

## **Cinderella Trophy (Adjudicator) Review**

Thank you for a warm welcome to the Strode Theatre on a cold December afternoon. I was accompanied by John Robinson, who is in the process of being inducted as a new adjudicator. It has been a few years since I have been to pantomime at the Strode Theatre and I was very much looking forward to it. It was a joy to see the foyer filling up with children as we waited for the auditorium doors to open. The sense of anticipation was palpable and there was a buzz of excitement. It augured well. I have to say that the timing of your show, just after Christmas, is perfect for the youngsters, eager to get out after the excesses of Christmas. I am acutely aware, however, that it needs huge dedication and commitment from the whole team - both onstage and off - to make it happen. And, more than that, it needs great understanding from their families as the commitment to the panto inevitably impacts on family Christmas arrangements. I imagine the technical team and the stage crew were working their socks off to have everything ready for the technical rehearsal and then ultimately for the opening show. So I take my hat off to you all. That is true dedication indeed. Well done everyone.

### **Direction**

From the off it was clear we were in for a treat. A strong opening number set the scene for a fast-paced and well-rehearsed show. What we had was traditional family pantomime fare – nothing you couldn't take your four-year-old or your gran to see (excepting, perhaps, the American reference to the bum bag)! Which is wonderful!

A good pantomime starts with a good script and the show was both written and directed by Matthew Maisey. The first act rattled along at a tremendous rate but by comparison I thought Act 2 was raggedy and overlong (indeed, you could have done with shaving 30 minutes off the overall running time). There were large gaps between some of the scenes - which may well have been down to the fact that this was the opening show and all the issues had not been ironed out. I couldn't help thinking, however, that with a little judicious planning the second half could have been just as slick as the first. I also thought there was a dearth of belly laughs. There were plenty of gags but some of them were a little too clever for their own good! Simple Simon, is quintessentially the dopey one. So for him to suddenly spout forth with a Haiku just so you could introduce a pun with Haiku and IQ, seemed to me to be overly forced. More to the point, it misses the essence of good panto humour, which should be quick-fire and easy to pick up. Such is the pace of panto that if we miss a gag we are already on to the next one. I thought some of the script was very clever and amusing – particularly those occasions when misunderstanding was rife (a device you used several times) and overall the gags were OK but I felt that an injection of really good panto gags would have transformed this script from a good one to a great one.

Still, this was a show performed with great confidence and aplomb. It was well rehearsed and you made good use of all the available space. There was plenty of audience interaction and a good balance between visual humour and spoken gags and between musical numbers and dialogue. All good stuff.

Inevitably, it is my job to point out areas where I think it could have been improved, so here are one or two pointers. I thought it was a mistake to break up the string gag with a song. It made it seem very long-drawn out. And I also thought splitting the ghost scene into two pairs was a mistake. On the same subject, the 'ghosts', despite their masks, were simply not terrifying enough so the ghost scene fell a little flat. But having said all that, the storyline was suitably simple and the plot moved along at quite a lick. There was also plenty of opportunity to introduce those time-honoured panto traditions. Slapstick, ghost scenes, audience participation, and the struggle between good and bad were all there, which is exactly as it should be. You didn't have any 'brokers men' characters, which is a shame because they often introduce a whole different level of humour that the kids usually enjoy. And I felt the slapstick needed to be further developed. It's not good enough just to 'pie' somebody. A good pie in the face is an art form in itself, with a slow build up, audience interaction and anticipation and a final flourish (perhaps with an unexpected twist) as pie hits face! I felt it was

all over in a jiffy and that so much more fun could have been had. Similarly, I think a bit more work could have gone into the house number. I loved your idea of the 'Golden Tickets' to limit the numbers on stage, but it seemed to me to be under-rehearsed. I know it's difficult to rehearse when you haven't got kids and an audience but all the more reason for meticulous planning. As it was, when one side was meant to be singing we actually had both sides being encouraged to sing along and the two principals were unclear about how the interviews would be conducted. I also thought it was a shame Simple Simon came out in his finale costume. The whole point of the house number is to give people time to change into their splendid finale outfits and it kind of spoils the magic when we get a sneak preview! Something else that is difficult to rehearse without an audience is the pause that is needed for the laughs. I know it was the first time in front of a real audience but even so, too often the cast was speaking over the laughter so we lost the lines. You see? I told you that even in a great show I could find areas for improvement!

In truth, on the whole I thought the structure and pacing of the show were good. You made great use of the stage and there were some fine stage 'pictures'. Your players were well rehearsed and diction of those on stage was consistently good. There was plenty of audience interaction and, despite the size of the theatre, you were able to create a sense of involvement that was admirable. Because of the balcony you are not able to use the auditorium for any of the action (it would be unseen from above), which is something you clearly were aware of and handled well. It was interesting to see so many males in the cast - sometimes societies find it hard to get a full quota of men. You even had the principal boy played by a male! And why not? It is increasingly the norm in professional panto and I thought it worked very well indeed. Indeed, the whole show was well cast and I think all the performers did you proud – there were no weak links. Possibly work on stronger entrances and exits to really gain maximum effect, but otherwise, smashing!

### **Stage and Technical Management**

You have a great stage at Strode and you used it to full effect with flying front cloths and great backdrops. Given all those advantages, it is a shame that one or two of the scene changes were overly long. First show hiccups? Perhaps. But we really should be moving completely seamlessly from one scene to the next with no gaps. You introduced some nice set features such as the prison bars and the entrance to the cottage with its practical door. And I loved the Giant's seat and table his lair. The piece de resistance was, of course, the beanstalk itself leading to a suitably dramatic ending to Act 1. I wasn't so sure about the effect when it was 'chopped down'. I think it needed something a bit more dramatic. Perhaps something didn't work quite right, I don't know. I thought your lighting was well designed and used to good effect to enhance the action. You used your two spotlights well and your use of moving-head lights and gobos was effective, and not overused. The haze to enhance the effects was also perfectly measured. Speaking of which, I thought the 'low lying' fog was excellent when it was used to represent clouds as our heroes climbed the beanstalk. That was a very effective scene. Sound effects worked well but I thought the Giant's voice was overly distorted making it difficult to hear some of the things he was saying. Other than that, though, the sound was very clear and your use of radio mics was very accomplished. A lot of hard work must have gone into all those very fine props. They were all perfectly chosen for the show and congratulations to the team for that.

### **Music and Choreography**

I thought you used a good mix of songs and I enjoyed the musical side of the show. You have some lovely singers who you used to great effect. The chorus songs were delivered with gusto and everything was well rehearsed and delivered with confidence. I enjoyed your use of original lyrics too. There was some lovely choreography. You really do have a team of very talented dancers, who you used to good effect. I liked how you also blended the dancers and the rest of the chorus in the ensemble numbers. You have a fantastic little four-piece band so I was a little bemused by the mixture of live music and backing tracks or songs. Some smaller societies find live music hard to accomplish but, when you have the means to do it, by and large I prefer the music to be live. That is one of the joys of live theatre. And when you did play live, it was very accomplished. You also

effectively used music to underscore the action and to link scenes. All great stuff. All in all, the music and choreography was a major strength of the show.

## **Costumes and Makeup**

I thought there were some lovely costumes with only a couple of reservations. It was good to see the dame changing costumes at every opportunity, which is just how it should be. But I felt it would have been so much better if the dresses had been hooped. It would have given the Dame so much more presence and it would have allowed her to glide around that extensive stage with great aplomb! I would also have liked colourful DMs rather than black, although the colourful laces helped. My other concern was the baddies in the Giant's lair. More sinister, frightening costumes would have been so much better. As it was we had pretty girls with a half mask. It didn't quite do it for me. By contrast, I enjoyed Fleshcreep's appearance. He really was a sinister creature! Perhaps a tad more makeup would have helped but the wig, the hat and the outfit were very good indeed, all enhanced, of course, by his demeanour. I thought the cow costume was lovely – particularly that udder! The King looked splendidly regal and Fairy Grapevine was a picture! I was particularly impressed by the attention to detail for the chorus costumes where even the shoes were matching. I loved some of the costumes for the chorus and the dancers – those soldier outfits are a fine example. There were a lot of changes for the chorus and dancers so very well done indeed. Great stuff.

## **The Players**

### **Choruses and Dancers**

Smashing stuff. Wonderful strong delivery, winning smiles and some wonderful dancing. All top notch panto fare! I particularly like Hillbilly Rock, which really got the party started! And I loved Shake Your Tail Feather, which was a great opener to Act 2. Great stuff!

### **Jack played by Toby Turley**

It was good to see this part taken by a male - especially since you have all the necessary attributes! You have great stage presence and have a confident aura. You also have a lovely singing voice and are no mean mover in the dances! So a good all round performance. Well done.

### **Simple Simon played by Matt Wilson**

Ah! The archetypal fool and linkman! It was a shame your name was wrong in the programme but I hope I have it right! As with the others, you have wonderfully clear diction and generally speaking your audience rapport was good. I felt perhaps you didn't get as many laughs as we should but that may have been the script, the first show audience or simply that the kids in the matinee didn't get the humour. I really loved your songs – great fun. I felt you needed to have rehearsed the house number more and to develop a better rapport with Lord Crusty. It would also have been good to have pre-planned a series of questions to ask the kids and rehearsed some witty ripostes. But, that aside, this was a strong performance. Well done!

### **Princess Violet played by Niamh Small**

What a wonderful singing voice you have! I loved your solo, I loved your energetic entrances as you skipped onto the stage, and I was very impressed by your dancing too. If you have an area to concentrate on, it is to make sure that your spoken delivery isn't too fast but overall this was a very strong all-round performance.

### **King Bing played by Matt Turner**

The King, of course has to master the dual characteristics of regal grandeur and slight stupidity. I thought you did it remarkably well. You certainly have the bearing and posture for the role and you most certainly looked the part. Perhaps you could have teased us a little more with your enjoyment of the milky pudding! But it was a great portrayal. Well done.

Daisy the Cow played by Jo Turley and Flo Rice

What a great udder! And it was an udderly entertaining performance. It's hard to convey 'character' from inside an animal costume, but I thought you did so remarkable well. Impressive.

Dame Deirdre played by Justin Hodge

Again, I was impressed by your great diction and stage presence, which I thought would have been enhanced by hooped dresses and, more importantly from your perspective, even stronger entrances. Flounce on like nobody else can flounce. And I know this is difficult in a big auditorium, but try to develop a more intimate relationship with the audience. Draw them into your zany universe and talk to them as though they're your best mates. Don't feel the need to 'project' all the time, darling! Especially when you're miked, it is possible to develop that intimacy. But that said, a great performance that I really enjoyed.

Lord Crusty played by Glynn Webster

I thought this was a cracking performance. You are right on top of your game and deliver with style and confidence. Your impersonation of Fleshcreep made me giggle and your control in the house number was good although see my comments to Simple Simon, because they equally apply. Overall, great.

Fairy Grapevine played by Lydia Lakin

Great presence and good eye contact with the audience. The timing of your entrances was good and I really loved your bearing. Make sure you keep that pronunciation clear and perhaps look for the humour in some of the rather ridiculous lines you have! A good all-round performance.

Fleshcreep played by Dave Bonser

I thought this was a great performance – full of character and just the right level of sinister evilness. You are a strong player who has good rapport with the other characters and, most importantly, with the audience. I also thoroughly enjoyed your songs. Tremendous stuff.

The Giant's Voice spoken by Luke Holman

It is difficult for me to say too much as I think your voice was somewhat over distorted, making it difficult to know exactly what you were saying although it was clear whatever it was, it was fairly ominous! Certainly in terms of tone and timbre, the delivery seemed spot on.

## **Summary**

What a great show from a talented group. Well-rehearsed and lively, it made a great spectacle. With a bit more attention to detail in the comedy front this would have been absolutely first class. It is great for Glastonbury and Street to have entertainment of this calibre.

Well done to everybody.

Sam Allen

Adjudicator, SFD