

KILLER QUEEN'S REDEMPTION

Evocative spin on a classic tale

ROSE RED. Directed by Pieter Bosch Botha, with Dianne Simpson. At the Alexander Upstairs Theatre, daily (excluding Tuesday) until Saturday at 9pm. **STEYN DU TOIT** reviews.

AN ABANDONED cottage lies in disarray. Among the dusty wreckage are seven tiny chairs scattered around a knee-length dining table. Scouring the rest of the scene you almost miss it at first: a browning apple, bitten only once, peeking out from beneath a pile of leaves. Could it perhaps be her footsteps that you hear approaching from outside?

But it is not Snow White who eventually enters the cabin.

It is her stepmother, the Evil Queen (Dianne Simpson), who steps through the door and into the almost forgotten memories of our childhoods.

The last we heard she was being chased off a cliff by the dwarves. Yet, there she stands before us: cloaked in black, carrying a cracked mirror and emitting nostalgia.

Created by Simpson along with director Pieter Bosch Botha, *Rose Red* is a contemporary take on the well-known fairy tale.

By shifting the narrative to tell the story from the Evil Queen's perspective, however, this is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* like you've never heard it before.

Made out to be a cold-hearted and cruel monster, the spirit of the

Evil Queen is unable to find eternal rest. She has to settle the score first. And it is us, as viewers, she has invited to hear her final confession. A woman of intense substance and duality, you'll soon find you have more in common with her than you might think.

Growing up with very little in a world that forced her to know her place as "a woman", she first started working as a servant at the king's castle. There everyone knew her as a bubbly, enthusiastic worker. It was only after the death of the queen, Snow White's mother, that she fell in love with (and began an affair) with the king.

Her happiness sadly turned into heartbreak after their marriage as she was soon forced to witness her husband, unable to cope with the death of his first wife, pine away and die. To make matters worse, the Evil Queen could see that little Snow White was also being groomed by the world to favour beauty over brains.

This, of course, does not excuse the resentment she cultivated towards her stepdaughter, nor the scheming to have her assassinated by a huntsman.

But thanks to Simpson's stellar acting, we do get to understand her motivations. Able to project redolent expressions evoking myriad feelings and memories, her performance will stay with you long after you've left the theatre.



CONFESSIOAL Dianne Simpson's character reveals all in the search for eternal rest in *Rose Red*, a compelling adaptation of *Snow White*.

Under Dawid Boverhoff's musical direction, several well-known songs are skilfully woven into the production.

Backed by Albert Combrink on keyboard, the likes of *Fields of Gold* and *Pokerface* are given new insight, thanks to Simpson's evocative and wide-ranging vocal talents.

Through her emphatic performance we get to experience Coldplay's *Viva La Vida* as an anthem for ambition, for instance, or Tori Amos's *Winter* as a requiem for a father who passed away.

The creative decision to use Annie Lennox's *Keep Young And Beautiful* as illustration of a world

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that teaches young girls to focus on their appearances instead of their intellect, was also spot on.

While Brandi Carlile's *The Story*, Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* and Sting's *Fields of Gold* have been covered to death, it is once again Simpson's remarkable insight into the essence of their words and how they relate to her character that makes for indelible enjoyment.

Rose Red has the potential to develop into a great theatre franchise and I'd love to see Botha and Simpson tackle the psyche behind other notoriously misunderstood fairy tale characters.

I'm sure *Hansel and Gretel*'s witch will be able to tell us a thing or two about juvenile vandalism, or that Cinderella's wicked stepsisters

will have an opinion on parental favouritism.

Life is not all sunshine, candy-floss and bluebirds sitting on our shoulder. By the time you've reached adolescence chances are that you would have already been slapped by reality a few times.

You might get born a Snow White, but the mere act of living will eventually also bring out the Evil Queen in you.

However, as Simpson tells us before her character finally finds solace: darkness is needed for the light to be able to shine through.

● Tickets are R90 to R100. To book, call 021 300 1652.