



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Banbury Cross Players
Production : Cinderella
Date : 24th November 2023
Venue : The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury

Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch for inviting me to report on the Banbury Cross Players' production of "Cinderella". This was the first time I had seen the Players, or visited The Mill, which appears to be an attractive and well-equipped venue.

I wasn't able to meet Justin as not only had he written this version of the classic fairy tale, but he also featured prominently as one of the ugly sisters. Justin can be proud of this pantomime, which included most of the classic elements, although the traditional pantomime dame was a notable omission from the cast. The script featured a number of truly terrible gags along with a sprinkling of contemporary references (such as the Baron regretting that he hadn't swiped left on first seeing the Baroness), and some entertaining physical comedy; the few instances of mild innuendo were comfortably within the parameters of family-friendly entertainment. I particularly enjoyed the word play (such as the misunderstanding around "Excuse me"), and the plot twists (I genuinely didn't spot Verruca's false leg in advance). I also liked the self-critical and knowing asides (such as when it was pointed out that we should ignore the fact that we'd met Dandini earlier). There were plenty of opportunities for audience participation, and that perennial favourite, the throwing of sweets into the auditorium, was resurrected (albeit with small packets of chocolate buttons), to the delight of those in the front few rows.

As accomplished as it was, the pantomime was perhaps just a little too long, something that seemed to be recognised in the script when there was a discussion about whether or not there was time for another "Oh yes it is, oh no it isn't" routine. There were moments when the energy flagged just a little, and the audi-

ence quietened down: eliminating the few flat spots through judicious cuts would have helped the cast to maintain the pace and engagement that characterised so much of the show. Did Buttons have one monologue too many? Did the Palace Announcer, despite the comedy of his repeated routine, introduce a guest or two more than necessary? Was the dance of the woodland creatures, which admittedly epitomised the inclusive, community spirit of pantomime, just a little bit too long? A few minor changes such as these, coupled with a relentless focus on crisp cues and pacey presentation, would have elevated this production to the next level.

Experienced director Liz Riley clearly understands this long-established art form, even if I didn't especially notice sinister blocking for the baddies, and the cast knew their roles and how to present their characters. The ugly sisters, Verruca and Bunion, were played with evident relish by Simon Hook and Justin Clinch. Wonderfully costumed in co-ordinating if not necessarily complementary outfits, Simon and Justin made an effective double act, breathing life into an often caustic sibling rivalry. Their dialogue was notable for its pace and natural rhythm, and the two of them interacted really well. Simon in particular had the self-confidence to own the stage, combining physical presence, telling gestures and an insincere smile to build his portrayal of someone doing their best to conceal just how unpleasant they really are. Justin, on the other hand, was very good at subtle asides, perhaps because he knew he wasn't going to upset the author; there's always an anarchic element to pantomime and Justin, through his facial expressions and quick wit, was able to deal with the challenges this can bring.

Jeremy Taylor and David Smith played the supporting double act of Snatchit and Grab, debt collectors trying to recover money owed by Baron Hardup. Curiously reminiscent of Nick and Fetcher in "Chicken Run", Jeremy and David had many of the best physical comedy routines, including the only custard pie of the evening, although sadly the plank routine didn't feature. Physical comedy depends on pace, trust and precise timing – attributes that were increasingly in evidence dur-

ing the course of the show. The re-imagining of the pre-closer sing-a-long – an improbable version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” – really brought out the best in them.

Baron Hardup himself featured far more prominently in this version than is often the case, and Nik Lester gave a persuasive portrayal of a man forced to marry for money rather than love. His nervous demeanour in the presence of his wife, realised through apologetic gestures and deliberately hesitant dialogue, was balanced by a selfless determination to do all he could to encourage and support his daughter Cinderella. I think we all felt a little bit nervous whenever the recently ennobled Baroness Hardup, played by Hilary Beaton, made an appearance. Hilary is another performer with an enviable ability to hold the stage, and the sheer unpleasantness of her Baroness effortlessly drew boos from the audience.

Katy Roberts played the title role with grace and charm. Pantomime heroines are frequently asked to project kindness and innocence while surrounded by a range of comic caricatures, and Katy delivered what was asked of her thanks to her very natural demeanour and understated delivery of her lines. She also has a pleasant singing voice, although the closing number in Act 1 was close to the top of her range. It was entirely understandable that she would attract the attention of Prince Charming, played by Steve Ramsden. The Principal Boy is often a girl, of course, and the role is associated with a very particular style of acting. Steve certainly captured some of the traditional heroic poses, but (perhaps wisely) gave the thigh-slapping a miss. He also was more able to break the fourth wall than a female Principal Boy would have been, as the need to sustain an illusion was less pressing; I liked the comic impact of his nervous smile and sideways glances.

Buttons was played with admirable enthusiasm by Martin Crook. This is a role which demands the ability to interact with the audience, and Martin certainly had that; some of the heckles he had to deal with would have bewildered a less confident performer. The manner in which he encouraged audience engagement,

and dragged the narrative back on track when it threatened to head off in unexpected directions, was exactly what was required. Martin did display a slight tendency to wave his arms about; his performance would have appeared even more assured if he had been more sparing in his use of gestures and really made them count. Adrian McGlynn as Dandini provided a useful contrast, delivering his lines with authority and adding physical emphasis only when strictly necessary.

Despite a sprinkling of LEDs on her costume, Helen Williams might have brought a touch more sparkle to the role of the Fairy Godmother – employing a more lyrical tone could have helped here – but she certainly radiated goodness which is the important thing. Terry Andrews brought out the humour in his role as the Palace Announcer, determined not to be deflected from his style of introducing each arrival at Prince Charming's Ball, and doing an excellent job of maintaining his character even when not directly involved in the action. Lizzie Forward had fun as the Ghost; the choreography of this key component of traditional pantomime was expertly plotted to enable the numbers on stage to be whittled down.

The chorus provided context and background colour, notably at the Ball, but their understandable and perhaps proper reluctance to steal any limelight resulted in this being a somewhat staid celebration. The opening scene was appropriately crowd pleasing, but could have been even more impactful with stronger singing. The junior dancers from the Sharon Green Dance Academy made charming mice, while their more senior colleagues impressed as the white horses. The inclusive dance routines were executed accurately, albeit in a rather mannered style; the moves involving dancers peeling off from a row perpendicular to the stage had good visual impact.

Set and lighting designers Clare and Nik Lester and Andy Lay wisely kept the setting simple, with faux stonework legs complementing a similar wall across the back of the stage, and strings of fairy lights lending a little festive twinkle. Individual scenes – the Baron's kitchen, a path through the woods – were front pro-

jected onto the screen above the rear wall: the elevation meant that the actors didn't cast shadows onto the projections, but light from the stage lighting design inevitably washed them out to some extent. Despite this technology being available, the transformation scene was staged the old fashioned way; not only was this a highlight for the young dancers, it also showcased an impressive if necessarily two-dimensional coach which provided a fine flourish at the end of the first act. The other properties (by Terry Andrews) were satisfactorily functional but couldn't hope to match the coach for glitz and glamour. Stage Manager Lucy Byford and her team kept the show running smoothly, but better choreography of the actors and stage crew to avoid them getting in each other's way would have helped on one or two occasions.

The costumes (by Sian Gibson and Brenda Williams) were very well judged: if Veruca and Bunion's costumes were the highlight, the Hardups' costumes, Dandini's waistcoat and Charming's white chocolate Magnum tunic and everyday boots also caught the eye. Kim Nichols must have enjoyed providing the ugly sisters and others with wigs that occasionally threatened to upstage the actors themselves, while the make-up (by Kate Groves and Jenny Tustian) contributed positively to characterisation and allowed the actors' expressions to come across despite the many colourful distractions and bright lighting. Musical Director David Ball gave a virtuoso performance at the keyboard, providing a selection of musical extracts and fragments of songs to accompany the onstage action, augmented by a range of atmospheric and occasionally comic sound effects (sound by Robin Williams).

How wonderful it was that The Banbury Cross Players were able to stage a new version of this classic pantomime written by one of their own members, under the direction of someone with significant experience of the genre. In many ways "Cinderella" epitomised the spirit of community pantomime, no more so than when Cinderella graciously forgave her stepmother and stepsisters in the final scene. The show blended comedy, music, dancing, and some strong individual

performances to good effect, while also involving plenty of young people and celebrating the town without taking itself too seriously. That pre-closer sing-a-long summed the whole thing up for me. With the traditional Twelve Days of Christmas gifts replaced by an even more ridiculous selection of presents, and with manic choreography that tapped into the nature of the characters performing, the whole number gained momentum, like a juggernaut starting to roll down an incline, until it became a glorious, energetic and hugely enjoyable celebration of this curious seasonal tradition. Well done to everyone involved.

Andrew Walter

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25th November 2023