



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Beaufort Players
Production : Beauty the #Pantomime
Date : 1 December 2018
Venue : Church of the Ascension Hall, Ealing
Report by : Zena Wigram

[Show report](#)

General

As always, it is good to visit Beaufort Players in any capacity, this time as a stand-in for my esteemed NODA replacement, Mike Smith. This charming evening of pure nonsense was splendidly original – I’ve never before seen a bad-tempered Beauty who snapped out hashtags – and seemed to involve the talents of the entire society in a multitude of on- and off-stage roles.

Players

Author Alan had crafted the well-written characters to the strengths of the society, and they were consistently portrayed. One or two people forgot to speak up over underscoring, and sometimes the silly voices made it harder to hear the very clever dialogue. Do be aware that if you're set right at the back of the stage, you must keep the energy up to get all the way to the back of the auditorium.

Meera Sarin’s friendly fairy gave us a successful and well managed opening (as well as popping up to help the action along later). The practice runs of “it’s behind you” gave great joy to the little girl opposite me, and it was a good way to set out the conventions of pantomime to those audience members to whom the genre was new.

Mary Hill and Kate Martin as Red Riding Hood and Cinderella were as daft a pair of warring anchorwomen as any TV studio could possibly have hired, and helped make the plot variations beautifully easy to follow. Their aeroplane noises were a highlight!

One might have expected the beautiful young blonde to be the conventional rather drippy heroine, but Gemma Robinson was a delight as self-centred vlogger Beauty. She was consistently selfish, with a lightness of touch that stopped her being unpleasant to watch, pacing the dialogue carefully to keep it lively without losing us among the emojis and hashtags. Chris Burns was an amusing grumpy King Muddle – again, not the customary kindly character, but we had quite a lot of sympathy for him as he did his best with his stropky daughter.

Lainy Cobb showed her versatility as well as her comely legs as hero Prince Charming, determined to follow his destiny and keep to the conventions, and skilfully playing the straight man among the lunatics with which the kingdom was so richly endowed.

The collection of fairy characters was ably led by Dame Balmy Weather. I was afraid Thom Cobb wasn’t doing his voice any favours with the falsetto (no wonder he was a bit croaky by Saturday night) and a microphone

would have helped. I'm personally not a fan of deliberately singing out of tune, because I think the audience pays to enjoy rather than endure, but that minor note aside, it was an entertaining performance, and I particularly enjoyed his 'exhaustion' after the community song and dance. He coped with his skirts with apparent ease, even when hopping down the aisle after turning into a frog (with a sprained ankle!).

Another good actor pushing her voice a little ('Get the Party Started' seemed very low for her) and who might also have benefited from a microphone, was Jane Quill as bad fairy Stormy Weather. Jane dominated the stage whenever she appeared and had a great evil cackle.

The trio of fairies Whatever the Weather (April Parker), Under the Weather (Amina Muneer) and Merry Weather (Julia Marques) were a constant delight, with their expertly differentiated and not entirely traditional characters. I particularly liked Merry Weather's energy – which she kept up throughout, so we heard everything even when she was set right upstage - as well as her most attractive singing voice.

The last fairy to appear, Eileen Laird as Fairy Godmother Gusty Weather, also had a lovely personality, delivering the silly parodies of Mary Poppins with super clarity which made them all the funnier.

Matt Wiggins was a delightfully sincere Jangles the Jester, particularly after he slowed down (he spoke a little too fast at first), with a consistent accent which didn't get in the way of hearing his dialogue. The energetic rappers (Matt with Brandon Jacobs Brewer) were splendid, and the way bad-tempered Traffic Warden Peter Coles (another very enjoyable performance) swept them off was really funny.

Lucy Navas was a thoroughly reliable Tinkerbell, promptly in place with magic portal (and plunger!). She and Vicky Prior worked tremendously well together as a beautifully co-ordinated dragon. Diana Dishley and Philip Hazeley, joined as appropriate by Brandon Jacobs Brewer, were consistently energetic and supportive super-fans, commoners, elves and staircase helpers.

Director, choreographer, producer – and author

Alan Robinson put a huge amount of work into this production in multiple roles. No wonder he said it had taken over his life. The silly script, complete with emojis and hashtags, was pacy and lively, with just a little flavouring of innuendo to make the adults laugh without creating difficulties for the parents of younger audience members. It was delightful to see so many people on stage despite the undoubtedly huge amount of work involved for him and producer Krystyna Kobiak.

There was lots of joyful singing coached by Jane Quill. However, I suggest either selecting songs written for acoustic performance, or looking into microphones for the singers, who tended to be drowned by the backing tracks anyway, and even more so when they encouraged the audience to clap along. As a result, many of the clever rewritten words were completely lost.

Alan and Mary Hill had planned simple and very effective choreography for all the songs: all the ensemble was obviously thoroughly rehearsed, and flowed beautifully. I particularly enjoyed 'Tragedy' with a neat contrast between the expert dancers and King Muddle's attempts, which were just the right side of caricature. 'Shake

Shake Shake' had lovely energy with an assortment of silly puppets as the stereotypical 'furry (and feral!) friends'.

There was just one scene when people stepped backwards into their places in the row – but fortunately it wasn't long before it broke into groups. I always admire well-planned bows, which leave the audience with a very favourable impression as they leave – and I hope will have encouraged their friends to come along in future. Over the years I seem to have seen Beaufort Players audiences swell consistently, which is a tribute to the hard work you all put in.

Stage management, lighting, sound, props

The set, by Ana Bretes, Thomas Cobb and Alan Robinson, was consistent and stylish. The lively cartoon-style of the set was coherently carried through the programme cover (Alan Robinson) and the props (Ana Bretes, Krystyna Kobiak, Alan (again!) and Eileen Laird). I enjoyed the frog and mouse in the corner of the castle, the impressive spinning wheel, and the comical mobile phone for Cinderella (with a complete contrast for the jester). The sparkly lamppost was a clever nod to Narnia - and we all enjoyed swishing the wands! The projected 'view through the window' at the back of the set, indicating time and place for each scene, was an absolute triumph. It moved when helpful but was still so as not to draw focus from the action at other times. Particularly effective was the animation of the dragon 'through the window' dive-bombing the castle to melt the wall of ice so Prince Charming could get through.

Sound designer Roger Dishley managed his usual amusing and appropriate choice of tracks to match the action, from a very funny 'Hooked on Classics' Tchaikovsky with menacing panto noises to the Postman Pat music for the invitation sequence. The backing tracks were beautifully co-ordinated, but, as mentioned above, there were times when having working microphones for the cast would have helped. A real microphone would have made Red and Cinders' fighting more effective, too. Lighting, by Pete Balls, could not have been bettered: every entrance was covered, and there were some excellent special panto effects. As always, the sound and lighting effects were beautifully timed, including the impressive thunder and lightning for Stormy's entrance at the christening and Beauty's touching the spindle, and working perfectly with the projection when required.

Costumes, hair, make-up

The look of the whole production was consistent and attractive. The make-up team (Bryony Robertson, Alice Lawson, Rosie Allison, Ruse Nutley, Sahdeh Merhinfar) had worked hard on everyone, from Stormy's dreadful eyelashes to Beauty's ultra-fashionable pink eyeshadow. I'm sorry not to be able to name every costume: my notes keep repeating how excellent the costumes were (not especially surprising, when led by Krystyna Kobiak, with Gemma Robinson, April Parker, Eileen Laird). There were some amazing tights; Cinderella's pumpkin disguise (and the dignity with which she wore it) was very funny; Balmy's series of costumes (loaned by Paul Morse) was splendid; Stormy's outfit was superb; Beauty's unicorn pyjamas with bunny slippers matched her soft toys; and the extra sparkles and sequins worked beautifully on everyone's look for the disco. Hair was just as good, particularly Balmy's 'bad hair day' and later frog-green wig.

Two very minor points: Prince Charming was wearing his sword on the wrong side, which made it much harder for him to manage, and Balmy seemed to change frock mid-dragon flight (it would have made more sense to change before beginning her travels). The dragon itself was just adorable!

Front of house and programme

I liked the clean design of the informative programme by Vicky Prior – with tremendously clever cartoon drawings throughout and added amusing activities. Thank you for the warm welcome from Krystyna and Alan - doing FOH and working the bar, too, along with all their other duties in the build-up to this delightful evening.

And all the best for your production of 'The Children', which I expect will be utterly different in every way except the amount of hard work I know will go into giving it the same high production values.

Zena Wigram

On behalf of Mike Smith, NODA regional representative district 2