



Mon
90/73



Tue
91/66

- [Entertainment](#)
- [Theater](#)

[Trial by Jury beats Alice in her Wonderland](#)

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- [Staff Writer](#)
- [0 comments](#)



Like all such festivals, the Capital Fringe Festival highlights cutting edge performances about gutsy, original subject matter that boldly speaks about today's issues and problems. And what says that better than these two shows about – Victorian England.

Wait a minute, Victorian England? These people were so uptight that they used doilies to hide table legs. They had major convulsions over Oscar Wilde. What are they doing at the Fringe?

Despite the “in your face” attitude of a lot of Fringe, you can often find the classics sitting right next to new and original works, but do not be surprised to find companies taking an old story and giving it a modern twist. That's what two local theater groups are doing at this year's festival, but with varying degrees of success.

The better of the two is Victorian Lyric Opera Company, which generally performs in Rockville, and their production of Gilbert and Sullivan's “Trial by Jury.” This is a great introductory G&S work – while not as famous as some of their later efforts, the score is lovely, the plotline quite humorous, and as a 50 minute one act, it poses no problems for the uninitiated.

The plot involves a breach of promise suit, a dated element where the man reneges on the promise to marry and the jilted bride sues for damages. VLOC takes this idea and moves it to modern day with our media obsessed culture. Reporters thrust their cameras and microphones everywhere, while the lawyers and defendants all play to the crowd. The judge and jurors openly present their decisions even before one word of sworn testimony is offered in court, as if they were all Nancy Grace.

The modern day attire and elements are no doubt a cost saving element, but the updating does not hurt the production. In fact, there is plenty of great stage business involving the bumbling judge (who got his position because of someone's “elderly ugly daughter”) where he does all sorts of things in the background with coffee makers and iPads and not following the case at all.

Directors Ali and Pete Oliver-Krueger keep it all moving nicely and the singing is strong throughout. Courtney Kalbacker is especially good, part

abandoned lover and part slinking vamp. The real star, as always with these operettas, is the authority figure. As the Learned Judge, Blair Eig steals every scene he can, especially when he is introduced with major fanfare (“All Hail, Great Judge”) and immediately sings a song explaining what a bumbling fool he is (“When I, Good Friends, Was Called to the Bar”).

“Trial by Jury” is a somewhat neglected gem in the Gilbert and Sullivan canon, but the Victorian Lyric Opera Company makes look all shining and new again.

Greenbelt Art Center is mounting an adaptation of a much more familiar work with “Alice in Wonderland.” This is a modern update of the Lewis Carroll novels, a more Avant-garde approach that was originally developed by the Manhattan Project under the direction of Andre Gregory.

The production itself is very well done by Greenbelt and it begins with a bang with the ensemble reciting the famous nonsense poem Jabberwocky. With simple theatrical gestures, the six actors imaginatively portray Alice’s fall down the Rabbit Hole, her confusion at her constant changes in size, and the silly energy of the caucus race.

Liz Cassedy is a very different Alice and often much closer to the book – a girl with a bit of a chip on her shoulder that makes her overly correct conversations in Wonderland well worth the verbal mocking of the other characters. In one great moment, after the Caterpillar has left, Alice suddenly takes a puff from his hookah pipe. Haven’t you always wondered?

But about halfway through, the production loses its way. Maybe the novelty of the concept wore off but the final half has a lot less energy than the first part. At one point we leave the “Wonderland” novel in mid croquet game and jump totally unprepared into the chess game in the final scenes of “Through the Looking Glass.” Instead of truly ending, the production just stops as Alice suddenly wakes up. Despite the best efforts of the Greenbelt cast, what began as an intriguing concept ends up getting as lost in Wonderland as Alice herself does.

There are over a hundred shows at the Fringe Festival this year, which runs to July 29. For more information, go online to <http://www.capfringe.org/>

Trial by Jury – 3 Stars

Alice in Wonderland – 2 Stars

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