

ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION 2 January 2017

Adjudicator: Gerry Parker

Over the Christmas period I saw two of the over three hundred versions of the story of Cinderella and was fascinated by the enormous variations in the two versions of the same story. The Charles Perrault 1692 version provided a good basis for the presentation at Bath's Theatre Royal and at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol the Travelling Light Company moved on just over one hundred years to tell the story as seen through the rather more serious eyes of the Brothers Grimm.

Although there do not appear to have been so many previous versions of the story of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', the Brothers Grimm's 1812, with a final revised edition in 1854, was by far the most accepted source of the story until Walt Disney's ground breaking 1937 animated version appeared with the Dwarfs acquiring individual names (which I believe are still the copyright of the Disney Corporation) and a memorable group of songs.

Whilst waiting for the script of this show to appear I cogitated long and hard on what version, or for that matter the several real life events that some historian claim are the basis for Grimm's tale, your Writer/Director had looked to when creating this Pantomime version of so beloved a story.

Despite not having access to the music and script, including those iconic Dwarfs' names, I think it is fair to say that this show owes more to Walt and his animators than to the Brothers Grimm. Without slavishly following the animated images found in the Disney film, the Wardrobe Team kept very much to the spirit of that presentation, the Queen had a great deal of black in her costumes, the Dwarfs replicated their drawn images fairly closely, and the other principal characters, with the allowed exception of Nurse Nellie and Molly Muddles, fitted readily into the picture of the story that most of the audience found easily recognisable.

The adaptations that had been made to the hired sets ensured that the visual pictures created fitted comfortably into the acting area offered by the Strode Theatre. A well designed, expertly delivered lighting plot enhanced these pictures, as did the nicely chosen properties.

Just as the production was robbed of those iconic Dwarfs' names so also there was no access to the much-loved group of songs associated with 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. Choosing suitable replacements for these numbers is an extremely difficult task. The temptation is to go for a modern group of 'pop' songs that would be appealing, and quickly recognisable to a young audience. The problem with going down that road is that very few of the 'latest hits' sit easily within a 'Pantomime' version of this story. I presume we have to thank the Director and MD for the clever mixture of songs that made up the score for this show. There was quite a range of sounds and periods amongst the choice, Buddy Holly's 1959 hit 'Raining in My Heart', from the 60's, Simon and Garfunkel's '59TH Bridge Song' and Lulu's Eurovision Song Contest entry, 'Boom, Bang, A Bang', 'That Thing You Do' from 1996 and the 2013 number, 'He's A Pirate'. These were all arranged in fine style {By the MD?} to fit the array of instruments.

Missing from that list is the oldest number on view, and in many ways an inspired choice to close Act 1, 'Spread A Little Happiness'. Although it had a late revival following Sting's recording taken from the sound track of 'Brimstone and Treacle', the song originates from

the 1929 show, 'Mr Cinders', a reversal of the Cinderella story. I saw a revival of it a few years back and as a small-scale musical it still has a great deal to offer. In the hands of this Director, MD, Choreographer, Stage, Lighting and Sound teams it formed the basis for an excellent first half finale.

I mentioned the MD in that last paragraph and with him, of course, goes the well-disciplined Orchestra, who provided splendid support to soloists and full chorus throughout proceedings. Alongside the MD and Orchestra must go the Sound Team responsible, as they are in virtually all modern musical productions for creating an acceptable balance between singers and musicians. Even sitting as close to the Orchestra as I was in Row B, I was never aware that either they or the vocalists were too dominant in any number and so the Sound team's efforts must receive a plus mark.

Although I believe that the show would have benefited from losing at least fifteen minutes from the first half, I cannot in all fairness claim that Act 1 dragged in any way because of being played at too slow a pace. Scene changes were, with only a couple of exceptions, quickly and efficiently carried out, cues into music and dialogue were invariably tight and as a result the overall pace of the production was good.

Individual Performances **Prince Artemis**

This Prince was a bit of a hybrid, visually a mixture of the animated Disney character and a traditional pantomime Principal Boy, with a couple of 'thigh slaps' thrown in for good measure. Vocally the songs, 'Boom Bang A Bang', 'We Could Be Together' and 'Raining in My Heart' originating in 1967, 1989, and 1967 respectively provided quite a variation in styles for you to tackle. The rousing 'Boom Bang A Bang' which Lulu sang in the 1969 Eurovision Contest found you doing vocal battle with The Queen and holding your own very well. Like many a romantic duet, the Debbie Gibson number, 'We Could Be Together' is not one of those that grabs the audience by the throat and will not let go, but with your two voices blending well together it served a good purpose on this occasion.

Left all alone to deal with the old Buddy Holly hit, 'Raining in My Heart' you delivered the package confidently. Having already presented a nice pictorial image, shown that the vocal challenges were well within your range and handled the dialogue that had come your way more than just competently, I felt that a little too much diffidence remained in the overall character as you met up with each new character you came into contact with. As more confidence appeared so did your portrait of the Prince grow in stature. You played the pieces of comedy that came your way as nicely as the romantic interludes with Snow White showing that here was a player with a good range of talents to offer.

Snow White

I have seen Snow White played in such a prissy, sickly sweet manner that I, and I suspect more than half of the audience, began to side with the Wicked Queen. How nice then to find a characterisation which, whilst living up to its name, was not one bogged down in a morass of sentimentality. When you first appeared before that attractively designed Castle garden backcloth you had a built-in rapport with the other members of the company who shared 'Sh-Boom' with you. It was no surprise when the Prince was attracted to this beautiful, positive young lady rather than the predatory older Queen. A romantic duet was

obviously on the cards, and although the one chosen was not memorable in itself it fitted the situation ideally, and was given full value by you and the Prince. It is always nice to see a change of costume and your move from the traditional appearance into more autumnal colours gave us a good change of visual picture. However, as you quickly returned to the traditional Snow White costume and remained with it throughout the rest of the show, it did all seem a bit like a change for change's sake.

Well supported by the Junior chorus, working in front of another fine backdrop, you sang 'Somewhere Out There' with warmth and feeling, underlining the lovely character you were creating. It is always a tricky moment when the Dwarfs appear; getting the relationship between them and Snow White just right is no easy matter. Thanks to some admirable settings and good mime from the Dwarfs when they first discover the sleeping Snow White any problems in this area were quickly resolved. The progression from this first meeting into the scene moved seamlessly into the, 'Spread a little Happiness' number and the end of Act 1. I did wonder about the wisdom of the Juniors joining Snow White and the Dwarfs for this 'big' ending, only to immediately change my mind as the whole group neatly choreographed and in good voice, built the scene into a suitable first half closer.

A word here about the length of that first Act. It is fair to say that the performance I attended did not suffer from many of the younger members of the audience fidgeting, at least none sitting in my vicinity, but you are gambling on that happening when an opening Act runs for an hour and a half and a little judicious pruning might pay dividends in the long run.

Neither would an opportunity for Snow White to have been more fully involved in a song in Act 2. She really did get pushed very far back in the production after the interval. Nevertheless, her strong personality made sure that she did not fade out of the picture completely, giving the Queen someone to continually plot against, and the Prince and Dwarfs someone worthy of their love.

Nurse Nelly

Underused and underdeveloped are words that come to mind when looking at the input to the show from this gorgeously grotesque character. There was never any doubt from your opening entrance and immediate attempt to engage with the audience that here was a player who was completely comfortable wearing the Dame's costumes, wigs, and make up. The well-trod road of distributing sweets to the audience was played with a fine sense of fun.

The introduction of a 'Dame' character into this story has presumably two functions, one to bolster the comedy aspects of the story, and secondly to place the production more in the genre of traditional pantomime. Whilst both of these functions were enhanced by the inclusion of Nurse Nellie in the storyline, it was done in a manner that placed the character more on the periphery of the story than would be the case in a traditional pantomime. It is not usual to find a 'Silly Billy' type character on hand to work in tandem with the 'Dame', and Molly Muddles fitted neatly into that role. It is also quite common to find two additional comedy characters, like 'Ping' and 'Pong' in Aladdin'. What is less usual is that these three characters combined to dominate much of the comedy input, leaving the 'Dame' at times play what the Americans would describe as 'Second Banana'. In the much appreciated 'Slapstick' routine, you showed that you were as happy playing physical comedy as you were making the most of some outrageously corny dialogue.

Equally nicely presented were the vocal inputs, duetting admirably with Molly, and combining in the same vein with the energetic Juniors in the '9 to 5' number. The business with children from the audience joining you and Molly on stage was hampered by no hand 'mic' for you to wield. Was there supposed to be one on hand, and somehow it became lost in the shuffle? Around this time in an effort to bring the comedy, (which was flagging for a moment or two), back on track, you indulged in a few 'In' jokes, always a dangerous thing to do. You, and others on, and off stage, find these jokes funny, but the audience who have no idea what the background to them is are either baffled or annoyed because they have not been let in on the gag. Let me say immediately that I am talking of a very little deviation from the script, so no great danger of audience alienation, but still something to be avoided. That aside, this was a character who always had a good relationship with the audience played by someone who in different circumstances with a script that was more generous towards them would be capable of holding the comedy centre stage throughout any show.

The Evil Queen

This is a gift of a part, always providing that the person cast in it has a big enough personality to take full advantage of the chances on offer. The answer to that question is a definite yes - visually, vocally, and dramatically here was an actress who fitted the role to a tee. You wore the well-chosen costumes, high boots and all with the sort of arrogance that befitted a woman who would brook no challenge to her claim to being the most beautiful lady in the land. When you reacted as you did to the Prince's proposal of marriage to Snow White, having a moment or so previously preened yourself to accept his proposal, the facial and body language told us more about you than pages of dialogue would have done. When the introduction to, 'Boom, Bang A Bang' began I wondered if it was going to be a good choice for such a pairing and for this part of the story. The way in which you both set about the task soon allayed any doubts I might have held in that direction.

I am always a little suspicious when 'canned music' is introduced, and so it took me a moment or so to appreciate your work with the Dancers in 'He's A Pirate'. Cleverly choreographed to add drama to the movement, you took advantage of the chance not only to show off your ability as a 'Song and Dance' lady, but also to highlight the true evil that lurks just below the surface of this 'pantomime' villain. Just one small note of caution; there were moments when you came perilously near to pushing the character too far, and thereby diminishing rather than adding to its impact. Fortunately, this was too skilled a practitioner to let so much good work be undermined for even a moment, so please accept those words as ones of caution, not criticism.

The Mirror

The Writer/Director was taking a chance when he decided to make 'The Mirror' a member of the cast rather than a clever mixture of lights, sounds and a disembodied voice. Nicely designed as the 'costume' was, I did wonder when you first appeared about the wisdom of taking this course. With that slightly self-deprecating style of delivery, however, you quickly put such fears in their proper place. My only query about your appearance was thrown up when during the interval, I examined the production photographs on view in the foyer. In these you were wearing a long skirt, which for me made for a rather more flattering picture, rather than the short dress seen on stage during the performance I viewed. The perfectly acceptable costume you wore did not prevent you from very quickly creating and maintaining a rapport with the audience. This 'Mirror' provided a home for a shrewd character with few, if any, illusions about her mistress, and a definite leaning

towards the causes of Snow White and Co. Firmly portrayed from the outset, this character never wavered throughout, making her an ideal 'straight man' in scene after scene on whom others could rely on for an ideal target to react to and bounce ideas off.

Molly Muddles

A hard-working lass involved in so much of the comedy business being played out and numerous musical numbers, Molly was someone who would have to be utterly reliable if she was to be an asset to the production. Fortunately for all concerned you turned out to be a very reliable performer. From the word go you worked hard to set up and maintain a close rapport with the audience, although you could have pushed the response from them to your 'Feeling Groovy' request a trifle harder, at times you let us get away with too light-weight a response to your appearance. That rather old fashioned 'Sh-Boom' number found you ready, willing and able to pull your weight in a group song and this style of vocal presentation was to be seen to good effect with the Juniors in, '9 to 5', and in the two duets with Nurse Nellie. That 'Dinner Service' gag lacked a little conviction to bring out its full flavour, but with so many others involved in its development I can hardly lay the blame for this solely at your door. The 'coddle' word routine was another routine that was only partially successful, on this occasion it served to underline too much reliance on the script and not enough use of mime to bring out the full comedy in the situation.

Where the blame should be placed for this, Writer, Director and/or the players involved we must leave to those involved to agree, or disagree on. On the reverse side of the comedy coin there can be no question of which scene was the audiences favourite, the 'custard pie' slapstick one. You did not draw back for a moment at the thought of being 'gunged' and as a result helped this scene to bring some traditional pantomime humour to life. I have already commented on the absence of a 'mic' for the interlude with the children from the audience, a scene in which despite this problem you showed that this was performer who knew the way to play pantomime, and the importance of keeping a close rapport with the audience.

Ratfink and Weasel

May I first complain on behalf of 'Ratfink' for saddling a pantomime character with such a disagreeable name. There are many examples of comedy pairings like this duo acting as support to the principal humorous figures within a pantomime, few however have as many chances as this pairing did to be the dominant factor in scenes. A well balanced pair, this couple were fully equipped to take advantage of these comedy opportunities. The use of Laurel and Hardy's distinctive signature tune, 'The Dance of the Cuckoos' for your first entrance gave us fair notice that Ratfink and Weasel were not going to be mere supporting players in the laughter stakes. Having already established your ability to handle verbal comedy you then happily joined in the 'Slapstick' scene, which although it would have benefited from a little more urgency in the delivery was still, as is almost always the case, the most popular comedy anywhere to be found in the show. The 'Yours' routine between you and Snow White was another place where you showed how valuable team work is in developing comedy. No chance for you to build on your individual musical input in Act 2, but by then the characters were so well established they made a definite impression in every scene in which they took part, adding always to the humour being generated in the scene.

The Seven Dwarfs

By chance I found myself in the Ice Cream queue during the interval, next to two ladies who were supports of Dwarf Teams A and B, and from the conversation it became apparent that a great deal of friendly rivalry existed between the two teams. One thing is certain, no matter how committed the team that were 'resting' on the occasion that I saw the production were, they could not have given more of themselves than the group which I saw occupying the stage. It would be invidious to pick out individuals because on every occasion that someone had an opportunity to take centre stage they did so with the alacrity of a starving beggar who had come across a feast of wonderful food. That being said, the best of these opportunities fell to the smallest of the group who promptly and perfectly naturally and without really trying, 'upstaged' all those sharing the scene with them. In this story, we have to wait quite some time before these important characters appear, and therefore if they prove not to be up to scratch it is very disappointing for an audience. This seven, as I am sure the other seven waiting in the wings also did, disappointed no one, providing just the sort of characters we were all expecting and love.

The Dancers, Dancers Team A, Dancers Team B

The old saying that opportunities were as scarce as 'hen's teeth' could be applied to these groups. Within the format of this show there were only two places, 'He's a Pirate' and 'Poison Ivy' where dance is the dominant factor in a scene, and even there the limited space available to the Choreographer to set the numbers hampered the extent to which the Dancers could show off their skills. Despite this, in both numbers we had enough of a glimpse of the sort of talent that was available within the production to make us wish that more and greater opportunities had been available to them.

Adult Chorus, Intermediate Chorus A and B, Junior Chorus A and B

Nice to see so many young men in the Adult Chorus, something that bodes well for the future of the society. With that in mind, I must ask where were they in the Intermediate Team? And a special cheer for the two boys to be found in the Junior teams. This is not meant as a criticism in any way, just a hint to any would-be young male thespians that in modern musical theatre you have to be able to be able to perform the occasional dance step as well as sing and deliver dialogue. Like anything in life, the earlier you learn the rudiments of anything the easier it is, and the stronger the platform you have to build from. Most importantly the club was able to turn out a goodly number of energetic young performers and have an equal number waiting in the wings, who brought both energy and drive to the production, helping to bring the scenes in which they were involved alive with bubbling enthusiasm.

Thank you for your help in arranging my visit for the last performance of the production and the contact, prior to 'curtain up'. The interval ice cream was also much appreciated. I trust I did not upset anyone scribbling notes in the middle of a row.