

Adjudication by Ian Hurdman - Cinderella Trophy Competition

Friday 30th December 2016

To say I was 'chuffed' when asked to adjudicate G&SMCS's panto at Strode would be a massive understatement. The group has stayed away from the Cinderella Trophy so I was excited that you have joined the family and Strode is about a mile from my house! Happy days!

Musical Theatre and Pantomime have a strong following in the area and G&SMCS's reputation is high, plus the show was written and directed by the talented Matthew Maisey so, as I made the arduous journey from home to the theatre my hopes were high for a good night. My wife and I were very warmly greeted by Theatre Manager, the lovely Liz Leyshon who issued our tickets and, very generously, a complimentary drinks ticket – thank you. We met your Society President Rodney Gifford who made us feel very welcome and we proceeded to our excellent seats in plenty of time to drink in the atmosphere of excitement and expectation from the full-house audience. I noted the reference to the Cinderella Trophy Competition in the attractive, glossy program and sat back to enjoy the show. Friendly announcements were given at seven o'clock, the spectacular, sparkly, hanging title board was flown and we were off to Pantoland.

Direction

To be brutally honest, having watched your pantomime very closely, it is clear to me that there is very little I could teach your Director Matthew Maisie about directing a pantomime. This was a terrific production of a traditional, family pantomime, filled with energy, pace, fun and sparkle.

Choice of script:

I read the original script, penned by your Director and was amazed by the sheer quantity of jokes! It reads as a very funny script, well structured and loaded with all of the essential panto elements: Dame, Broker's Men, Principal Boy and Girl, Baddy and so on. The story is told clearly and without unnecessary complication so that any age of audience member could follow it comfortably. The structure also allows for any number of Chorus members – all in all a great 'fit' for your group. On the night I did wonder if the dialogue was occasionally too clever and many excellent gags were missed by much of the audience? But perhaps I am being too 'picky'?

In terms of Creativity, direction was spot on: huge energy was immediately obvious. There was no overture, just straight into the action, which I liked very much. Playing to a young audience it is essential to 'hook' them from the outset and a long piece of music before anything has even happened on stage can be tedious for them. The appearance of the staggeringly energetic Molly Muddles set the bar and the rest followed suit.

Following all of the traditional panto 'rules' and very quickly establishing principal characters' strong relationships with the audience: eliciting boos for the baddy, a call-and-answer for the linkman and so on, immediately engaged and excited the audience. What followed was a cohesive and slickly delivered show. In addition was the amazing 'falling off a log' scene which was one of the funniest and best-worked scenes I have ever seen in pantomime.

Pace was electrifying: entrances and exits were crisp, motivated and speedy; cue-bite was razor sharp and the flow of scenes was as smooth as is possible. The only downside for me was the amount of 'dark time' when the stage stood unlit as scene transitions were made. This felt a little old fashioned and I wondered if scene changing in light might have worked? The audience is aware that scenes do not change themselves and seeing either members of cast or costumed 'black-gang' making the changes in a well-rehearsed manner might maintain the audiences interest level and avoid having to rebuild the energy after a dark stage – just a thought.

Acting

You were blessed with a talented and experienced group of principals who showed no

weaknesses in acting delivery: interacting amongst themselves, with the audience and even alone with great believability, clarity and no little charm. It was however the performances elicited from the very youngest performers that particularly impressed; all were clear, confident, believable and sweet without ever becoming 'saccharine' and also remained resolutely in-character – no easy feat for a director to achieve. Casting was very good indeed but I did struggle slightly when The Evil Queen was enjoining us to agree that she was beautiful and we were required to disagree – She is stunning!

Stage Picture

Striking backcloths provided colour and depth, enhanced by various items of stage furniture like the magnificent four-poster. This deceptively simple staging allowed the creation of attractive stage pictures using the beautifully costumed cast. Straight lines of actors reciting lines is the bane of amateur panto but this was never seen – from the opening number featuring song and dance by a cast of thousands, eye-catching scene after scene followed. Use of Space was impressive – every inch of the stage and much of the auditorium were utilised: from full-cast numbers dancing spectacularly across the full width and depth to Molly Muddles sprinting around everywhere to the Dame's noisy and funny entrance through the auditorium.

The place felt 'full of pantomime'. Attention to detail from the director was very good indeed too; even the slapstick routine was tightly managed. The direction showed a real love of pantomime and maintained the traditions very effectively: Baddy on stage left, traditional PB costume, changes for the Dame and family-friendly language. I was a little unsure about the suitability of the 'bed scene' with The Evil Queen and Prince Artemis tussling on the four-poster. Somehow it did not seem to scam with the innocence of the rest of the show (or I may be getting unreasonably prudish in my dotage?). Otherwise this was a top-flight pantomime, expertly directed. Excellent.

Music

Musical Director Tom Billings fronted a very small band comprising Bass, Reeds, Percussion and Keyboard to produce a surprisingly full, orchestral sound and feel to the accompaniment. The band were tight and organised, supporting the singing superbly. Singing from principals and ensemble alike was of a very high order. Harmony was widely used and some excellent voices were on show. Arrangements were right for all songs and the length was appropriate. Vocal Tutor Elspeth Salmon had clearly worked hard with many, as the quality across the board was noticeable. Very well done.

Stage Management

Stage Management under Stage Manager Sarah Vowles and DSM Helen Bulman was neat, tidy, quiet and slick. The hired cloths and sets were adapted to the Strode stage perfectly and scene transitions were pleasingly quick. I mentioned under 'Direction' that I would have liked to see a little less 'dark time' but this was overall, the individual transitions were very timely. Performers made prompt entrances and even large groups made clean exits. Well managed.

Lighting

The lighting design by Chris Sealy, using Bright* Production Services equipment worked very effectively. I see no program credit for operators but changes were smooth, not over complex and enhanced the mood of the scene on stage without ever up-staging it. Follow-spot was crisp and accurate. Good work all.

Sound

Sound Engineer Dave Riley, assisted by Lewis Packham, using Northern Lights Productions equipment produced a reasonable result. The acoustics at Strode can be challenging, particularly with a fairly powerful band and varies greatly depending on where one sits in the theatre. For me clarity was just good enough. I could hear pretty much every word but I would struggle to say 'excellent'. Mic cuing and balance were very well managed and there was a pleasingly professional lack of pops, crackles and bangs. Well done.

Properties Andy and Mo Pickford's props were spot-on. Everything from yellow dusters in Nine to Five to The Evil Queen's lovely fan. I should think the props table was groaning. Everything seemed to blend and suit the moment. Very well done.

Effects I liked the 'steam jet' effects DSR and DSL – a good visual impact without choking the audience. I was also very impressed (not sure that this is an effect but I wanted to mention it somewhere!) with the fabulous Mirror: Great design which really worked and looked superb.

Choreography

Choreographer Sarah Neale must have a huge and scary whip during rehearsals: judging by the huge amount of work that had clearly gone into the many, excellent dance elements of this panto. From the full-company splendour of Can't Stop the Feeling to the fun of 9 to 5 or the dramatic He's a Pirate or the lovely balletic, modern dance in the Spooky Woods there was variety, quality and energy. It was even good to see Sarah herself dancing and looking younger than many of the teenagers on stage! Excellent work.

Costume

Accepting (in the absence of information to the contrary) that the majority of costumes will have been hired or borrowed, rather than made specifically for the show costume was very good indeed. Going firmly along the 'traditional' line (which I like very much) Prince Artemis looked suitably dashing, Snow White looked exactly how she should (especially to a boy like me, raised on Disney), The Evil Queen looked magnificent and glamorous, Molly Muddles was the perfect rag-doll, the two idiots look daft enough and the Dame was suitably gruesome. In a perfect world I would have liked to see a full change of costume (rig & wig) per scene for the Dame but I understand that there are limits! Ensemble costume sets looked great and the animal and insect 'specials' were gorgeous. The Dwarfs were nicely colourful and the Walkdown set was spectacular. Wardrobe Mistress Di Gifford and her assistants Sarah Neale and Janet Black should be proud of their work. Very good indeed.

Hair, Wigs & Makeup

The 'look' of the panto was highly professional – the attention to detail across the board was very high. From the Dame's 'beautiful' tresses to Molly's bunches hair and wigs, managed by Di Gifford all looked tidy and appropriate. Makeup too was very well presented: I liked the minimal touch for the Dame – no clown-mask here. It allowed him/her to use clear facial expression to good effect. The principal boy and girl both looked clean-cut and pretty, the 'Baddy' nicely nasty. I loved Molly's freckles and the way the Dwarfs were not over-done. The ensemble all looked healthy and natural. Daisy Lailey, Marie Slater, Adele Loxton and Annie Cave know what they are doing! Very well done.

Comedy

This was a funny script and also featured some very funny pieces of business. Comedy plays a huge part in pantomime, and generally comes from the pair of Brokers Men and the Dame. In this show the Dame, Nurse Nelly was also aided and abetted by a side-kick, Molly Muddles. Comedy was generally very well handled although, as I mention in 'Direction', the audience missed quite a few of the cleverer gags. Occasionally heavily 'pointing up' jokes can be effective but can also slow the pace, particularly with the sheer quantity in this script! So the Director's apparent decision to 'go with pace' seems sensible. The Dame's stand-up worked very well – I particularly liked the thermometer joke- and his/her handling of comedy worked well throughout. There were several quick-fire question/answer shticks between Broker's Men and sometimes including the Dame. These were superbly performed and were often very funny. Slapstick was well worked and the aforementioned 'falling off a log' routine was genius.

Villainy

Every Panto needs a Villain – you had The Evil Queen and her two dozy henchmen, Ratfink and Weasel. The imperious Queen worked very well in her role of audience-stirrer – from the word 'Go' she was engaging the audience, controlling them effectively and raising great boos and hisses.

This audience-engagement is the lifeblood of panto and was well managed. Played stylishly and with some great timing the Queen quickly became the best sort of villain: the one we love to hate.

Romance

Romance in panto is traditionally seen between the Principal Boy and Principal Girl. Both of them are really girls so sometimes it can feel a bit awkward. Snow White and Prince Artemis worked well and naturally together and we were entirely comfortable yet convinced of their love. Ahhh.

Performances

If I have missed any character or individual from this piece please take this section as including you. Every show depends on every member of the cast maintaining the magic of theatre, transporting us the audience to the "world" of the story told, the slightest mistake can break the magic: each must always be "in character" focussed, concentrating and smiling, from the smallest part to the biggest star. This was all very well achieved. Every player from the very youngest to the more 'mature' remained focussed and engaged throughout. Very well done all.

The Evil Queen - Jessy Stradling

Jessy, The Baddy- what a great role! You fully inhabited it, looked brilliant and maintained a great, good-humoured, wicked persona. The audience loved to hate you. Your presence, audience control and interaction with other cast members were spot-on. I liked Evil Woman very much and you even revealed a talent for dance! Excellent.

Molly Muddles – Amelia Chinnock-Schumann

Amelia, I bet you sleep well after each performance! I have rarely seen more energy from any performer short of the Olympics. You absolutely lived Molly: energetic, hugely likeable and very engaging. I particularly liked your physicality of expression: emphases being made with arms, legs, everything. Your pieces straight-to-audience were absolutely confident and assured and you can even sing! Excellent

Nurse Nelly – Glynn Webster

Glynn, I'm guessing this is not your first time on the stage or as Dame and it is a real pleasure to watch a Dame so fully in control of everything: energy, lines, gags, movement, singing, timing and audience interaction. Excellent.

Snow White – Niamh Small

Niamh, you looked amazingly like every little boy or girl's image of Snow White. Not simply in appearance but also in your gently confident deportment and movement; lovely, effortless singing; natural acting and charm. This was a very strong performance indeed. Excellent.

Prince Artemis – Bethany Baker

Bethany, you achieved that difficult balance for any Principal Boy: playing a strong, thigh-slapping boy but still remaining distinctly feminine under it all. I liked your stance and you slap a mean thigh. I wonder, though if slightly slowing your spoken deliver might enhance your performance even further. I enjoyed your singing and you certainly looked every inch the Prince. Very well done.

The Mirror – Judi Neale

Judi, I thought your 'take' on The Mirror was great. She was dry and very funny- the tone was just right. Managing the mirror operation on top of delivering your character must have added plenty of extra pressure too. Very well done.

Ratfink & Weasel – Justin Hodge & Matthew Maisey

Gents, I have lumped you together because you were a real double act. I very much liked your interactions together – the quick-fire stuff in particular. I have mentioned the 'log' scene several times – fantastic. Your timing, energy and precision of performance whilst managing to look

confident and entirely relaxed was impressive (especially as Matthew was also directing!).
Excellent.

The Dwarfs

Dwarfs, I am sorry that I haven't been able to give you all individual critiques but there were so many of you that it is impossible for an old bloke like me to manage. However I thought you were all very good indeed. You were all very clearly spoken and word-perfect. All of your movement and singing were impressive and you all stayed fully in-character at all times. I hope that I will see many of you in many shows in the future. Very well done.

Summary

I am very aware, from experience, that a huge amount of hard work goes into delivering a show and special credit should be given to all those unseen workers, seamstresses, chaperones, front of house, set builders et al, without whom the show could not go on. Yours was a very strong pantomime in all areas and I would like to thank you all for giving my wife and me a very enjoyable evening.

Thank you for inviting me.

Ian Hurdman