? – is a fantastical stage realisation of that epic nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll, the pen-name of the Victorian don and cleric, the Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. An improbable band of characters embark on a search for the elusive ‘Snark’. Their worst fear is that this ‘Snark’ might turn into a ‘Boojum’.

“What does it all mean?” asks Alice, the young girl who was a favourite of the Rev Dodgson, the photographer of little girls. “Nothing, my dear,” replies his *alter ego*. “It means nothing at all.”

That’s hardly helpful trying to trace a conventional narrative but it soon becomes obvious that this is far from a conventional piece or production.



The cast of *Boojum!* Photograph © Soda Street Productions

Joseph Mitchell's wonderful new production restores the more contemplative, philosophical side of Carroll/Dodgson. It explores dualities in themselves, the twin creators and each of us as we embark on the mysteries of journeys through life. It bubbles and bristles along with many deft and finely-honed touches of 'stage-iness'. Like the score itself, which is virtually a patch-work quilt of defined numbers, it floats between music hall and Broadway, between church sermon and personal confession. Most of all it engages the imagination and, at times, is truly incredibly moving. It has us in its thrall until the final curtain. True to the real spirit of the work it reveals new intricacies I had not considered before.

Similarly, Simone Romaniuk's modest but colourful designs spring from the imagination of the Rev Dodgson. The single-set is a playground with a Miro-esque fragmented garden, a roundabout and cubby house (Carroll's home) with its wall of trinkets and floor covered with a chest-board. I felt more could be made of the connection with chess and other word-games. Also, some incursions from the contemporary world: a laptop for Carroll, mobile phone flashes, and the like. The work is timeless, it belongs to our era as well, testified by the inevitable Trump-reference and his red hat.

Down in the pit, Warwick Stengårds led a trio of musicians and 20 principals with magisterial command. Tricky rhythms were tossed off effortlessly, all entries secure. Special plaudits to pianist Mark Sandon for mastering musical styles known to the 20th century, ably abetted by Louis Cann on double bass and Sami Butler negotiating a battery of percussion.

The cast, all locals as far as I could see, was uneven. The standouts were Joshua Rowe as the Bellman, whose big engaging baritone filled the thin acoustic of the stage. In similar vein were the tenors Adam Goodburn and Brock Roberts, as the bi-focal Rev Dodgson, the quintessence of questioning Victorian moral rectitude, and Roberts as the white-suited, Barnum-esque showman. The purity of soprano Katrina Mackenzie as the young Alice contrasted markedly with the darker demeanour of soprano Joanna McWaters as the older Alice, Mrs Hargreaves. Their Richard-Strauss-like duet brought tears to many an eye.

The cast was bolstered by a dozen young singer-actors from SOSA's Winter School Ensemble, a kind of 'work-experience' exercise, which bolstered the choral amplitude and stage busy-ness considerably. Perhaps with a longer rehearsal period, the cast could have injected more 'oomph' into their fantasy-characters. At times they seemed somewhat wooden, uncertain in their roles.

Overall, though, this Snark-hunting corpus was a lively and amiable crew, delivering their witty lines and ear-worm melodies as best they could, under the acoustic circumstances.

And what melodies! Martin Wesley-Smith, former composer of ABC children's radio songs, member of The Wesley Three, and one-time potential full-time banjo-player, is the consummate tune-smith, a melody-man who can turn his hand with the best of them, from Gershwin to Stephen Sondheim, and back again. As we rolled out into the freezing Adelaide night, those tunes ran through our heads.

*Boojum!* is the opening gambit of The Lost Operas of Oz, an adventurous and admirable project, which is the brain-child of Stuart Maunder, Artistic Director of SOSA since March 2018. Over the next three years, SOSA will look again at nine Australian operas that have been lost in the sands of time and in our lust for the new.

On August 3 and 4, they will present *Christina's World*, the 1985 collaboration of Ross Edwards and Dorothy Hewett. On October 4 and 5, they will exhume *Madeleine Lee*, by John Haddock and Michael Campbell, which premiered in 2004. Both these productions will be given in the historic Queen's Theatre, much smaller and with superior acoustics.

The choice of the Dunstan Playhouse as a venue for *Boojum!* had good and bad points. Opened in 1974 as a home for the State Theatre Company, the 'Don' seats around 600, an ideal size for a production like this. Its acoustics, though, are notoriously poor for music. Designed as a live theatre space, the hall is dead, singers cannot project their voices, for them it must be a near-death experience.

Fundamental to a production of *Boojum!* must be the clear delivery of the words, spoken and sung. Peter Wesley-Smith's libretto is incredibly clever, outrageously pun-ridden and utterly fantastical, true to the spirit of Lewis Carroll. Especially in the case of female voices, I heard maybe half their sung lines. A pity the budget did not extend to sound design, with discreet amplification and body microphones for the main cast members. It would be good also to see some return of the techno-gee-whizz-adry that was shorn from the original production.

So, *quo vadis*, er, *Boojum!* On the strength of the present Adelaide production, it certainly deserves a wider season. For the moment, let's be grateful that *Boojum!* has re-emerged after all these decades, grateful to SOSA's vision and to Joseph Mitchell's thoughtful and brilliantly conceived production.