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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Wishing on a Star
Date : 26th January 2019
Venue : Faringdon Junior School
Report by : Rob Bertwistle

Show Report

Thanks for the kind invitation from your Chairman Gary Field and the warm welcome for my guest and I to this seasonal offering - Faringdon Dramatic Society's original pantomime entitled Wishing on a Star written and directed by society members Verity Roberts and Helen Thrower.

Comedy writing is certainly an art and can be a hit and miss affair. The cast did seem to have to work very hard on the matinee audience with the first half being rather too long in my opinion leading to some distracted younger audience members. I felt the scene changes could have been slicker and the pace did slip on quite a few occasions not helped by not all the cast being secure in their lines. It's so important that everyone picks up cues quickly and learns the lines! Perhaps first performance with an audience created some nerves?

Principals:

This was very much an ensemble piece with good cast interactions and reactions to the business happening on stage. Everyone was in - and maintained - their particular character for that scene as various cast members appeared in more than one guise.

Abby Benson gave a convincing performance as Principal Boy Kristian. Abby used the stage well and her powerful and tuneful vocals impressed! There was some good harmony with the 'Star' notably in the number 'Rewrite the Stars'.

Andrea Bond looked and sounded great as the 'Star' of the title. She had good stage craft and an equally impressive vocal range which she used to good effect with some very good harmony work with 'Kristian'.

Sarah Varnom took on the 'Dame' character with, I felt, a little trepidation. The audience were not so responsive on that first performance but Sarah maintained her character - Dame Ariel Bucket - and the ad-libbing going throughout the performance so many congratulations.

The three witches, Griselda – Scooby Carter, Esmeralda – Millie Green and Janie Eyre-Brook as Ifelda worked well as a trio. They interacted and reacted to each other convincingly and always elicited the customary audience boos. The larger than life characterisations certainly kept the attention of the audience and their transformation to more youth versions of themselves was done well.

The Princes Fitzroy, Odo and Sigurd were played for laughs with some good comedy timing by Jacob Bayliss, Alison Morris and Matthew Warner respectively. Again they worked well as a trio bouncing off each other with ad-libs and all having very different characterisations. I liked the Brush up your Shakespeare routine in particular.

Duncan Sinclair worked hard to engage the audience in his various guises as Boatman, Innkeeper and the Dandy Highwayman. I liked his Master of the House number with a cameo and uncredited appearance of writer and co-director Verity Roberts as his ribald and ungrateful wife! This was a clever and convincing take on the famous Les Miserables inn scene. Well done!

Jane Hoyland had fun as the leader of the constantly interrupting band of wandering minstrels, Galaxy. She clearly relished this part and brought out some good comedic moments. The said group of minstrels Jan Crowdson, Jack Metcalfe, Carole Tappenden, Julie Childs, Lynne Puddifoot, Finlay Farquhar and Henry Marlow all played their parts well - being in character and forming a believably cohesive group.

Carolyn Taylor brought out the comedy in her role as the very 'show-bizzy' Dragon, Scaringas. I liked the sparkly green tux costume too and the Welsh accent was a stroke of genius!

Millie Long looked and sounded great as Kristian's love interest Louisa with some nice vocals and good stage presence as did her friends Clara and Isabella played convincingly by Kayleigh Booth and Kia Howard respectively.

Roddy Benson and Gary Field had fun as King Goddard and Lord Uppham with fairly brief but none-the-less important appearances.

Byron Pound was very good as the witches 'lackey' Malarkey. He gave a confident and believable performance on what I may hazard a guess at being his first major speaking role. Forgive me if I'm wrong but well done that man anyway!

Ensemble:

The ensemble members performed well but I must mention the Imps and Sprites/ Draglets members. Both groups sang and acted very well and delivered their quite complicated songs with considerable charm and aplomb sharing the mikes in a very impressive and disciplined way - so well done to you all. And a 'well done' to each and every member of the ensemble you were all a credit to yourselves and the company. I hope you continue to enjoy working and acting on stage in future productions.

Direction:

This was co-directed by the writers Verity Roberts (who also made a brief uncredited appearance as the innkeeper's wife) and Helen Thrower. This was an engaging piece of theatre but I felt lacked pace on occasions and being the 'opening' performance the cast were definitely feeling their way through the first 'outing'. The performances were good and the cast were very much engaged in the story but the audience was rather quiet probably because this first performance was the matinee on a decidedly wet and windy Saturday afternoon. Some of the entrances and exits down the centre and side aisles worked well but sometimes the dialogue was lost as these entrances were being made. There were some good characterisations with plenty for the ensemble to do.

Musical Director:

Martin Waymark (also playing bass guitar in the small but effective four piece band) ensured the cast were word and pitch perfect with some very good vocal performances from the principal players. The band did over-power some of the younger performers who did not have the luxury of personal mikes this did not distract too much from the overall production and generally the balance was good.

Choreographer:

Also playing the 'Star' a busy Andrea Bond doubled as choreographer creating some clever and inventive moves and dance steps which were readily accessible to all the members of the cast. I particularly liked the Mama Mia routine and the finale was impressive also.

Stage management:

Jeff Barry ensured the production proceeded with no noticeable hitches no doubt aided by his very competent back stage crew – Alan Merrick, Derek Crowdson and Jo Webster (another busy member of the team!).

Lighting and Sound:

Ian Chandler's lighting design with some clever use of gobos was up to the usual FDS high standards with some great lighting effects adding to the atmosphere while Gary Bates and Steve Greening on lights operation and sound ensured that the cast could be heard and that the sound effects occurred on cue. I liked the creation of the echo effect – very well don!

Make-up:

FDS are always very clever with their make-up designs and this show was no exception with make-up, co-ordinated by Anna Marlow, looking very good and showing off the characters well. The dragon make-up was particularly effective as was the witch's transformations helped by some excellent hair designs.

Set Design:

Jo Webster's set design worked well and the free standing set dressing pieces added a simple but effective touch to the various scenes. The scene in the inn looked very convincing with just a few additions to the basic set. The set enabled the cast to enter and exit with few problems.

Props:

Jo Webster, Carole Tappenden and Jan Crowdson created some splendid and clever props which were used effectively by the cast although I did feel the 'silhouette dragon' could have been used to more dramatic effect.

Costumes:

The costumes by Joan Lee, Lynda Bates, Helen Tate and Jan Crowdson looked very good and showed the unfailingly creative talents of the members of FDS. The costumes for the witches were particularly striking. Well done to you all.

Programme:

Dave Headey's fairly succinct programme followed the usual FDS format with some interesting profiles of some cast members and a helpful though rather brief synopsis of the somewhat convoluted story line.

Front of House:

Thanks to Sarah Couzens and her Front of House team for the usual warm and friendly welcome. It is always a pleasure to visit you all. Thank you again!

An interesting and entertaining matinee performance from this hard working and dedicated group. Thank you for asking me and I hope to see you all in the not too distant future.

With very best wishes

Rob

Rob Bertwistle

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