



Society : Beaufort Players
Production : Once Upon a Witch by Alan Robinson
Date : Thursday 19th November 2009-12-22
Venue : Church of the Ascension Hall
Report by : Sam Webb

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They do say don't mess with something that's perfect, so why experiment with the successful formula of pantomime(?) both in terms of the conventions of the performance and the story line, it can be a risky business; a business which in the past I have seen performed with various degrees of success. However utilising a talented director who obviously has a firm knowledge assisted by a strong cast to carry the show, Beaufort Players latest offering, Once Upon a Witch was enjoyable, warm and funny.

Your writer and director Alan Robinson obviously had fun developing a show from a blank canvas having the opportunity to work, 'play' with and keep some of the general conventions of the art form. The convention of audience inter-play, which we had in abundance was nearly always played with strength and ability and written in at moments to complement the performance. The presence of a battle between good and evil was evident but I felt the script could have benefited from more coherence and structure in the fight between good and evil; perhaps giving the Fairy God Mother (exceptionally well played with comedic character and wonderful wit by Kate Martin, her senior moments conveyed with fun and performed with brilliant timing and humour) a battle at the beginning. The emphasis on the Witch throughout, a bad character, gave the show an imbalance of this structure and it gave the audience some light relief from the cloud of darkness when she left the stage. However by no means should the performance given by Matt Tylianakis be sniffed at, his/her characterisation was upheld, movements matching his/her evil persona and the interaction with the audience was top notch. I did at times lose some of the lines due to diction and speed of delivery, however a very well performed 'drag act'. He was supported by two henchmen in the form of Matthew Carpenter, following a very old tradition in his portrayal of evil with his almost crippled figure and idiotic voice (which was audible!) mirrored by another talented actress Lisa Morris who had a little more energy and enthusiasm in her characterisation. The two played off each other which an evil/childish charm.

In opposition to all this evil Gemma Breakell as Aurora played the 'apprentice' with a sweetness and purity the show required. With an ability to throw her voice and emotions with gusto she was, I'm sure, every little girl's idyllic principal girl, unlike of course the 'princess' (and I use the word loosely) we saw in Rachel Thorn's interpretation. Attitude, flair and modern references and word play gave the audience, including the men, a treat (with those legs!). Dialogue generally flowed well and soon she was the character we loved to hate.

I felt the overall performance could have benefited from a cod-corpse, used now, more widely in professional pantomimes than ever before, but it does take a carefully chosen moment and some very close direction, though I'm sure this is something that your talented director and cast could have managed. The magic mirror played by June Burgess showed strength in both her acting and her attitude when delivering direct, and during on-stage interaction her emotion and flair was clear. Martin Perrott as the Storyteller showed competency in his audience work, at first I struggled with his diction, but a little later on the vocal work was clear and had

been refined. His character had charm and charisma and made up for the lack of pantomime dame in his dizziness and forgetfulness.

No pantomime would be complete without 'furry things' and you had 3. Tickle well manoeuvred by Charlie Froomberg and (on this performance, stepping in at last minute) Alan Robinson, both worked in unison to play the back and front ends with skill and accuracy. Perhaps a song with the dragon involving some slapstick could have built up Tickle's role and love with the children. I hope Vicky felt better and was able to complete the rest of the run. Laura Wood as Rags was a charming, cute and cuddly creature who acted both vocally and physically with good presence showing she could work well in a 'skin' and finally Tom Cobb as the wonderful Mr Squeaks, well inserted by the script writer as 'something for the kids' and well played with no hint of arm! (squeak).

James King spoke well as the Wolf despite being slightly muffled by his face piece, I felt he should have been miked to make this a little clearer, however he portrayed evil with a touch of comedy, beautifully executed in the voice. There perhaps could have been more physical work, when working with a 'mask' a deeper physicalisation would have assisted our understanding of the feelings, never the less, we loved him!

Finally our royalty; Russell Gillman played the Pwince with a wonderful lisp, another strongly executed accent despite a vocal disability. The comment about his 'Balls' was my favourite of the show and his royal persona was shown with pride and glory. Mother Natasha Bergg, played royal exceptionally well and although her part was small, the character made an impact in its short stay with her accent and mannerisms.

The sound once again by Roger Dishley was top notch, always delivered on time and no doubt some time taken to source the correct effect or backing music. The piano played by Diana Dishley added some 'live' music to an already exciting mix of performance mediums. I felt the performance could have really benefited from a percussionist, for the falls, bums and jokes, even if it's a couple of drums in the wings this would further the excitement and range of the audience reaction to the gags and slapstick undertaken. Pete Balls, once again did a fine job on lights, in particular the 'lightning moment'; it's a shame there wasn't more of these effects throughout as they added supplementary animation to the stage.

The set was beautifully painted with sparkle. Well done to a supportive back stage crew and everyone else who made the production possible, including Jayne Bowman for her assistance in direction. Alan and the entire crew and cast deserves much credit for making and successfully performing a home grown show with such success and I hope he saw it in the reactions from both adult and child theatre-goers.

Thank you for another warm welcome, have a lovely Christmas and I hope to see you in the New Year with your selection of one acts.

Sam Webb

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