

Babes in the Wood

A revised pantomime by Peter Webster
(first performed 10 years ago).

Performed in Jan/Feb 2002

Director: Jo Webster with help from Simon Wisbey

Every small town should have a show such as this

PANTOMIME is an unusual form of theatre. Cross-dressing, in-jokes, 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 town'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

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 Karen Price and Hannah Logan 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;

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 small town 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?

PETER TAYLOR-WHIFFEN

Oh, yes they did!

WHO said panto is a dying art? It was certainly very much alive and kicking when the Faringdon Dramatic Society staged their dazzling production of "Babes in the Wood" at the Community College on 25th/26th January and 1st/2nd February.

Lively audiences at the show's six performances were enchanted by Karen Price's Principal Boy (Robin) and the demure Hannah Logan as Marion. Dave Headey (the dastardly Count Effete) was duly hissed and booed at his every villainous appearance and the bumbling antics of would-be hitmen Nick Coard and Paul Mountford-Lister (Mr. Rough and Mr. Ready) had everyone in stitches as did the highly original entrances of Fairy Godmother, Jeni Summerfield, first as

hands on the gorgeous Robin and was ecstatic at the climax of the show to be rewarded with a night on the town with the whole of the English Rugby squad!

Debra Warner led an accomplished band of musicians, who provided excellent backing to a wonderful range of vocals and dances - particularly the scary *danse macabre* of the troupe of skeletons. And who could forget that sizzling routine the girls performed in Act 1 to the accompaniment of a Kylie Minogue hit? Spice girls - eat your hearts out!

The show, written and directed by husband-and-wife team Peter and Jo Webster, veterans of the Faringdon Drama Society of sixteen years

ton-up motor-biker, next cantering on as a huntsman, and then an Olympic runner powering across the stage on Nike trainers to the strains of *Chariots of Fire*.

Joe Yon and Emily Downes were delightful as the Prince and Princess. Their guardian, the man-eating Mrs. Custard-Pigh (Kate Lord), seemed more interested in getting her

standing, featured a cast of some seventy actors, with superb musical backing from an orchestra of nine musicians. A behind-the-scenes crew of thirty brought the total of those involved in the production to over a hundred, drawn from Drama Society members and a number of local schools, and over the four days of performances the panto attracted a total attendance of over eight hundred.

OH, YES IT DID!

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