

National Operatic & Dramatic Association      London Region

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	Aladdin
Date	:	21 <sup>st</sup> November 2025
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

---

© NODA CIO. All rights reserved

Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch and David Smith for inviting me to report on the Banbury Cross Players' production of "Aladdin" at The Mill Arts Centre. The Players' Chairman, Adrian McGlynn, was in the foyer to greet me, and Writer and Director Liz Riley was kind enough to spare me the time to talk about the piece both before the show and during the interval.

There are a lot of panto scripts out there, but what do you do when you can't find the one that's exactly right for you? One that promises festive family entertainment with all the familiar trappings of a traditional pantomime. One that stays on the right side of the narrow line that separates funny and smutty, and which broadly avoids cultural misappropriation. One that matches up to the pool of talent at your group's disposal. Well, if you are Liz Riley of the Banbury Cross Players, what you do is write your own panto script, and this production of Aladdin is certainly wholesome family fun. So many people's first experience of live theatre is a pantomime, and this warm-hearted, accessible presentation is an ideal introduction; I was interested to learn that Sunday's matinee will be a "relaxed" performance, opening up the genre to a whole new audience who wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable about going to see a live show.

The production certainly ticked most of the boxes on my personal traditional pantomime checklist. “Aladdin” is a familiar tale with a good strong narrative, and also offers plenty of opportunities for chorus work and troupes of dancers. There’s slapstick and wordplay, musical numbers and singalongs, animal costumes and cross-dressing. In this version there wasn’t a Principal Boy, which I thought was a shame as I rather enjoy all the heroic poses and thigh-slapping, but perhaps that’s just me. There was, however, plenty of humour, including every “poo” joke ever written (which seemed to please the younger members of the audience), and a sprinkling of contemporary references including some allusions to Andrew Mountbatten Windsor (which played well with older theatregoers). The Eastern setting of the story was downplayed to the extent that just about the only reference point was Aladdin’s harem pants, although there was a degree of oriental exoticism in many of the costumes.

As for audience participation, the packed house was up for it from the very start, joining in with the calls and responses and making a decent effort with the actions to “heads, shoulders, knees and toes”. Perhaps we were all experiencing a sugar rush; mindful of the health and safety strictures around throwing sweets into the audience, members of the cast had handed out goodies as we made our way into the auditorium. Excellent!

Liz confided that she had written some parts of the pantomime with potential casting in mind, and it showed in that many of the actors were notably well suited to their roles. This was certainly the case with Richard Oliver who channelled his inner Julian Clary in the central role of Mrs Twanky. Bosom-heaving vulgarity was largely eschewed in favour of some acidic asides – for example, when discussing an audience

member's outfit, Mrs Twanky claimed to have "had one like that way back when it was in fashion" – but Richard clearly appreciates how a pantomime dame should stand and move as he berated the boys, fluttered his eyelashes at the King, and generally proved to be impressively light on his feet. Richard was able to switch smoothly between Mrs Twanky's falsetto and his normal range, which employed to mimic his husband and occasionally for added emphasis or comic effect.

Richard Morris, playing Aladdin, brought an appropriate warmth and relentless positivity to the title role – after all, he is the person we are meant to identify with. Richard has excellent stage presence, and on occasion he affected a mildly heroic stance in keeping with the character; his clear diction and slightly lyrical delivery meant that his words were never lost. In this production Aladdin has acquired a younger brother, Nigel, played by Simon Hook. Clad in the oversized shorts and the old school tie of, well, an old school pupil, Simon was frequently preoccupied by itches that needed to be scratched. His toilet humour, previously alluded to, was strictly for juvenile amusement. Above all, Simon captured the boyish enthusiasm of the character, all excess energy and gangling limbs, modest misdemeanours and playful excitement.

This being pantomime, Aladdin was destined to set his eyes, albeit briefly, upon Princess Anastasia, played by Katy Roberts. Anastasia proved to be a relatively adventurous princess as she joined in with the search for the cave full of treasure, but Katy understands that the Princess is one of the roles that anchors the drama, thus allowing the manic mayhem to play out around her. Katy has a strong and serene stage presence, and her delivery was appropriately similar to Aladdin's which reinforced the notion that they were destined to end up together. She also has a pleasant singing voice,

although she sometimes found it challenging to project over the backing track, and an impressive scream.

Nik Lester and Clare Lester played the Princess's parents, King Rupert and Queen Mayhem, in a fine example of nominative determinism. Nik initially appeared to be every inch the warm-hearted but ineffectual monarch, bumbling around the stage and generally deferring to his wife while invariably finding himself the object of her ire. However, it gradually became apparent that he knew exactly how to handle her. Clare, by contrast, bristled whenever she made an appearance; entitled and demanding, her unpredictability and barely suppressed anger ensured that the Queen was no more popular in the country than she evidently was at the palace. This characterisation, however, did not prevent Clare from employing some impressive sweeping arm gestures, or from demonstrating good dynamic and tonal variation in the delivery of her lines.

Queen Mayhem may have been rather disagreeable, but the real baddie was Abanazar, played with relish by Jonathan Muir. Jonathan cut an imposing figure in his black and gold costume, and despite suffering from a chest infection he had the evil laugh to match. This was very much his trump card and perhaps he slightly overplayed it; if Jonathan had really focused on his deportment and drawn himself up to his full height his considerable stage presence would have made his pronouncements even more portentous, and that laugh would have provided the *coup de grace*. Jonathan certainly enjoyed an excellent rapport with the audience, and he showed that he could dish out the badinage and take it with equal good humour.

The two genies had contrasting characters: the Genie of the Ring, played by Hilary Beaton, was a throwback to the 70s in

her blue wig, psychedelic dress and purple boots, casually taking the audience into her confidence in a scouse accent. Hilary left us in no doubt that this Genie was working hard to secure the right outcome to the story, although the character's slightly whimsical manner and lack of formal qualifications – she was working her way through a copy of “Magic for Dummies” – proved problematic. The serious magical power lay in the hands of the Genie of the Lamp, played by Debby Andrews, an impression Debby was able to reinforce through the somewhat formal delivery of her poetic lines which were often accompanied by very deliberate hand and arm gestures. Debby also demonstrated the positive impact of standing still as necessary, and while her Genie maintained the façade of obeying the possessor of the lamp, Debby was able to subvert this to some extent through where she placed the emphases in her lines.

Every pantomime needs a comedy duo, and that responsibility fell here to Jem Turner as Fester and David Smith as Mould. What is it about policemen in helmets? They've been at the heart of countless comedy routines since the advent of the Keystone Kops, and that degree of wackiness was evident from Fester and Mould's first entrance on a comically small bicycle and a tiny scooter. David was suitably lugubrious as he characterised Mould as rather slow on the uptake, failing to think through the consequences of Fester's more idiotic ideas; he is proved to be an excellent foil, always focusing the audience's attention back to where it needs to be. Jem portrayed Fester as no brighter than his colleague, but more prone to original thought, usually with unfortunate results. The two played off each other brilliantly, chuntering away to maintain atmosphere and pace, trading lines with easy familiarity, and engaging enthusiastically in the slapstick, despite the fact that this often involved them beating each other over the helmet with their truncheons. By the end of

each scene their helmets were well down over their foreheads, which only added to their visual comic appeal.

Mould and Fester's "protective equipment" proved to be water pistols; Jem and David were clever enough to wait before firing them to allow the anticipation to build in the audience; why anybody would ever sit towards the front of the auditorium at a pantomime is a mystery to me. A shout-out as well for the stage hand who, for good Health and Safety reasons, rushed onstage to mop up any spills, and reliably garnered their own round of applause. Perhaps this task could productively have been assigned to a member of the cast – or could the person have been a character in their own right?

In the second act the hapless pair of policemen was joined by their superior officer, the Royal Palace Guard Sergeant played by Martin Crook. Martin's Sergeant basked in his petty power, employing a sort of threatening sarcasm to belittle Fester and Mould's efforts, and Martin's lilting Welsh accent only added to the comedic effect. He also understands physical comedy, and his fidgety gestures and accomplished truncheon twirling were highlighted by his white gloves. Martin was able to establish an excellent connection with the audience, and his facial expressions and ability to time a line enabled him to really bring out the comedy in the character.

Dick Whittington's cat, played by Vikkie Murray and given their own musical leitmotif, provided a subversive twist to the plot as they were regularly reminded that they were in the wrong pantomime. I enjoyed this little joke for aficionados of the form. Vikkie also appeared as the pantomime ghost, flitting across the stage at sufficient pace to keep it plausible that she wouldn't be spotted by the actors downstage, before being predictably scared away by Mrs Twanky. Finally, the King and Queen justified a Steward to announce their arrival –

someone with presence and authority, someone with a suitably stentorian voice and the confidence to make himself heard over the rabble. Step forward Sir Tony Baldry, Banbury's Member of Parliament for 32 years, whose years of experience in the House of Commons had clearly been building up to this moment. Now I think about it, it may have been Sir Tony who handed me my sweet at the beginning. Does that contravene electoral law?

The principals were supported by a small chorus: they may have been unnecessarily quiet when they gathered to greet the royal party, but overall there was plenty of engagement with the action, and chorus members with individual lines hit their cues admirably quickly. The two troupes of dancers – Seniors and Juniors – had been very well drilled by choreographer Sharon Green and assistant choreographer Rachel Biles, and they executed a series of routines in a range of styles from balletic to contemporary while smiling, keeping their heads up, and engaging the audience. One or two of the dancers executed some impressive cartwheels across the front of the stage.

The singers had been effectively coached by Bruce Walton and Charlotte Saunders, as was evident in their clear diction and technical accuracy; while the chorus was collectively able to project over the backing tracks, some of the soloists found it harder to make themselves heard. To be fair, the lack of any amplification of the performers' voices wasn't a problem for the most part, even if some enhancing effects such as a generous amount of reverb for Abanazar's laugh, might have been effective. Liz admitted that the one time vocal effects were used – the echo effect when Aladdin enters the cave offstage – the segment was pre-recorded. The eclectic selection of songs in Robin Williams' sound plot worked well in the context of the narrative, and while the jolly Christmas tunes playing

before the start helped to build the atmosphere and anticipation, some of the incidental music didn't work quite so well: for example, the manic music familiar from Benny Hill, ideal for a comedy chase sequence, felt an odd choice for a blackout between scenes. Sound effects such as a stone being rolled across the cave entrance or water dripping from the cave roof lent realism to the offstage action.

With over thirty in the cast it was necessary to clear the stage for the disciplined company routines which opened and closed the show. In my opinion, that big expanse was slightly problematic in more intimate scenes. The slapstick in *Swanky Twanky's* was at least given scale by the rather splendid, and solidly constructed, washing machine, but some of the interior scenes might have benefited from a contextual flat or a piece of furniture to help set some boundaries, as the zonal lighting had limited impact. That said, Nik and Clare Lester's set design did include some nice touches such as the rolling landscape masking the ground row, the decoration on the door leading to Twanky's premises, and the Tardis next to the main entrance to the auditorium. This positioning meant we all had an opportunity to admire the quality of the set painting, with a two dimensional surface rendered three dimensional through clever highlights and shadows.

The properties, supervised by Terry Andrews and Rob Hall, included some impressive chests full of treasure, and clever use was made of LEDs in the chests to provide sparkle. Andy Lay and Clare Lester's lighting design brought the cave to life through gobos, a glitter ball, and an adventurous colour palette, and the dancers' sparkly jackets really came to life in this lighting state. The back wall, standing in for a cyclorama, was beautifully lit throughout, and mood changes in the drama were emphasised through variations in brightness and tone.

The costumes, by Lucy Byford and Suzy Casey, were a fine demonstration that you don't need too tight a focus on a specific time or place to costume a pantomime effectively. The key thing is that the costumes should help define character, and in this they succeeded. Aladdin's harem pants and embroidered waistcoat had nothing in common with Nigel's grey flannel shorts and Thomas the Tank Engine rucksack, but each outfit told us so much about the wearer. Princess Anastasia's matching skirt and top had regal overtones, the Genies' contrasting outfits reflected their attitudes and experience, while the dancers' and villagers' costumes gave the whole enterprise a central European fairy-tale feel. As for Mrs Twanky, the multi-coloured mismatched fabrics of her first frock had a classic pantomime dame vibe. The attractive look of the piece was enhanced by well-judged make-up by Jenny Tustian, Lauren Davidson, Immy Tredwell and Kate Groves, together with wigs by Kim at Total Image Hair.

There is no doubt that Writer and Director succeeded in her principal objective of creating a family-friendly, accessible pantomime – an ideal introduction to the genre with nothing to cause offence. Most of the proud traditions of the genre were respectfully observed. The sinister convention of the villain(s) operating from stage left may have been ignored, but who cares? (Apart, perhaps, from me.) We had sweeties, calls and responses, audience participation and a singalong – what's not to like?

If the production lacked anything, it was the energy of spectacle – and I recognise that this may have been deliberate to keep the piece accessible to those who might normally find the theatre an intimidating place. Just imagine what clouds of bubbles or a sea of suds might have achieved in the laundry! (Apart, that is, from alarming both the Stage Manager and the

Players' treasurer.) What special effects might have accompanied the summoning of the Genies, or the entrances of Abanazar? While pantomimes invariably benefit from live music because of its capacity to provide energy and a sense of occasion, I understand that sometimes there is no option but to use a backing track.

Liz, together with her talented company, was nevertheless able to maintain a lively atmosphere in the theatre thanks to excellent characterisation and the fact that the cast knew and understood their parts very well; I for one don't believe Mrs Twanky's assertion, late in the first act, that she had gone off-script half an hour earlier. The performance ran for a little over two hours, and if there is any scope for paring it down a touch then it's probably in the first act as the second act felt really tight. Such considerations should not detract from the immense achievement of conceiving, writing and producing an original pantomime script. Liz and the company should be very proud of this show, and judging by the comments I heard in the foyer and on the street the audience, young and old, thoroughly enjoyed it. Oh yes they did!

Andrew Walter

NODA Regional Representative, London District 12

22<sup>nd</sup> November 2025