

---

**MADAM LARK**  
**Strut & Fret**  
**Botanic Gardens**

Review by Simon Slade

Performances in the Botanic Gardens during the day are fraught with difficulties. Factor in the fact that this show is targeted to children aged six to twelve, and it is a testament to these performers that they hold their audience enthralled.

The show begins with a forest walk to the performance area. All the way, we can see Madam Lark, played by Christine Johnston, and her tuba-playing cohort Bluebell, played by Michele Watt.

Christine Johnston has an astounding history. She is one of Australia's most distinguished cabaret singers, has been the subject of an ABC TV's Australian Story and is legendary for making the best bird noises in the country.

As much known for her experimental use of voice as she is for her dramatic visual style and unique sense of humour, she has the ability to transform diagrams and even hairstyles into wonderful sounds.

Using a head microphone and speakers that Madam Lark had to pass in front of, the excellent mixing saw that feedback was avoided.

Children of all ages were captivated and amused by her bird impressions and her playing of the musical saw, but her vocal performance of "Love Me Tender" as though it was being played on Cowbells brought the house down.

The children then get involved in the show by drawing diagrams, which are then interpreted vocally. This sort of involvement, where the content depends on the child, really engaged the audience and there was no shortage of eager volunteers. Diagrams ranged from the simple and easily sung, to the wild scribble of 4 children at once that left poor Madam Lark looking like she could do with a stiff drink!

At least one audience member must have known about the operatic quality of Christine Johnston's voice. When her mobile phone rang just after the show had started, the ringtone was Nessun Dorma from Turandot! But perhaps she is not an operagoer, as she proceeded to answer the call and then walk through the rest of the audience having a conversation! All this was about ten minutes after we had been asked to turn off mobile phones!

But even with a distraction like that, Madam Lark was unshaken and unstoppable, rounding out the show with vocal interpretations of the varying hairstyles in the audience!