

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Beauty and the Beast
Date : 31st January 2026
Venue : The Elms Primary School, Faringdon
District : London District 12

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[Show Report](#)

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's annual pantomime, "Beauty and the Beast". Gary had produced the show and was on duty front of house, yet he still found a moment for a chat, while author and director Bex Hutchings was generous with her time both before the show and during the interval. I was pleased to note that the new seat reservation system appeared to be working well.

You know that if Bex is involved with a pantomime it is certain to be interesting and entertaining, and probably innovative as well. Her presentation of "The Ruby Slippers", staged two years ago, was a novel interpretation of "The Wizard of Oz" which explored the boundary between a musical and a pantomime, but arguably ended up on the fence. This isn't necessarily a problem, but when an audience turns up to see a pantomime there are certain expectations which probably have to be met. You don't need to tick all the boxes, and you'd be foolish to try, but the appeal of pantomime lies largely in the comforting familiarity of the format. The audience needs to recognise the characters, be confident in the plot, and understand its own role in the drama.

That wasn't always the case in "The Ruby Slippers", but there was no mistaking which theatrical tradition this adaptation of "Beauty and the Beast" belongs to. Belle is a classic, wholesome pantomime princess, seeking true love; the Beast, at heart, is a flawed prince seeking redemption while masquerading as someone else altogether; Mamma Kaye is an archetypal Dame; and Hugh Geego has many of the characteristics of the boo-able baddie, even if his faults are rather more subtle and modern than the outright evil of a wicked witch. Add in a comedy duo, a pantomime horse, a talented supporting cast, a script featuring gags of frankly variable quality, and plenty of opportunities for call and response, and you are left in no doubt that this is a proper traditional pantomime.

Bex is always interested in character, and the principals here were far from two-dimensional. Bella-Storm Rowley was excellent as Belle; she is an assured and natural performer, winning the audience's trust and confidence as she politely but firmly declined Hugh's advances, and wrestled with the complex emotions she felt towards the Beast. Bella-Storm has strong stage presence, moved well in the ensemble numbers, and was able to ensure that her character's essential goodness and kindness shone through. She is also an accomplished soprano singer, embellishing her melodies in the modern style, and while a few words were lost in the opening musical number her good diction meant that most of her lines came across clearly. Bella-Storm understands the importance of looking the audience right in the eye, and this was exactly the sort of performance you want at the heart of any pantomime.

Matthew Warner gave a memorable portrayal of the Beast. He certainly has the stature for the role and his initial characterisation was appropriately full of understated menace: a storm-cloud forever threatening to break. In the first half I was somehow hoping that he would drop the tone of his voice to

complement the darkness implicit in his performance, but I came to see that Matthew's unexpectedly light tone hinted at the unseen prince within; his strong upper range meant that he could certainly belt out a song, and some of his top notes were wonderfully sustained. The transition from fearsome beast to caring and popular prince was seamless and believable, and the development of character within this role – for example, when Belle feels able to dance with the Beast with genuine yet guarded affection – was a highlight of the show.

Kevin Jones, as Hugh Geeogo, had a not dissimilar problem to solve. Hugh is not an outright baddie – the Mean Girls at least seem to regard him as a bit of a catch – but his seemingly limitless arrogance and self-regard don't make him popular. This is the character the audience should be booing, and while Kevin could strike a pose with the best of them, he could have worked the audience even harder through the fourth wall to draw a bigger vocal response from us. Kevin brought a certain restlessness to his portrayal, and for the most part ensured that this didn't spill over into over-gesturing; he is also a fine singer, particularly in his upper range – indeed, the quality of the principals' singing in general was a noteworthy feature of this production.

Hugh was given strong support by Heather Kent as Achoo – evidently named for a single gag, but it was a gag that was timed faultlessly throughout. The role of Hugh's henchman isn't central to the narrative, but Heather gave an object lesson in pantomime performance: projecting strongly, executing her moves and dances with precision, and keeping her energy levels high. Her excellent control as she sang the chromatic sequences in her showpiece musical number was particularly impressive.

Hugh may be doing his best to woo Belle, but an adoring gaggle of girls only have eyes for him. Isla Maline as Nelly, Jasmine Clark as Shelly and Tylah-Jay Edmonds as Kelly were ridiculously well matched as the Mean Girls with the similarities in their fine wigs and outfits matched in their movements and behaviours. In my opinion it was a pity they stood so far apart when providing backing vocals for Belle, as they would have fed off each other's energy if they had been standing closer together; this would have built confidence in their harmonies and put a bit more snap in their clicks. The narrative calls for a group of silly, simpering girls and that was precisely what Isla, Jasmine and Tylah-Jay gave us – “We don't fight, we get fought over!” – with their every action and reaction suggesting that these characters spend a lot of time in each other's company.

Matt Wheeler played Mamma Kaye, our classic pantomime dame. Except, well, even here there was a twist as Mamma Kaye is Belle's mother which creates a different parent-child dynamic to that found in most pantomimes (when the dame is the mother of the principal boy). Nor did Mamma Kaye have anyone obvious to flirt with; I did wonder if she might have caught Hugh's eye but I think both Hugh and Mamma felt they had to draw the line somewhere. Despite these challenges, Matt appeared to have a splendid time portraying this larger-than-life character, showing off the technicolour frock and generously-proportioned handbag, and finding the humour in every situation.

Andrea Forgione as Ray and Abby Valentine as Faye led the comic characters with distinction – both had engaging personalities and projected their sung and spoken lines clearly. Andrea in particular proved very adept at dealing with whatever the audience could throw at her, so it was no surprise to learn that she teaches in Oxford, an occupation that must surely sometimes draw on a similar skillset. Andrea and Abby are quite dissimilar in stature, a fact which was effectively exploited in their scenes; they also affected Scottish accents which allowed them to tap into the rich heritage of humour from north of the border. Critically, they acted out their scenes with relentless energy, so if a joke failed to land or a bit of slapstick didn't quite work out it hardly mattered: we were already on to the next thing.

How wonderful it was to see a proper pantomime horse back on stage! Jayne Hoyland and Ellie-May Smith donned the fur to bring us Phillipe Phillop, and through excellent teamwork and skilful manipulation they truly brought the character to life. They were helped by the quality of the costume as Phillipe had a lopsided grin which made him instantly lovable, but the subtlety of the actors' movements gave him genuine personality. Poor old Phillipe had to go up and down quite a lot of stairs – challenge enough I would have thought, but he managed them without obvious mishap.

The transformation of the prince into a beast is not the only bit of sorcery to have taken place in the castle, as the servants have been changed into a selection of household items. There was a sense that Bex hadn't wanted to attract the attention of Disney's lawyers as the familiar enchanted characters from the animated film were replaced by new objects with similar characteristics. Lumens, played by Andrew Slater, bore a particularly close resemblance to his cartoon counterpart, but Andrew was able to give him a distinct personality, most notably by making him the dominant character in the castle and by dropping the French accent. Andrew has good stage presence and brought real expression to his performance despite the limitations imposed by the costume; he could perhaps have used the costume to greater advantage by striking the characteristic pose more often.

Jobsworth, played by Verity Roberts, was at least as well regulated as her Disney equivalent, but in my opinion, there was something a little bit uncomfortable about characterising her as a toilet. Verity is a skilful actor and was able to make Jobsworth the butt of quite a few jokes (see what I did there?), but somehow the lavatory humour, for me at least, matched the costume better than it matched the character. Verity did however deliver her song so memorably that I'll never be able to listen to the original version in the same way again. Vixz Edmonds characterised Mrs Pans as rather more combative than her teapot cousin, but nevertheless retained some of the latter's maternal instincts; her scene with the Beast was amongst the most serious in the show, and all the more effective for it.

The principals were supported by a substantial ensemble composed mainly of children; the young actor playing the squirrel made a particularly strong impression but was not individually credited in the programme. There was some unaccompanied but accurate ensemble singing, and the chorus delivered the big company numbers with exemplary enthusiasm; indeed, the final song was the embodiment of a community enterprise, with the stage packed with actors of all ages and varying ability singing and dancing without reserve. The choreography, by Bex Hutchings, Jade Atkinson, Bertie Sharrocks and Jayne Hoyland, was generally inclusive and conceived to enable company singing, with modest steps and rather more flamboyant arm movements; the occasional showpiece dance (such as Belle and the Beast) was well judged. It was also noticeable that some of the principals found a little bit extra in their performances when they were part of a bigger ensemble – for example, the Mean Girls often found the same groove, while Achoo had that little bit more snap in her movements.

The band, led by Musical Director Duncan Sinclair at the piano, was another strength of the production. As well as providing sensitive support to the singers, the musicians provided incidental music and prefaced each act with a medley of musical numbers which showcased Richard Lock's melodic lead guitar, Mike Fraser's solid bass and Nick Morris's restrained and disciplined drumming.

The production values were generally impressive, most notably the colourful and stylised panel depicting a rose just downstage of the cyclorama. This was a really striking image, beautifully lit and cleverly used to denote the passage of time; in my opinion it was a pity that the same image wasn't used on the publicity materials as it would have given the presentation a holistic design theme. The

rest of Bex Hutchings' set design was more functional, with patterned, multi-purpose legs, but the generous forestage was used to good effect and the scenes played out here had admirable immediacy. The lighting design was filled with pleasing details such as the contrast between the indigo cyclorama and the illuminated panel, and the use of gobos on the tabs; the sound design ensured that a good balance was maintained between the onstage performers and the band, with only a few lyrics lost. Sound effects were only used on a few occasions and there might have been more scope for these.

The properties, by Christine Milne, included components of a traditional but sadly under-utilised slapstick kitchen. The potential of properties to contribute to the comedy was well represented in Faye's giant pencil and tiny notebook. The nine-strong costume team had assembled a wonderful collection of outfits, from themed sets of villager costumes and the Mean Girls' complementary frocks, to dancing choruses of cutlery, salt and pepper pots, and the principal enchanted characters' imaginative and beautifully realised outfits. Ray and Faye sported lab coats to represent their manic inventiveness, and it remains a mystery exactly how Ray carried off the comedy glasses and moustache for the entire show. The Beast's rich tunic coat was splendidly regal and exactly suited his character, while Belle changed up into a flowing cream and gold gown that elevated the love between the leading principals into something spectacularly theatrical.

The audience clearly loved it, and they were right. This was a well-written traditional pantomime presented by a company that seems to be going from strength to strength in terms of its community engagement and the quality of its productions. It's terrific that the Society has the confidence and resources to stage its own work, and Bex's adaptation of "Beauty and the Beast" ticked more than enough boxes to please any fan of traditional pantomime. If there were any issues with the piece, then in my view they were the sorts of thing that are difficult for an amateur company to address; a professional production might have weeks of try-outs and previews to make cuts and/or additions, hone the humour and work on any flat spots to ensure that the show zings along from start to finish.

In "Beauty and the Beast" the narrative thread is strongest in the second half as time runs out, Belle and the Beast recognise their feelings for each other, and the plot lines are resolved; the first half necessarily involves a lot of exposition, and might have benefited from more easily resolvable micro-plots (the relationship between Hugo and the Mean Girls, Mamma Kaye's inventions, etc) to keep the pace high while the principal narrative was established. The dialogue was generally quick-fire enough to keep the energy levels up; there was exemplary timing in places (such as the reactions to Achoo), but in other places the cues were picked up more sedately. The nervous energy of fussy characters such as Ray and Faye was very effective at maintaining the atmosphere.

In my opinion the humour was a bit uneven. My favourite moments included Bex's rhetorical question – "If a man speaks his mind in the forest, and no woman hears him, is he still wrong?" – and there was some sophisticated wordplay such as that around "ennui". There was quite a lot of good punning, such as Ray and Faye's extended sequence about vegetables, the Notre Dame gag and the line about striking bees, as well as several instances of gender-based humour such as maps being turned the right way up or references to piles of laundry. Even the six-seven meme popped up again – I still don't understand it – but despite all of this it felt as if some of the scenes weren't quite as funny as had been hoped. A pantomime needs to appeal to all ages so you require all sorts of jokes, and ideally jokes that work at more than one level; perhaps the only way to truly find out what works is through try-outs and by making changes in response to audience reactions. Physical comedy is pretty

universal, and Ray and Faye in particular made the most of the opportunities they had, but (as alluded to earlier) it was surprising that the kitchen set-up seemed to lead nowhere.

Bex clearly recognises the importance of audience participation as she extended the housekeeping notices to include a bit of practice in call and response, but getting the audience to join in during the show proved surprisingly problematic. Blocking and, well, overacting can usually generate a “S/he’s behind you!”; while manic laughs and overweening arrogance can conjure up boos. The classic “Oh yes, it is!” or “Oh no, it isn’t!” can be harder to initiate, and the secret is probably to establish the formula and prompt line and stick with it; having the band lead the responses felt a little bit like cheating. Talking of cheating, it might be worth considering having a couple of members of the cast – most obviously Ray and Faye in this production – out in the auditorium for a few minutes during the interval, specifically to pressgang some of the younger members of the audience into singing onstage during the singalong; while I enjoyed their parents making fools of themselves, and narrowly avoided being called up myself by making frantic notes, it might have been even better if more children had been involved.

These are all just small points of opinion, and the fact is that “Beauty and the Beast” was an enjoyable and accomplished show. Once again Faringdon Dramatic Society has refused to play it safe, and a strong cast, tight band and high production values combined to breathe life into an original script and provide everyone present with an impressive couple of hours of entertainment. The closing chorus on its own would have been enough to persuade any doubters of the value of community pantomime, a Dramatic Society capable of staging two contrasting shows such as “Over by Christmas” and “Beauty and the Beast” within three months of each other must be doing something right.

Andrew Walter

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