

PANTOMIME is an unusual form of theatre. Cross-dressing, injokes, slapstick, deliberate overacting, sing-a-long songs and the unquestioned inevitability that good will triumph over evil. Oh, and as much fun for the cast as for the audience.

Babes In The Wood, the latest seasonal outing from the prolific Faringdon Dramatic Society, had all of these and more. This made it a relaxing treat not only for the audience at the village's community college but also for the Society itself, whose recent heavyweight outings include Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and whose next show owes much to Shakespeare.

Writer Peter Webster's plot has all the right ingredients as his fictitious nation's king and queen – as seems to be in vogue with monarchs – takes a tour of their country, leaving their domain and their children in the hands of the sinister Count Effete. Fortunately, as happens in these things, the young prince and princess have lots of help to escape, from their guardian Mrs Custard Pigh, a maid called Marion, a fairy godmother and, of course, the audience and, well, you know how it turned out In The End.

The script has pace and wit and director Jo Webster keeps the action moving – quite literally – with regular good use of the stalls as well as the stage. Debra Warner's accomplished band of musicians show much talent, the songs are well performed and all the dancers deserve a special mention.

I particularly enjoyed the skeleton dance and, even more so, the routine accompanying the music of Kylie Minogue – it makes a welcome change to see such modern dance in such a traditional show. The courtiers' So Long, Farewell routine from *The Sound of Music* was also performed well – both the dance and the music – and by parodying it, the Society even managed to head off anyone who thought it twee.

Many individual performances are worth particular note: Jeni Summerfield entertained as an original motorcycling, horse-riding, cycling Fairy Godmother; Karen Price was perfect as the thigh-slapping Robin of Loxley; Karen Whiffen's queen hit some very pure high notes; I enjoyed Kate Lord's side-long glances and exasperated looks as the man-hungry Mrs Custard Pigh; and the society's two young leads were both excellent, with Emily Downes particularly natural as the princess.

The villains were all good, too, even if none seemed capable of true evil. Dave Headey's smooth Effete enjoyed the best lines, with his fleeting impression of Tony Blair a particular highlight of the night, and Nick Coard and Paul Mountford-Lister perfect as the cowardly, bungling pantomime villains.

The show did suffer slightly as a straightforward, good vs evil panto, from a combination of too many ideas. In particular the introduction and eventual demise of the witch seemed to be only a minor, almost irrelevant sub-plot. But without it we would not have seen Sarah Varnom, who, on her rare and brief forays onto the stage, captivated the audience with the outstanding performance of the night.

The wedding, too, of Robin and Marion, while inevitable in as much as these things must happen in a show like this, seemed again to be written and played as a minor plot-line until the very final scenes. It also gave Kate Lord and Hannah Logan the final entrance in the bows which, considering their joint storyline had happened so late in the show, seemed strangely out of context.

But these are minor quibbles. This was a fine production by an enthusiastic and professional cast, orchestra and behind-the-scenes team. The fact that many of the cast knew many of the audience – and vice versa – gave it a particular charm. Where else would you see a villain entering stage left and hear a small voice at the back of the audience calling out: “Is that my daddy?”

Every village should have a show such as this, and every community a society as committed and talented. For those who don't, I wonder if they tour?