

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2012-13

Group: Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Production: Jack & The Beanstalk by Paul Alexander

Adjudication Date: Jan 3, 2013

Venue: Wickham Bishops Village Hall

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen accompanied by Andrew Hodgson

INTRODUCTION:

This was Jack Williams's debut as director, and we always love to see what new directors have in store for us. This was also a slightly unusual version of the well-loved tale, as the cow is not taken to market to be sold in exchange for the beans. Possibly the original bovine bartering is a bit more emotional, but it's not a big stumbling block by any means.

So we were in for an evening of firsts. It was even the first night, and some little glitches can be put down to that.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

The usual efficient and friendly welcome and those lovely leg-room aisle seats in row G.

In the interval we were kindly offered free refreshments (even though Andrew had already leapt off to buy these, the offer was appreciated).

Always nice to see tea and coffee served in nice cups, too. The presence of two different sales counters makes it easy for audience members to grab their choice of refuelling without feeling rushed.

SETTING & PROPS:

We had some colourful and descriptive sets to enjoy once the red tabs opened.

The main village setting at Much Muddling had clear differentiation between the Squire's side of the territory and that of the humble villagers.

Outdoors in Cloudland, the blue sky had some wispy clouds and a feeling of being on top of the world. The parapet enhanced that feeling.

The Giant's kitchen was certainly a highlight, with its enlarged perspectives and imaginative oversized props. The mouse's escape tunnel was well conceived and well used.

The beanstalk grew dramatically and, best of all, it could really be climbed, thanks to the carefully placed ladder. The picture/pitcher joke worked well with a frame that crashed painlessly over Billy's head and the dropping of the magical bean from Cloudland worked well. It was a shame that it was inaccurately tossed on the first night and grew in the wrong place.

COSTUMES:

Liberties can generally be taken in pantoland when it comes to period costume details. Here we had some pretty Ruritanian-style village girls, a couple of straightforward wench costumes and a pair of cowboys. All very colourful. The mice costumes were cleverly done and these little rodents looked very cute in their waistcoats and noses.

We were taken aback to find a one-person cow whose head didn't match its body. A cow walking on its hind legs is a bizarre sight, but it certainly gave us plenty of amusement! We can only assume that one of the intended actresses had fallen ill on the night.

The squire was dressed in suitably dastardly style, complete with moustache. The dame's outfits were buxom and gaudy, contrasting with the fairy's gracefully charming costume. The ballet dancers in Cloudland looked like white clouds themselves, in their tutus.

The Royals certainly looked the part. The wardrobe team had come up with crowns, robes, ermine and glitter to create a regal appearance for this anxious King and Queen. Her Majesty's spiky headdress was eye-catching.

Jack, Billy and Hugh were all clad as young fellows of their class and station in life, and director Jack's cameo moments as the herald saw him correctly and colourful costumed.

Then came the excellent walk down – accompanied by wedding bells! The Dame's mauve and white gown, the happy couple's dashing wedding attire –including a very pretty wedding dress....it all added up to a finale with visual impact.

LIGHTING/SOUND:

The sound and lighting plot had been designed by one man, Robert Brown, so it's not surprising that these two elements worked well together.

For sound we had everything from merrily chirruping birds to joyful wedding bells (all too rare in a walkdown). The mics along the front of the stage ensured good singing volume.

The lighting was creative, with a nice green glow as Jack climbed the beanstalk, a swirling "gobo" (plus sound effects) each time the Fairy Queen appeared, brighter ambience for Cloudland and so on. The giant's shadow (spotted by my companion while I scribbled in the dark) was a creative idea.

The varying colours for the Money, Money, Money trio worked well.

MUSIC/DANCE:

Tom Duchan's band comprised keyboards, drums, trumpet and guitar and they gave a good standard of lively musical accompaniment and support...

Whether live or recorded, we liked the choice of numbers, from The Carpenters' On Top Of The World (very appropriate for this show) to Abba's Money Money Money sung by the Dame, Dora and Dolly. Together from Gypsy and – a masterstroke, this - Joe McElderry's hit The Climb was the perfect choice as Jack started to scale the beanstalk and the way it segued into Chariots Of Fire was a neat touch..

Mission Impossible for the raiding mice was equally enjoyable.

The director seems to have a wide knowledge of pop music and it was good to hear other old classics like REO Speedwagon's Can't Fight This Feeling. For this Jack took the solo, with harmonies provided mainly by Dora, Dolly and Billy. Very nice!

Heather Howard's choreography was effective, from chorus numbers through to ballet, and helped carry the story along. Dancing In The Street was particularly enjoyable, performed by the Chorus while Lilly and the transformed Squire swayed together.

PERFORMANCES:

FAIRY QUEEN: Anne-Marie Latter has a pleasant speaking voice, and looked lovely. I would have like the occasional understated sigh, groan or eye-rolling in the early stages of her corny rhyming so that we were primed for the humorous moment when she broke off to complain about the verse. And, perhaps, a later silent acknowledgement too. But a nice, controlled and pleasing performance.

DORA & DOLLY: This inseparable pair could have played up the nose neighbour facets of their roles and put more physicality into their gossiping, to enhance the humour.

But Rebecca Lee and Kim French were at ease onstage, and made valuable contributions to the village atmosphere, in which you could believe that everyone knew everyone well. Well done to both ladies for their harmonies in Can't Fight This Feeling.

JACK: We enjoyed Laura Kittle's very expressive Jack. What Laura lacked in leggy height she made up for in clarity of delivery and lively personality. Laura's every gesture seemed natural and appropriate and she had great dignity and leadership in the walk down and final bows. The beanstalk climb was dramatic and carried through with conviction. Her singing was good and we enjoyed the solo (with harmony accompaniment) in Can't Fight This Feeling.

BILLY: An amusing contrast was achieved by Debbie Allen as the more truculent brother. Stomping around and being generally not too bright, this was an entertaining character.

SQUIRE GRAY: Defying his youth, Steve Barham made a dastardly Squire Gray, and the moustache-twirling enabled him to define the character quickly. His switch from snarling baddie to butter-wouldn't-melt nice guy was enjoyed by all.

WIDOW LILLY WHITE: Ian Lodge looked striking and, after taking a little while to get into the spirit of the role, made a likeable dame. We suspect that as the week continued, Ian must have relaxed into the character and developed more audience rapport. First nights are not easy on Dames.

KING REX: Roger Lyons gave us a nicely anxious, bumbling King. It's not a very fulsome or challenging role in this particular script, but Roger developed it as far as he was able.

QUEEN ROXANA: More strident than her husband, this Queen is again a role without too much dramatic tension, but Sue Matten endowed the Royal mum with fluttering anxiety.

HUGH: Good work from Claire Burgess as Hugh, a character lacking energy in his working life. Claire's energy and focus could not, however, be questioned.

PRINCESS MIRABEL: A pretty, sweet, yet clever Princess from Maddy Lyman, who also looked fabulous in her wedding dress.

IDA NOE: As the Princess's maid, Linda Burgess played along well with the running gag about her name, and worked effectively with Hugh and other characters. Linda was a delight because she exuded a twinkling humour and a lively personality.

LORD CHANCELLOR: If the King was bumbling, David Lodge's Lord Chancellor was mega-bumbling. This was a delightfully dotty old chap whose useful days at court had clearly passed some time ago!

BUTTERCUP: As I said earlier, only one of the two cow actresses seemed to be there – surely one wasn't sitting on the other's shoulders!? We uniquely had a cow standing on its hind legs throughout. Whoever was inside gave Buttercup a great personality but we were as bemused as we were amused!

HERALD: Jack William's cheeky personality suited his cameo role as the Herald. His conversation with the King and Queen should have faded out but instead came to an abrupt end. These are the little tweaks Jack need to think about when he directs again.

GIANT NIMBUS: Heard but not seen, Richard Cowan gave the ogre a suitably deep and scary voice.

JUNIOR CHORUS: Some lively work from a disciplined young chorus – the group's lead actors or dancers of the future, perhaps.

SUMMARY:

As a debut production, we felt Jack Williams had done a pretty good job! There were deft touches of creativity and drama, with the beanstalk climb scene being a good example of how to build up a sense of tension. Not only was the music an excellent choice (as was the case throughout the show) but the scene brought together lighting, sound, acting, song – and excitement. The genuine climbing after such an emotive song, and the way the cast froze into Usain Bolt postures was a superb way to close the first half.

Jack possibly missed a trick in the mice scene. Everyone chased the mice off, but it would have been hilarious if they all came back across in the other direction, with the mice giving chase. They could even have hijacked the rolling pin? Yes, it's a rather corny chestnut of an idea, but that's what makes panto fun.

So well done on a promising debut.

The audience really enjoyed themselves and we too had a good evening. We emerged into the night feeling that people had gone to some trouble to entertain us and that they had largely succeeded – thank you.

Best wishes
Liz Mullen
Adjudicator