



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Sleeping Beauty
Date : 3rd February 2023
Venue : The Elms Primary School, Faringdon

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Sleeping Beauty". Pantomime is in the DNA of this Society, and after two Covid-disrupted years there was an excited buzz in the hall before the show. I was provided with an informative programme, which I was interested to note was included in the ticket price – quite unusual in my experience. Director Helen Thrower found time to speak with me during the interval, and it was clear that she shares the same enthusiasm for the genre that had already been demonstrated by the company.

There was a real community feeling to this production – the sense of people coming together, and their achievement being celebrated by friends and neighbours. This was an inclusive, traditional pantomime – and yet it was distinctive and unusual in many ways. It was as if the characteristics of pantomime had been shuffled up, so that all the expected elements were there but not necessarily where you might expect to find them. Most obviously there wasn't a stereotypical pantomime dame; we still enjoyed the slapstick and word play of a kitchen scene, it's just that it was led by other characters. Nor was there any shortage of cross-dressing, just not always in the usual roles – although this may have been partly because there were so few men in the company.

Pantomime Kings and Queens usually provide an element of stability – pompous, yes, ridiculous, almost certainly – with the principal comic characters operating around them. In this production, King Norbert and Queen Dorothy (or "Nobby" and "Dotty" as we came to think of them) were the stars of the show, providing many of the comedic highlights. Dotty was played by Verity Roberts, an experienced and versatile performer, who gave us a wonderfully energetic and enthusiastic interpretation of the role. Channelling her inner Helena Bonham Carter – I found her portrayal curiously reminiscent of Lady Tottington in "The Curse of the Were-Rabbit" – she ensured that the pace never flagged through her intelligent use of gesture, expression and vocal variation. I particularly enjoyed her musical dream sequence in which a desk stood in for a grand piano, and her playing style was gloriously disconnected from the music. Air on a G string, and other thongs, indeed!

Alongside Verity, Bex Hutchings gave a bravura performance as King Norbert. Realised in Henry VIII proportions and richly attired in an impressive regal costume, Bex had plenty of opportunities to shine and took them all. There was authority here – the banishment of Prince Orlando had a real edge to it – and Bex's King owned the stage with the confidence of power. But Bex proved equally adept at embracing the comedic aspects of the role – for example when on the wrong end of many of the elements in the kitchen slapstick routine. She used her voice intelligently, and helped by a false moustache that must have a storied career of its own ahead of it, knew exactly how to time a look or a line to maximum effect. Above all, Bex moved really well – her fluid dancing was so at odds with her character you couldn't help but laugh, and her performance of "The Chain" by Fleetwood Mac on an inflatable guitar will stay with me for a while.

The pantomime Princess is often required to do little but look pretty and sing sweetly, but Kia Howard as Princess Aurora managed to do much more than simply tick those boxes. Her princess was spirited and independent, and I liked the way she quizzed Prince Orlando on meeting him – more first date than fairytale. Abby Valentine grew into the role of the Prince, particularly when protesting passionately against his banishment, and when portraying the Prince's great, great grandson driven to find out about his ancestor. Abby and Kia's voices blended well in their duets, and as befits any self-respecting principal boy, Abby even managed to give us a thigh slap towards the end. Hurrah!

Lu Waywell and Dexter Kent kicked off the evening as the Royal Butler Billy, and his lackey Bob. Seemingly set up as the comedy duo, they weren't given as much material to work with as might have been expected, but Lu in particular found herself with several unexpected opportunities to shine. First her mike pack came adrift at the beginning of the kitchen scene with her attempts to surreptitiously replace it causing much amusement both on stage and in the hall. She was then given some very unhelpful advice by a member of the audience about where another character had run off, which she dealt with stylishly. Then finally, after skilfully leading the youngsters on stage through the community singing, she helped Bob with a prompt line; to be fair, he then delivered it clearly and confidently. This ability to engage directly with the audience and deal assuredly with everything that gets thrown at you is a key attribute of the best pantomime performers, and Lu showed us all how it's done.

I often think that pantomime villains have the most fun, and Jacob Bayliss clearly relished playing the evil fairy Carabosse. Villains need to be able to look the audience right in the eye, adopt a malevolent expression, cackle insanely and avoid standing up straight. Jacob could do all of these things, as well as adopt a convincing Irish accent when disguised as a serving wench in the local village. Pleasingly entering from stage left and utilising the full dynamic and tonal range of his voice, he generated some agreeably negative feedback from the audience from the start. Carabosse was accompanied by Spindleshanks the cat, played by Jade Atkinson; Jade made the most of her relatively few lines, demonstrated that she has a strong singing voice, and moved with a certain feline grace.

Annabel Whalley played Kitty the court cat with an assured confidence. Denied any meaningful dialogue, Annabel found a surprising number of different ways of saying "Miaow" to express her views. She also proved impressively adept at using expression to give us an insight into her emotions, and was really professional about maintaining concentration when on stage, deflecting the audience's attention back to where it needed to be.

The forces of good were represented by Vicky Edmonds as Fairy Peaceful, aided by Byron Pound as Fairy Graceful, Kayleigh Booth as Fairy Thoughtful and Heather Kent as Fairy Beautiful. The first act gave them little opportunity to establish character, as the christening of Princess Aurora takes place so quickly and Carabosse is soon on hand to inevitably steal the scene. However, Prince Orlando's quest gave Vicky in particular the opportunity to bring out her character's essential goodness, while Byron caught the eye with some perfectly executed dance moves.

The principals were supported by an exclusively female chorus of twelve, with some of the younger performers doubling up as rats. There was some strong unison and accurate part singing, and while the choreography (by

Paula Read and Duncan Sinclair) was clearly conceived to be inclusive, the dancing was generally precise and occasionally energetic, with some notable armography in certain numbers. The rats certainly enjoyed their dance routines, and there was also a well-staged sword fight between Prince Orlando and Carabosse. The sense of occasion that can only be generated by live music was provided by Musical Director Duncan Sinclair and his very capable band; most of the songs slotted neatly into the narrative and the sound system ensured that the balance between the actors and the musicians was good. Indeed, the radio microphones, augmented by fixed microphones above the stage, ensured that the words were clear throughout.

The hall at The Elms Primary School is an agreeable venue, but clearly lacks the resources of a dedicated theatre. Director Helen Thrower made a virtue out of necessity by keeping the settings very simple; the tormentors were plain and pale (although shaped to frame the onstage action), while specific locations were hinted at through gobo projections onto an upstage white cloth. Colour and glitz were added through Ian Chandler and Steve Greening's lighting design, which employed the power, movement and flexibility of modern lamps to light the stage in attractive ways, while occasionally adding to the spectacle themselves. Scene changes were effected behind the main tabs, which were themselves lit in strong colours; the front of house spots failed in the first act, a problem which only really became apparent in the second half when the lamps were restored to the plot to make a significant difference to the look of these interludes.

The costume team did an excellent job, with the King's courtly tunic and the Queen's frocks particularly catching the eye; Billy and Bob's flunkey outfits, Carabosse's Victorian undertaker look, and the two cats also impressed. Jody King's make-up enhanced the look of the production; the Queen's wigs had nearly as much impact as the King's moustache, while expressions were clear and the cats were appropriately whiskered.

Director Helen Thrower certainly worked hard to make the most of the resources at her disposal. The cast knew their lines thoroughly, with King Norbert's masterful recall of Princess Aurora's alphabet of twenty-six names an excellent example. Cues were generally picked up rapidly, and comic lines timed well. The company didn't overegg the slapstick in the kitchen, and the family friendly credentials of this pantomime were illustrated by the fact I don't remember a single instance of innuendo. Helen also mentioned that she had deliberately avoided contemporary references – pantomime should help us escape from all of that for an hour or two – although I couldn't help suspecting from the audience's reaction to some of the dialogue that there might have been one or two bank and shop closures in Faringdon recently. The stage was used intelligently, but I did wonder if some of the settings such as the kitchen might have been set a little bit further downstage, still behind the tab line, to enable the cast to engage even more immediately with the audience.

It was great to go to a show which showcased young local talent. The rats and the cats get a taste of what performing on stage feels like; they learn from their more experienced co-stars, and they encourage other young people to join them. In this way the future of amateur theatre is protected and the proud traditions of pantomime are passed from generation to generation.

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