



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : The Quince Players
Production : Sleeping Beauty
Date : 9 January
Venue : The Cordes Hall
Report by : John Woodward-Roberts

Show Report

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of a good pantomime there is always a story about a charming hero and a sinister and powerful villain that culminates in a grand finale where good triumphs over evil and all ends happily. The story needs a great script full of magic and opportunities for stock members of the cast – be they royalty or peasantry – to show off and bring the action to life in well-known set pieces that have the audience shouting from their seats. All supported by songs and music that can be drawn – and here is the beauty of panto – from whatever discipline that fits and works. Above everything pantomime is completely for the audience - to give them a really good time at the theatre - and what I saw when I looked around the audience watching Andrew Darling's Sleeping Beauty were people having a really good time at the theatre!

DIRECTION, CHOREOGRAPHY and MUSIC DIRECTION

Andrew, working to a script by Alan Frayn, strived to integrate well all the jigsaw pieces that make up a good panto ensuring that charm and magic were well balanced with daftness of character and situation and for the most part his recipe worked. So we laughed at Muddles, Fetch and Carry and Nurse Hettie Harpic, smiled at Princess Rose and her Prince, oo'd and aa'd over the youngsters in the show and made sure that we cheered all the good fairies, led by Fairy Lilac, and booed the villainy of the wicked Witch Hazel. Within a series of simple sets Andrew set simple, over the top and very audience focused action that, mostly, ensured its engagement and involvement. I liked the in and local jokes frittered throughout, the classroom scene I felt worked really well, the incantation was magical and spooky and the dream sequence impressive. There were 1st night moments when the pace dropped and where timing between characters, necessary to ensure that jokes worked, was off but I'm sure the whole piece got slicker as the run continued. What I will particularly remember is the level of commitment that everybody brought to their parts – there wasn't one person on stage not working hard – and how this smoothed over any gaps and kept the audience on side.

The action was well supported by the band. They played professionally throughout and were well MD'd from the keyboard. So good were they in in fact that I would have liked to have heard more from them. In my humble opinion the panto would have benefitted from a further song or two at the expense of some of its libretto which, in some scenes, was overlong. Particularly as the company clearly had the necessary singing talent in its cast. The songs we did hear, however, be they full company, ensemble, duet or solo were well delivered.

And the choreography. Well a shout out for the choreography team. The steps were inventive and the energy uplifting. The variety in the dance was also noticeable. The skeleton dance, particularly, stays with me and, of course, the dancing of Freddie Madden.

MAIN PLAYERS

FAB – Thunderbirds are Go

Florence, Amelie and Becky sang well together injecting the start of the show with some real sass and energy. They worked as a group because they were not bolted onto the action but grafted into it commenting on the narrative through their music. A creative addition.

The Magical World

Well done to Maisy, Belle, Sophia, Lucy, Fiona and Mia for their delightful fairies. They were charming in all their scenes striking magical poses that added warmth and mood to the show. I noticed the support and back up that they provided to Fairy Lilac in key moments. Good wand work, girls!

Fairy Lilac played by Belle Whitbread

Who diminishes the power of the baddie and restores order in pantomime? Why the good fairy of course. Belle had authority in the role and brought a calm presence and a smile to her duties.

Witch Hazel played by Fiona Barker

The “boo” quotient is always a good indicator of the success of the bad witch in the show and Fiona’s boo quotient was high. She injected her words with just the right amount of sneer and her in jokes about various places in the area was funny. A good costume too!

King Cactus and Queen Marigold played by David Barker and Alison Sharpe

The double act is a stock structure in pantomime, and it was nice to see David and Alison relish their halves of the royal double act in *Sleeping Beauty*. They brought impact and humour to the roles via a dottiness that was both funny and endearing. Northern accents used for comic effect? Mmm.....

Princess Rose played by Sadie Nuttall

The Princess in pantomime, although the goodie that we all root for, can be a little one note when set alongside the other much larger than life characters. Sadie avoided this by giving us both the sweetly innocent and the rebellious teenager railing against being kept in the palace. A part of many colours, therefore, well expressed and delivered either when with other characters or when on stage on her own. Her solo opening Act 2 was delightful as was her duet with the Prince.

Muddles played by Robin Newell

It’s vital that the comic lead in panto dismantles the 4th wall completely and has a direct relationship with the audience cemented by words and phrases rehearsed together and known only to them. He’s there to encourage involvement and to ensure that the drama is a completely inclusive experience. Robin understood this and, on most occasions, held the audience in the palm of his hand. A more emphatic presence coupled, at times, with greater projection would have ensured that we were with him all the way. But a natural and funny performance.

Fetch and Carry played by Simon Hurry and Jenny Faulkner

These two good hearted sidekicks were endearing and loveable and I enjoyed, particularly, the play on words that they were part of throughout the show. Much of their action and banter was a delight and they bounced off one another well. They were particularly strong leading the community song with the audience before the show’s finale. They had some pace and timing moments but I’m sure these were the products of a 1st night ironed out in subsequent performances.

Nurse Hettie Harpic played by Quiller Rees

The most recognisable character in pantomime – certainly the most fabulous – Quiller brought Nurse Hettie Harper to life on stage via hair, talk, make up, costume and walk that was all “her” own. I wasn’t sure that he was completely comfortable in the role but he certainly went all out for a loud and over the top performance and I liked his repeated flirtation with a member of the audience and the other examples of cheeky (risqué?) humour

that he used. You certainly couldn't take your eyes off him when he was onstage. A discussion point with Quiller is whether panto dames usually adopt a faux woman's voice? In my experience they don't.

Prince Alexis/Alexander played by Charlie Stokes

I read that this was a return to the stage for Charlie and I liked the gently wry approach he took to the two Princes separated by time. Usually, we get the traditional Prince, but this was something different. His duet with Rose had charm and it was good to see a talent for physical comedy coming through. I look forward to seeing him onstage again.

Villagers, Courtiers, School Children and Creatures

Let's not underestimate the value that chorus work of all types adds to a panto. Big song and dance numbers bring energy, colour and spectacle to the stage so well done to Lucy, Keira, Naomi, Elsie, Bailey, Betsy, Sophie, Orla, Fiona, Lillie, Lois, Maira, Hannah, Kirsten and Reuben for their fine chorus work. And of course, well done to Freddie for his dance in the dream sequence. Very good!

A well-run technical, backstage and front of house team clearly supported the production well.

The programme for the show is a particularly good one with helpful information, insights into the cast members, information on the next production and how to join. The colour photos are well positioned and the welcome from the President and the director informal and engaging.

As ever I experienced a front of house that was warm, welcoming and attentive at the Cordes Hall making for a very pleasant customer experience!

Thank you for asking me and I look forward to the next time!

John Woodward-Roberts
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