

North Essex Theatre Guild

Showcase Festival 2011-12

Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Cinderella

Thursday 5th January 2012

Adjudicator: William Hooper accompanied by Andrew Hodgson

Introduction

There can surely be no more enchanting, magical pantomime than the classic tale of Cinderella. This is one of the perennial, traditional favourites – a great story, the archetypal (and literal) rags-to-riches tale, the magic, the colourful range of characters, with goodies, baddies, and, of course, the ugly sisters. It really has it all. As such, Wickham Bishops Drama Club chose a strong foundation for their pantomime this year.

At the same time though, it does present a number of challenges for any Group looking to create an effective staging: not only the usual pantomimic demands of big, colourful scenery, equally colourful costumes, and the task and bringing unity to the crazy multifarious mix of drama, romance, comedy, music and dance; but also the effective presentation of the magic, especially the famous transformation scene.

These are challenges that each group meets in their own unique way. On what was my first visit to see this group, I, together with my colleague, was interested to see how you would rise to these challenges, as well as looking forward with much anticipation to the evening's entertainment.

Front-of-House

It's always interesting to see how different Groups approach the front-of-house roles. In this instance, we received an extremely friendly greeting, and were shown to our well-positioned and comfortable seats with great efficiency.

It was very pleasing to see a comprehensive range of refreshments on offer – something that one or two other venues might learn from – and were generally made to feel extremely welcome.

The programme was very well-presented: colourful, clear, professional and informative.

Set design, construction and properties

As mentioned above, pantomime sets are of a very particular style: bright, colourful, cartoony and generally larger than life in appearance.

In this regard, the first set we saw – outside the Baron's house – with its lovely colours, larger-than-life style and attention to detail, fitted the bill perfectly. Having set such high standards with the opening set, it was just a little disappointing that a number of the subsequent sets didn't quite live up to this high level. In particular, the Baron's study, the ugly sisters' bedroom and the kitchen, didn't quite meet this level, being a little plain, and devoid of the same attention to detail.

In the bedroom scene, there was also very little change between before and after the magical cleaning. I know this can be quite difficult to achieve, but a few little touches, perhaps a few more flowers, or shiny decorations might have helped in this.

Likewise with the kitchen, which seemed a little plain and lacking in the same attention to detail: it really called out for more pots and pans and ingredients, or washing materials on display.

That said, I well appreciate that getting all this done in a short space of time is an immense challenge, and the things that were done well, such as the opening scene, and indeed the ballroom, really did look spot on.

The stage dressing was reasonably simple and minimal – but none the worse for that. Items of furniture were brought on when needed, such as the thrones, or the beds. Such a simple approach helps keep the show moving along without the need for lengthy scene changes.

My colleague and I both felt that you coped with the transformation scene well, with the switches in costumes, the bringing down of the black tabs and the appearance of the coach being achieved pretty slickly. Perhaps it would have been good to have had a flash when Cinderella appeared in her new costume, to point up the magic of it, but I might just be being picky there. My colleague also suggested it would have been nice to have seen Cinderella in the carriage, to add a final touch to the scene. However, on the whole, well done.

Properties were comprehensive and served their purpose very well.

Lighting and Sound

Some productions place a great premium on the lighting – using variations and different colouring to create atmosphere and to change the mood where needed.

Lighting in this panto was, by contrast, reasonably minimalist. There were changes at certain moments, such as during the transformation scene, to help aid the magical denouement to the act, and also very effectively during the ball scene, the nudge up the tension as the clock ticked its way towards midnight – a nice touch. Generally however, the scenes were played out in a general stage light with few changes. I certainly don't think it was any the worse for this. And, as I say, the moments where we did see changes, they were well chosen and executed.

Sound worked perfectly well, with no glitches. The live band – always a pleasure to see (and hear) – were set at a clear volume. The recorded musical accompaniment was, likewise, just right. The sound effects used were effective and, at times, wittily introduced, such as with the heart beating in the bedroom, and, of course, the foot squeezing into the shoe!

Costumes and Make-up

This show calls for a vast range of costumes – and in this production we weren't disappointed. The costumes were impeccable and displayed a wonderful and tireless attention to detail.

I said at the start that this was a traditional pantomime, and in this instance, we were treated to the costumes to match. From the trimming on the coats and jackets, through the ugly sisters' delightful and subtly-contrasting range of clothing (loved the night attire – and the teddy bear for the Baron!) and the glamorous ballroom costumes, to the lovely ceremonial outfits and the vast array of wigs, this was a very well-costumed pantomime.

It's always a good sign when the chorus have good costumes as well – and the attention to detail in these, from the crowd scene at the start, through to the frog chorus clothing – very well done indeed.

Music and Choreography

As mentioned earlier, it's always great to have a live band – not always possible to arrange, but makes a real difference, so bravo for that. And, they set a good tone for the show, with their lively opening for each half, and pacy accompaniments.

Generally the music choices were very good. As well as the songs, some of the incidental music, such as the Harry Potter music for the search scene and the Blue Danube Waltz for the ballroom, both in act 2, worked very well. The one exception to this was the choice of duet for Cinderella and the Prince – You've Got a Friend in Me. Somehow this choice, fun and knock-about as it was, really jarred. What was needed was something much softer and more romantic – a genuine love song. But, as I say, this was the one sole exception to some very good musical choices.

It was good to see all the cast getting stuck in to the singing. Clearly there'll be a range of abilities in this regard, but the effort was fulsome and effective. There were moments when a singer seemed to be lacking in confidence, but within a few lines, they'd got into their stride and all was well. It was also nice to hear some pleasant harmonies as well. The sweet singing of When You Wish Upon A Star after the transformation was very fitting and well done.

The choreography was very effective. As with the costumes, it's with the chorus that you can really tell how much work has gone into it, and they didn't disappoint – some very good and clearly marked routines. And with smiling faces as well.

Production

Pantomimes really are a heady mix of styles and disciplines, and it can be a real trial to bring these all together and achieve some kind of unity. However, the different aspects of this production worked well together with a nice mix. The conception of the various scenes was good, and a lot of thinking had clearly gone into how to maximise the potential in each of the characters and their situations.

As a result, there were some enjoyable scenes and some good stage pictures. Coping with the transformation is always a big test, but the opening set the mood effectively, and dramatic moments, such as the ticking clock, the candlelight search, and the trying on of the shoe, all worked to good dramatic effect.

The Acting

The acting through this show was generally of a consistent standard, and with a clear sense of team spirit. The casting seemed appropriate, and everyone appeared to work well together. My colleague and I both felt that the whole show needed more pace, but no doubt this is something that will have picked up, with confidence, as the run proceeded.

Fairy Godmother / Queen – Sue Matten

Ah, what more traditional start could there be to a pantomime than the appearance of the Fairy Godmother! Sue looked the part as she emerged on stage and set the tone well with her monologues. She also worked very well with her young trainee, making an enjoyable double act.

Sue doubled up as the Queen, and successfully created a nicely-judged and clearly distinct character.

Buttons – Sue Walker

Buttons can be a tricky role – not only central to the spirit of the show, but with the need to be perpetually energetic and full of life, engaging the audience at every turn: not always easy. Sue came on and worked extremely hard to achieve just these demands and gleaned a lively response from the audience.

She was warm, friendly and engaging and with some nice facial expressions and good timing.

Hollyhock and Pansy – Dafydd Bates and Jack Williams

The ugly sisters were very well cast! By that, I don't wish to cast aspersions, but rather draw attention to the abilities of both Dafydd and Jack to be the larger-than-life baddies-cum-comic-turns. A nice bit of casting because they contrasted, both in style and in height, but had a good chemistry, were always boisterous, and generated just the right tone for the roles.

Cinderella – Maddy Lyman

Maddy came across very well as Cinderella. As the struggling, put-upon step sister, she drew just the right amount of sympathy, without playing up to it. Her transformation into the beautiful princess was convincing, and she worked well with the Prince. Her singing, when it gained confidence, was sweet and tuneful, and her dancing extremely elegant. The audience were with her all the way.

Penny Peace – Georgina Foley-Brickley

One of the amusing innovations of this script is the creation of Penny Peace, the erstwhile youth trainee fairy. Georgina picked up the tone of this part very effectively, with her voice, attitude and expressions. She and her mentor made a engaging combination.

Prince Charming – Laura Kittle

Laura demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of principal boy. Notably, she also recognised the importance of making an impression on your first appearance, both with voice, but crucially, through your posture. She stepped on stage very confidently and struck very effective poses as the prince. Her affection for Cinderella was convincing and they worked together well. Again, I sensed a certain tentative feel in the early stages of her singing, but this disappeared as she got into her stride.

Lord Dandini – Debbie Allen

Another familiar pantomime favourite, Debbie looked just right as Dandini, with a fitting tone of voice, appropriate, courtly gestures and movements, and good facial expressions. Her work with the Prince was, again, highly convincing and added greatly to proceedings.

Short, Back and Sides – Geoff Stables, David Lodge and Len Howard

Oh dear! What a hopeless trio! Not the actors, I hasten to add, but the characters! Geoff, David and Len all clearly understood their roles and their part in proceedings. The facial expressions and their amusing interplay were highly

entertaining. I did feel that their scenes would have benefitted from a bit more pace – the quick-fire one-liners and the business really demanded that. However, I've no doubt this picked up as the run progressed. The highly-amusing facial expressions of the three of you will certainly live in the memory!

Baron Boracic-Lint / King – Roger Lyons

Roger created two differing characters here, and always managed to demonstrate a clear personality, which shone through. His interplay with his wife, in each case, was amusing, and he demonstrated a clear knack for timing his lines which elicited some good laughs.

Baroness Boracic-Lint – Linda Burgess

Linda saw the potential of this part and created an entertaining character. Again, there was good use of posture and expression to convey the personality of the Baroness. She also delivered her lines very well.

Lord Chamberlain – David Lodge

Another role for David, and another nice performance. This was a clearly distinct characterisation and effectively delivered.

Shopkeepers 1 and 2 – Shirley Baldwin and Shirley Hunter

Both the Shirleys looked the part as shop keepers and played their roles very effectively, contributing nicely to the scene and to the overall feel of the piece.

Conclusion

It's always good to see a traditional, magical pantomime like Cinderella, and done in a nicely traditional way. Clearly a lot of thought had gone into every aspect of this production and my fellow adjudicator and I both got the impression that you all had a thoroughly good time rehearsing and performing it.

Thank you all for your hard work and effort put into this production, both on and off stage. It was very much appreciated. I look forward to coming back very soon.

With best wishes

William Hooper (adjudicator)
North Essex Theatre Guild