

North Essex Theatre Guild
Showcase Festival 2013 – 2014
Wickham Bishops Drama Club
Aladdin
Thursday January 9th 2014

Front of House

On a cold winter's night, both the hall and the welcome from the front of house team was very warm. The programme was well designed with all the relevant information. Interval drinks were brought to our seats by a very friendly lady.

Music

The band comprised keyboard, guitar, two violins and a cello. The music was varied and was played well. The show began with an overture – always a nice touch as it settles the audience and gives that sense of anticipation for what's to come. The band displayed their skill as accompanists when one of the cast got off to a bad start with one of the songs and they were able to get her back in the right key. With so many bands relying on pre-set rhythms and backing, it was something not all musicians could have done.

Sound/ Lighting

There were some excellent effects, particularly the thunder and lightning at the beginning. Instead of the traditional Aladdin's cave with sparking jewels, the cavern was dramatically portrayed with swirling lights, smoke and a spooky, dripping sound. The sound effects for the opening of the cave were very good. The lighting was imaginative and really enhanced the whole show. All sound effects were perfectly on time.

Costumes

These were bright and colourful and the chorus of children had matching outfits, beautifully made. Abanazer's outfit was green and sumptuous with a gorgeous cloak. I would have preferred the dame to have more dresses. The main outfit he wore wasn't very special and was a top and bloomers. I feel that the dame's costumes can defy logic and continuity – the more the merrier. The handmaidens looked very pretty and the royal party were dressed very grandly, with sparkly cloaks, shoulder pads and tassels. The chorus children had Chinese pigtailed attached to their hats.

Sets

These were brightly painted with perspective. The opening scene had the hills and houses of China and the laundry had a jolly selection of washing and giant washing baskets. There was a row of washing machines that Wishee Washee used to hide in. The dragon backcloth was delightful.

Aladdin. Laura Kittle

This was a confident performance from the moment Aladdin first appeared. Laura had to show a range of emotions and I felt that she really acted her songs in the manner of a musical theatre actress. She had good stage presence. Well done.

Widow Twankey. Graham Pipe

I thought Graham's dame was in the style of Les Dawson. He simpered, he was plaintive and his moments of panic were well acted and funny. It's not often that pantomime characters have to act drunk, so unlike drama where the tipsiness needs very careful playing, Graham could really have fun with this and made us laugh.

Wishee-Washee. Debbie Allen

At first I thought that Debbie's Chinese accent could have been more exaggerated and silly, but as the pantomime went on, the character she created was just so appealing that it didn't matter. She used a funny little walk and her comic timing and facial expressions were good.

Abanazer. Steve Barham

Abanazer is one of my favourite panto villains, and Steve didn't disappoint, with a deep voice and an authoritative manner. He interacted well with the audience.

Abdul and Ming Varz. Michelle Bacon and Linda Burgess

The comedy duo, Michelle and Linda worked well together, carrying out all their bits of business slickly. Their panic when pursued by the skeleton was good.

Emperor. Len Howard

The Emperor was a bluff old cove with an endless fund of corny jokes. Len gave him the necessary authority and had a good singing voice.

Princess. Seren Keeling

This princess was sparky and confident. Seren sang well in her duet with Aladdin and they had a good rapport with each other.

Hari Kari. Malcolm Lealan

Malcolm's delivery was rather slow. This may have been a directorial decision about the character but I felt the lines needed more pace. However, this did provide a contrast with the Vizier and the Emperor.

Grand Vizier. Jack Williams

This was a positive performance. The Vizier might be subservient to the Emperor but you felt that he was the one running things at the palace! A lively characterisation.

Li Lo and Shang Hi. Emma Howard and Simone Howard

The handmaidens looked lovely but they were both too quiet. I think one of them had some funny lines, with the words muddled up but I couldn't hear much of their dialogue so the humour was lost. With more volume, the girls had the potential for good performances.

Genie. Sue Walker

I've seen many productions of Aladdin and this was the first time I'd come across a female genie, so it took a little getting used to. Sue opened the show with a prologue and had a cosy, chatty style. She looked good with her blue face, turban with a huge feather and draping costume. Her relationship with Tai Wan was an interesting one and the rapport between the two actresses worked well.

Tai Wan. Kim French

Kim was the spirit of the ring and played her role with spirit! She looked glamorous and her sparky attitude contrasted nicely with the genie's more laid back style.

Skeleton. James Bacon

A small cameo role, but James was suitably scary, creeping up on Abdul and Ming Vaze.

Chorus

The chorus of children looked good and danced very well. I liked their lines spoken in unison – they really had impact. The dragon dance was a highlight. However, during the opening number, they all looked completely deadpan. Had they been told to look inscrutable or did the first night audience make them forget to smile? The skeleton dance was very well done.

Conclusion

This was a bright, colourful pantomime, with some excellent performances and some great lighting effects. Some of the songs worked better than others. There were some unusual choices and the audience participation song didn't really get us enthused but it was fairly brief – which is often a bonus! I liked the idea of the genie's television screen where the characters came on and off, sometimes fast forwarding or rewinding, but although parts of this scene were very funny, it did go on a bit too long. The appearance of Romeo wasn't really necessary. Some scenes lacked pace and in one instance the cast seemed to lose their way and go round in circles. The scene in the laundry where Wishee Washee got put through the mangle just didn't work. It took place off stage so might as well not have happened. Perhaps some other disaster could have befallen him that we could see and enjoy. I loved the dragon dance, it was very impressive but I had to smile as one of the smaller children at the back was struggling to keep up. The "ah factor." There were some delightful moments especially the chorus dancing. The first night audience was quite small but appreciative. With the same surnames appearing several times in the programme, this is obviously a close-knit community pantomime – a nice touch when whole families get involved together.

Thank you for inviting me along and I wish the group every success with their future productions.

Jane Rayner

