

Cinderella – Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Performed at Wickham Bishops Village Hall, 5th January 2012

Director – Ian Lodge

This is the first time I have seen a Wickham Bishops pantomime with no significant adult chorus and in many ways this is a great shame since it takes away one key element of the genre – hearty singing en masse. There are no doubt other negative consequences, although not perhaps from a production viewpoint. However, while it may seem churlish to mention it the upside of having no adult chorus was that the production ran smoothly and seamlessly, with no awkward breaks or contrived moments for the obligatory song. It also meant that the curtain was down by 21.45, a great result when so many pantomimes elsewhere are directed in such a way as to prolong the event way beyond the audience's tolerance for hissing and booing or competing with other singers during the sing-along.

In fact singing was subsidiary to acting throughout this production, perhaps accommodating the inclinations of the group. The songs that we did hear were traditional, against the recent trend to incorporate West End hits or pop songs, but this was no bad thing. The one change that could have been made would have been to have raised the pitch of Prince Charming's duet with Cinderella a few tones. Laura Kittle was a delightful Prince, with an expressive face and good dialogue but was forced to sing in her boots for half the song. At a reasonable pitch, either with Cinderella or Dandini, she sang well but the low notes did not come across.

The music was provided mostly by a small band and on occasion, usually when the lovely junior chorus was dancing, by backing tracks. This blend worked well and while I am a fan of backing tracks they only work when the singing is loud and lusty. The more subtle approach was also the best approach in this production. The technical effects were excellent, with timely lighting changes and special effects; the clock countdown as midnight approached, was especially effective. Scene changes were also smooth and efficient and the colour and variety of sets really good. I noticed the effect of the light on a small piece of fabric behind the coach windows giving a sense of depth – a lovely touch.

Costumes at WB are always superb and the fact that they are made by members of the group is so impressive. I do hope that Jenny Higgins is able to share her considerable skills with others so that beautiful costumes remain a talking point of the pantomime for generations to come. I lost count of the number of costumes used but at commercial rates they would surely cost £2000+ to hire. This is well worth bearing in mind should the group decide it needs to supplement its income.

Turning to the cast itself, I shall confine my remarks to the principals, who were all strong. However, the ugly sisters (Dafydd Bates and Jack Williams) were easily the best ugly sisters I have seen – loud, excellent diction and great timing. They represented the core around which this production revolved and lit up every scene in which they appeared. Maddy Lyman was a pretty Cinderella and had good poise, especially when dancing. Sue Walker, as Buttons, had good rapport with the audience and was clearly a good actor but I would have preferred a brasher, louder and less nuanced characterization. This was an unusual gender reversal, perhaps from necessity. Overall, this was an enjoyable evening which benefited from good direction and slick changes. The lack of chorus is a shame for the group but ironically did not represent a problem from the audience's perspective.

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

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