

Region

Society : Beaufort Players
Production : Pantostein
Date : 29 November 2013
Venue : The Church of the Ascension Hall, Beaufort Road, Ealing W5 3EB
Report by : Zena Wigram (District 2)

Report

Thank you for inviting me to this appropriately silly pantomime at the start of this year's festive season. Super costumes and amusing scenery complemented lots of groan-inducing puns, and it was clear the cast members were enjoying themselves. The production was directed by **Chris Burns**, supported by Producer **Jayne Bowman**, and Choreographer and MD **Jane Quill** had clearly worked hard to introduce singing and dancing to several people who were new to musical theatre. It might have helped to have her conduct the singing, though with no orchestra pit, I appreciate that that would have introduced other difficulties.

A suitably surprising pyro prepared us for the entrance of **Paul Miglentsis** as Dracula, the asthmatic vampire. He recovered well from a memory lapse and swirled off so we could meet **Alan Robinson** and **Vicky Prior** as German tourists Boris and Bertha. They were a charming couple, with particularly good characterisation by Alan, who quickly established and maintained a good rapport with the audience, and made the appropriately corny lines seem natural. (I am not convinced they were right to pick a child for the stooge: the script suggests 'fishy man' and I hope his young audience member wasn't upset by the running gag.) Vicky needed to work a little harder to keep her eyes open when talking to the audience.

Russell Gillman's Dame Bloodengutz was an energetic performance, but he failed to convince me that he really believed what he was doing and I found his frenetic running back and forth across the apron distracting. In Act II it wasn't at all clear why he was urging the audience to shout out – the shouting was to persuade the dame that Dracula and his bride weren't to be trusted, so the point was rather lost.

With so many excellent female performers in the society I had expected one of them to take the role of principal boy, but **Thomas Cobb** as Dr Frank N Stein looked great and was a sympathetic hero, consistent and reliable. His girlfriend Ophelia (**Gemma Robinson**) was also attractive (though I wasn't quite sure why she had such a huge black beauty spot) and consistent, and they made a touching couple well worth audience support.

Villagers **Laurence Jones** (suitably grumpy when Boris pushed him off his seat), **Angela North** and **Kester Worme** were supportive and helpful, and I particularly enjoyed their 'are they / aren't they' zombification by Dracula and his wicked Bride (**Kate Martin** looking gorgeous in her different outfits). Kester could help his attractive voice by standing still to give it better support, and not opening his mouth so wide (it is counter-intuitive, but in fact opening too wide at the front generally closes up the throat and often strangles the sound). A less ambitious choice of song would also have helped: 'All Shook Up' or 'Whistle a Happy Tune' perhaps?

I enjoyed **Matthew Carpenter's** performance as Frank N Stein's monster very much. He was utterly still before he came to life (so much so that I wondered if your marvellous props department had made him) and he negotiated with ease and humour the line between being a rampaging monster and not being too

scary. **Robert Allan's** Igor was delightfully understated and his lugubrious comments were perfectly timed. A bit of time watching YouTube (or even a real violinist) might have helped to make his violin playing seem slightly more believable. **Krystyna Kobiak** was an unusually purple werewolf with an amusing fur-ball problem, but unfortunately her toothy head made it hard to hear her lines. Her conversion to an equally unusual fairy when the moon changed (very cleverly) was suitably silly.

General cast notes: I was delighted that everyone worked really hard to articulate your words despite some fabulously hammy accents – very well done and congratulations. But please stand still unless you have a reason to move: a number of people wandered a bit aimlessly about, and I have a particular dislike of watching people step forward to speak or sing and then step back into line.

I'm afraid I feel I have to say that unfortunately the singing tended towards karaoke, and some of the song choices were unhelpful. I think perhaps older songs originally written for minimal vocal processing would have worked better, particularly as there were no personal microphones: TV talent shows don't show quite how much work the recording engineers do on the voices! The bigger – easier – song and dance numbers like 'Time Warp' and 'Monster Mash' worked well, with Jane's simple and effective choreography enthusiastically executed although a trifle under-rehearsed, but it was often hard to hear the words, especially the rewritten lyrics, and few of the solos were in tune. If you plan to do more music (which I hope you do) you might like to consider the musical theatre courses at the NODA summer school, to help raise your game?

This was a lovely looking show, with absolutely excellent costumes (all, including Boris's great lederhosen and her own werewolf costume, made by the talented **Krystyna Kobiak**) and great make-up by **Gabriela Ardeleanu, Hannah Locke, Kate Daniels** and **Rebecca Eklof Lofvenmark**, especially the excellent monster and Frank N Stein, who looked otherworldly but still handsome enough for it to be no surprise that Ophelia fell for him as soon as she saw him. Hair was also appropriate, and I did like Bertha's 'Pippi Longstocking' plaits. The scenery, designed by **Alan Robinson, Chris Burns** and **Thom Cobb** was splendid – the décor in the Amputee's Arms was very amusing - and while some of the scene changes managed by Stage Manager **Laurence Jones** took a trifle longer than usual, the most effective results were worth waiting for. **Jayne Bowman, Laurence Jones, Thom Cobb** and cast members had assembled a tremendous assortment of unusual props including a brain in a sandwich and cheese in a jar, as well as a lovely 'zombicator' with all the flashing lights one could want.

Lighting by **Pete Balls** was, as usual, excellent, and flashes of lightning were timed beautifully with **Roger Dishley's** thunder. I'm generally not a fan of pre-recorded accompaniment, much preferring live music, but despite their lack of microphones, the sound didn't drown the singers and the balance was excellent, so you proved it can work well. Roger also provided great spooky music between scenes.

The attractive and cleanly laid-out programme by **Russell Gillman** and **Esther Holt** could perhaps have had a bit more about the plot, and maybe a song or scene list?

Thank you for the warm welcome from **Elaine O'Sullivan** (looking much cleaner than last time I saw her) and **Roger Dishley** in his multiple roles. I look forward to seeing you again in March for 'Lettice and Lovage'.

Zena Wigram
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