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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society  
Production : The Ruby Slippers  
Date : 26<sup>th</sup> January 2024  
Venue : The Elms Primary School, Faringdon

## Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on “The Ruby Slippers”, this year’s pantomime staged by Faringdon Dramatic Society. Author and director Rebecca Hutchings, who played a memorable King Norbert in last year’s production of “Sleeping Beauty”, was kind enough to spare me a few minutes in the interval to chat about this year’s show, before being dragged away to sort something out ...

Rebecca told me that she started to think about this year’s pantomime more or less straight after “Sleeping Beauty” closed. When she couldn’t find a script that really appealed to her, she set about writing her own. What she has come up with is a novel retelling of the story of “The Wizard of Oz”, fusing elements of stage musical, traditional pantomime and morality play, with steampunk overtones. It’s an ambitious undertaking, and Rebecca and the Society must be commended for having the brains, the heart and the courage to bring it to the stage.

The particular challenge of “The Ruby Slippers” is that while it draws on different stage genres, it doesn’t fit comfortably into any one of them, which can leave the audience feeling a little confused about how to respond. The links to the stage musical are clear, as the familiar story of Dorothy arriving in Oz, and meeting the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man on the Yellow Brick Road, provides a strong narrative thread in Act 1 in particular. However, rights issues and limitations on how shows can be adapted mean that we were limited to the merest hint of just one of the familiar musical numbers, so support for the characterisation and storytelling was provided by an eclectic mix of songs, no doubt carefully chosen, and some of them inevitably worked better than others. The power of the musical lies in the way in which the story and the score together can tap into our emotions, and here the connection between the music and the narrative wasn’t quite strong enough to do that.

The pantomime aspect got off to a strong start with Aunt Em, an entirely peripheral character in the musical, transported with Dorothy to Oz as the pantomime dame. And Dame Em had her moments as she journeyed to The Emerald City; for example, her Mary Poppins style carpet bag was a frequent source of interest and amusement. The issue was that there weren’t enough other elements of pantomime around her for her to work with. Yes, the Wicked Witch of the West was a splendid baddie, and Glinda and Blunda effectively fulfilled the role of a good fairy, albeit in an unusually complex way. Yes, there was a good, old-fashioned sing-along in Oz at the end (and as Lion noted, care was taken not to upset another, particularly litigious magical kingdom). But there was no principal boy, no comedy duo, little slapstick; and Dorothy was cast as an adventurous girl rather than as a romantic lead. The result was that this dame, a classic pantomime staple, was sometimes left isolated in a different sort of show altogether, with the accompanying danger that she might be left looking like just a bloke in a frock. Perhaps some of the other characters, notably Tin Man searching for a heart, could have been adapted to provide the dame with more context.

The morality play only came to the fore in Act 2, when the relationships between Glinda, the Wicked Witch and the Wizard of Oz turned out to be rather more complicated than I at least had imagined. What has been going on in Oz? Somehow, I felt we were being encouraged to look to our actions and mend our ways, a laudable sentiment, but somehow ill-defined. We were certainly reminded that co-operation and collaboration is the only way forward, but I'm not sure that this fine conclusion was adequately set up in the exposition at the start of Act 1. Lines such as the Wizard's rhetorical question - "What does it matter who we are or where we come from?" – invited further exploration, but perhaps this was just too political a comment to develop just now.

Rebecca's script included relatively few contemporary or local references, so no lampooning of politicians, and no snide remarks about other local communities (Clanfield? Bampton?). There was also remarkably little innuendo: Rebecca feels that it is important to respect the family-friendly nature of pantomime, and I can only agree with her. The script did incorporate some clever word play – I particularly enjoyed the Witch soup / which soup dialogue, and the false rhymes in the spoken verse – but the jokes tended to be quite spread out as there weren't the predominantly comic characters to deliver them.

I do hope this isn't coming over as too negative as I believe turning "The Wizard of Oz" into a pantomime is an interesting and innovative idea full of promise, and Rebecca has done wonderfully well to come up with the concept, and to be determined enough to see it through to production. I am on record for my belief that it's always a particular challenge for an author to direct their own work. I realise that Rebecca signed up to direct before she decided to write her own script, and I didn't have time to ask her about whether or not she had people around her able to offer advice and support. But a director has an obligation to analyse what works, and what doesn't work within a show, something that the author, so invested in the piece, isn't always well placed to judge. One particular observation that I have to agree with, made by the Gatekeeper towards the end of Act 2, is that the show is too long. Taking 20 minutes or so out of the running time would result in a much pacier, and even more engaging show.

Enough of this theorising, what about the production? Annabel Whalley capably led the cast as Dorothy, portraying her character as an optimistic innocent abroad. This was a careful, tidy performance, and I feel sure that as the run goes on Annabel will gain in confidence, relax into the role, and really take us along with her on her exciting journey. She moves well on stage and has a fine singing voice. Dorothy was accompanied by her faithful dog Toto, brought to life in true pantomime style by Tatum Rowley. Tatum might not have had any lines, but she could bark in a very persuasive manner, and she also moved very well.

The re-imagining of Aunt Em as the dame was one of the most striking features of the show, and Kevin Jones threw himself into the challenge of bringing this character to life. An iconic component of traditional pantomime, the dame is defined by many aspects of the role: the over-the-top frocks, the posture, the mild innuendo (which may be no more than an arched eyebrow to indicate a potential double entendre); but also the business, the haste, and the comedy which characterise the dame's interactions with those around her. Dame Em was sometimes the only recognisably pantomime character on stage, making it more difficult to introduce many of those classic dame behaviours into the characterisation. Kevin certainly has the required skills, including holding his carpet bag in proper handbag style. He also proved himself able to hold the stage, confident enough to break the fourth wall and really engage with the audience (notably when he was wolf-whistled), and capable of unleashing his inner rock star to treat us to some energetic singing.

The familiar characters from “The Wizard of Oz” – the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, were played by Jason Boorman, Dexter Kent and Jonathan Waywell respectively. Jason certainly had the stage presence to bring the Lion to life, and if his movement could on occasion have been more obviously feline, his sometimes kittenish demeanour fitted in well with his backstory about losing his father in a stampede, being exiled by his uncle ... well, you know the rest. In common with the other leading characters, the Lion is both literally and metaphorically on a journey – in his case to find the courage to become the Lion he could be. I would have liked to have seen a bit more of this potential – the roar, the physicality – earlier on, so we better understand that what he lacks is the courage to use his powers.

Dexter made a strong start as the Scarecrow, a supporting wooden cross enabling him to hold exactly the right posture while standing in a field. I would have liked to have seen a bit more of this physicality moving forward, with looser movements to indicate his fundamental lack of physical strength, and a vacant expression to hint at his supposed lack of a brain. However, Dexter made sure that we did understand that Scarecrow is quite sharp really, enunciating his lines clearly enough to put across. This was a mature performance from such a young actor. Jonathan Waywell did capture the essence of Tin Man, with jerky movement that any General Practitioner would correctly diagnose as rusty joints.

Jason, Dexter and Jonathan all have fine voices, and their trio, with overtones of a boy band, was amongst the musical highlights of the evening. The fans turned out with their placards, but could even more have been made of this number? A key change to accompany them all standing up together?

Rebecca confided to me that she doesn't like pink, but she allowed a little pink to infiltrate the costume and character of Glinda, the good witch (played by Jayne Hoyland). Or is she a good witch? We discover at the end that (in this case at least) good and evil aren't simply opposite sides of the same coin. Jayne was certainly full of radiant goodness at the beginning of the show, and if she had a little bit too much narration to get through – surely it's preferable to allow the story to tell itself on stage whenever possible – she certainly ensured that the exposition was clear. Glinda's pupil, Blunda, is undergoing her final assessment, and Verity Roberts charmed the audience while also providing many of the show's best comic moments. Verity is a true performer, able to combine vocal variation (including in her singing), a range of gestures, and some excellent facial expressions to bring Blunda's ditsy character to life, and open a window on how she is thinking and feeling. This was perhaps most obvious when she found herself smitten by the Tin Man.

We all know that it's the baddies that have the best time in pantomimes, and Lu Waywell appeared to have a ball as the Wicked Witch of the West. The green make-up and black costumes, complete with classic witch's pointed hat, left the audience in no doubt about how to respond when she confidently strutted onto the stage while voicing an evil cackle to be proud of. Lu is another excellent performer, totally confident on stage, able to engage the audience and indeed to deal with anyone foolish enough to heckle. She also proved herself to be a fine singer, and her solo numbers were very impressive.

The final principals we meet are the Gatekeeper and the Wizard of Oz. Byron Pound as the Gatekeeper once again proved himself a master of physical comedy, following on from his performance in “Act Naturally” at the end of last year, using his gangly frame and expressive face to good effect. Vix Edmonds brought an

authoritative serenity to the role of the Wizard, and while this rather aligned her with Glinda, this may not have been entirely accidental.

The troupe of monkeys introduced a degree of anarchy into their scenes, even if they were a little shouty at times, and some of their unison singing wasn't quite unison enough. Respect to the actor who went on in a supportive boot – the show must go on! The twelve members of the adult and under-18 ensembles provided some context, for example in Munchkin Land and the Emerald City, but a few members of the ensemble needed to remember to keep their focus on the action and to react appropriately – otherwise there's a danger that they will suck energy out of the production rather than adding to it. To be fair to them, there were times (particularly during the opening scene) when they hadn't been asked to do very much other than refocus the audience's attention onto the principals. Some of the stage fighting was a bit chaotic – more deliberate staging often works better – and I can tell you that big wooden swords have been a feature of this year's pantomime season across Oxfordshire!

The company choreography (by Bex Hutchings, Paula Read, Byron Pound and Jayne Hoyland) was inclusive rather than eye-catching, but generally executed tidily. The hats worn by the company in the opening routine added attractive splashes of colour, but in a few cases needed to be pushed up a bit more so that the audience could see the performers' eyes.

The music was a particularly impressive aspect of this production: Musical Director Duncan Sinclair had some strong singers to work with amongst the principals, and could call on a disciplined band of six musicians; Richard Lock's singing guitar and Nick Morris's precise drumming particularly caught the ear. The harmonies in much of the singing were accurate, and voices blended well in the ensembles.

The set design was kept simple, with colour washes illuminating a slightly battered white backcloth, and silhouettes used to suggest trees, castle ramparts and so forth; there was also a useful fragment of yellow brick road in front of the proscenium arch. The fixed legs were decorated in a steampunk style, with plenty of cogs and similar paraphernalia, and this general design was carried over into many of the costumes (by Nell Tate). The monkeys were all equipped with a sort of booster backpack and goggles, while the fabrics and the colour palette reinforced the overarching design concept. The Lion, Scarecrow and Tin Man were splendidly costumed in broadly traditional style, and I liked the way that Glinda and Blunda's costumes reflected their relative status, even if they might have been more strongly linked thematically. The overall look of the production was enhanced further by the make-up (by Jody King); Toto's and Lion's make-up was particularly good.

The rich range of colours in the lighting design (Sam Tate and Ian Chandler) enabled the main tabs to act as an effective backdrop to the linking scenes; there were however times when Dame Em, in particular, wandered out of her light onstage. The sound design (Craig Atkinson and Gary Bates) allowed the performers to be heard clearly over the band, although there was just a hint of feedback here and there. But this was the first night, and I'm sure such technical niggles will be ironed out very quickly. Similarly, first night nerves will have fed through to the performers, and I am sure that the odd uncertainty with lines and cues will quickly be eliminated as the performers gain in confidence and experience; I expect the overall pace and energy will only

increase during the run. The closing number was as energetic as you could hope for, and the bows sequence was well done.

It wasn't perfect, but "The Ruby Slippers" was novel and innovative, ambitious and brave. Faringdon Dramatic Society could have chosen a traditional pantomime (and saved themselves a lot of work) but instead they chose to fuse some distinct forms into something different and new. If the audiences later in the run are a bit more ready to interpolate their traditional responses without needing to be encouraged from the back of the hall, then this show could fly higher than Aunt Em's house. Many congratulations to Rebecca and everyone involved for bringing this work to the stage.

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