



Society : Quince Players
 Production : Puss in Boots
 Date : Thursday 19th January 2006
 Venue : The Cordes Hall, Sunninghill, Berkshire
 Report by : Kim Halliday
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Report

Once again, I would like to thank Quince Players for inviting me to review this production. Having now seen and reviewed several Quince Players' shows – from pantos to high drama pieces – I have come to the conclusion that although a 'village group', performing at their village hall, the Players are a hugely talented group, staging slick, well-rehearsed and high quality productions, worthy of any 'Pro' theatre. Let's see if tonight's pantomime was up to the usual standard....

SOPHIE WEDLOCK-SMITH (Mother Goose). Sophie gave us a very chirpy and upbeat portrayal of this typical 'good fairy' character. She looked every inch the part with her blond ponytail and pink outfit, complete with sparkly butterfly wings and she interacted well with her 'mini-me' companion, taking her under her wing (no pun intended!), and showing the trainee the ropes! I was a little puzzled as to why she was dressed as a fairy, yet had the name 'Mother Goose', but this didn't detract from her confident and pleasing portrayal (and sometimes it's best not to take these things too literally!).

RAFFAELLA JOHNSON (Mini-Me Fairy). What a little cutie! Raffaella displayed a confidence way beyond her years, and it was obvious to see that she was enjoying every minute in front of the lights, mimicking *Mother Goose's* every action when required. A charming and well-behaved tiny tot – well done, Raffaella! I look forward to watching your progress with the Players!

NATALIE BOARDMAN (Marjory Daw). Natalie was another youngster who was growing in confidence and looked at home on the stage. She reacted well with others, especially her 'partner in crime', *Jack Spratt*, and she projected well, cheerily smiling and laughing at the action around her. I did wonder, though, why she had bright red cheeks and was covered in glitter? This didn't seem to go with her character or her traditional villagers' outfit. Nevertheless, this was a very competent performance, Natalie, so well done!

HENRY KING (Jack Spratt). Here is yet another young member of the Players who is brimming with confidence and improving with every performance. This time, Henry was playing the 'cheeky urchin' role, hamming it up at every opportunity. In fact, I think there were definite echoes of Captain Flashheart (from *Blackadder*) in his performance (although Henry might be a little bit young to remember this!). Well done, Henry – you are definitely another one to watch for the future!

DIANE MORETON & SIMON HURRY (Caspar & Hector). Well, what can be said about these two? What a brilliant pairing! Playing their parts as country bumpkins was an inspired move which worked well and immediately made them favourites with the audience. They had superb rapport, both with each other and with the audience and delivered many brilliant and corny gags with absolutely perfect timing. Simon played the dim one of the two, whilst Diane was obviously having a lot of fun bossing him around. In particular, the slapstick routine set in the kitchen, with the cooking, the water, the flour, and the mess was hilarious; in fact, I was reminded very strongly of Peter Glaze working with Don McClean on *Crackerjack* in the 1970's. I also liked Diane's running 'wired pigtailed' gag, changing their direction and style for every scene (and all her own hair as well, I think?). Brilliant pantomime slapstick comedy at its very best... Excellent stuff!

MELANIE TRAPNELL (Peter). I liked Melanie's portrayal of this down-at-heel principal boy role. *Peter* wasn't the typical hero of the story – that was left this time to *Puss 2*; instead, Melanie made an extremely believable poor farm hand, which contrasted well with the more strident *Puss 2*. Melanie paired up well with Kim as her 'princess', and was able to convince both children and adults that the two of them were 'in love', without making it too soppy or embarrassing. A subtle and nicely understated performance, Melanie!

BRUCE OSGOOD (Gruesome). This was Bruce's first stab at being the panto 'baddie' and I think he did a very creditable job overall, bringing out the comedy of the character as well as being scary enough to get the kids booing on cue. There were a couple of times I felt that he didn't quite engage with the audience as well as he might, but this may be down to the natural cockney accent he put across, making his character more likeable and friendly than frightening. Perhaps a little bit more 'aggression' was necessary (or it may just be that Bruce is too nice!)?

PHIL MACHERS (Queen Fanny the Fifth). The first thing to say about Phil is what boundless energy he has! He was constantly leaping from the stage into the audience and back on stage with no apparent effort... will he *ever* age?! Phil is an experienced actor and played the *Dame* exactly as it should be – an obvious bloke in a dress, and his natural Newcastle accent actually suited the part perfectly, giving him a slightly rougher edge. He also had a nice, slightly apologetic air when delivering the corniest of gags, and we all appreciated that! Phil was able to build up an excellent rapport with his audience from the moment he stepped on stage and he also made a good team with *Freckles*, with them both working well

off each other. And when he joined the chorus for 'Blue Danube', pirouetting around with all the young girls, you couldn't help but smile at his hilarious antics! Well, done, Phil – your hard work paid off.

CLAIRE GROSVENOR (Chamberlain). This was another quietly understated characterisation, and, in my mind, was one of the best performances in the show. Claire looked the part of the aloof *Chamberlain*, with her tall, thin, laconic, stature, and gave the role something of John Cleese, quietly taking the mickey out of *Queen Fanny*, but remaining detached from the action, with a lovely air of disdain. Brilliant, Claire!

JANE CURD (Freckles). Like her 'partner in crime' in the panto (Phil), Jane was a significant contributor to the pace and vitality of the show, playing this 'Buttons' character as abouncy, cheerful and comic character. She had a fantastic rapport with the audience, and superb timing of lines (especially the comic ones!). She was well paired with Phil and the two of them displayed how well they work together as a team, each backing the other up when required. Great stuff once again, Jane – I don't know where you get the energy!

KIM BUSSEY (Princess). Kim made a very pretty princess, convincing us all of her status with her gestures and mannerisms. Her lines were confidently delivered and she maintained a level of cheeriness, behaving just as a 'panto princess' should. Kim has a very pleasant singing voice and paired well with Melanie as her 'love interest'. A very pleasing and mature performance, Kim – well done!

ANDREW KING (Crunchbones). This was an excellent little part: the audience were led to believe the 'monster' would be 'great' and 'all powerful', but instead, Andrew gave us a 'spoiled brat', in a sort-of *Wizard of Oz*-style twist to the plot. However, Andrew was so confident and convincing, we all completely suspended our disbelief and went along with it! Brilliant! Well done, Andrew, you had us all fooled!

HEATHER KING & HELEN MUNRO (Puss 1 and 2). The contrast between *Puss 1* and *2* was stark and nicely done. Heather's 'Bagpuss' look was very tatty and down at heel, and although this was a non-speaking role, she used her facial expressions and body language very well to convey emotions and feelings. Heather also was good at hamming it up for the audience and her occasional scratching and 'cat grooming' moments, when not involved in the action, were very funny, but not too detracting from the plot. Helen was also perfectly cast as the *Puss 2*: the Antonio Banderas double, aka. Puss from *Shrek 2*! This was an obvious and quite wise move. Her Spanish accent was spot on and she put the cockiness of her character over well, arrogantly strutting around the stage in her leather boots and furry leggings, remaining in character throughout. Helen was also a good 'mover', with the song 'These Boots' being a definite highlight of the show, and had an excellent sense of comic timing, delivering some classic one liners and asides with confidence. Two very different but very well played characterisations, ladies!

HELEN BUCKHAM, HAZEL CAWTHORNE & ANGELA McCARTHY (The QP's). What an excellent and inspired idea! These girls were all dressed identically in rock and roll outfits and beehive wigs, and they stood at the side of the stage for most of the performance, dancing and adding in backing vocals as required! All three looked good and remained in character throughout – even when not part of the plot – and without the slightest sign of boredom! They reacted well to the action on stage, and proved to be both good singers and movers, demonstrating some nifty footwork when they joined those on stage for a couple of numbers. Excellent teamwork girls!

CHORUS. It's always a pleasure to see a mixture of young and ... more 'mature' members in the chorus, and tonight's show gave us a lovely mix (gives us some hope for the future continuance of am-dram!). The chorus tonight seemed perhaps just a tad hesitant but smiled nicely, and gave the audience that warm feel-good factor which is so important.

DIRECTION (Andrew Darling). Overall, I felt Andrew had put a lot of thought into staging tonight's production. The casting was almost spot-on and there were plenty of people experienced enough in panto on stage to know the score. There were some nice characterisations going on and everyone seemed to know what they were doing and what was expected of them. There were also some superb slapstick moments to keep the little ones in the audience laughing and plenty of local and topical gags had been added in to please the adults. The addition of the QP's as backing singers was an inspired idea that worked well as did having the kids in the audience during the opening overture. If I have any criticism, though, it was that the panto was too long – especially the first Act, which suffered from a slackening pace which made it drag even more. A 7.30pm start should be over by 10pm, especially on a school night (and there were plenty of children in this Thursday audience), but it was gone 10.30pm when we were finally able to leave our hard seats! Perhaps cutting some of the songs would have helped (there were 21!)? But apart from that, this was a very commendable effort to be proud of, Andrew!

MUSICAL DIRECTION (Dennis Golding). How nice to see some young blood in the band as well as on stage! The electronic drums are a god-send, as they can be fed through the mixing desk and 'quietened down'! In fact, with the whole band being electronic (OK, except clarinet!), it was easily possible to set levels for un-mic'd cast and that worked well. Once again, this was another performance well up to Dennis's traditional high standards. The cast and chorus all appeared to know their parts musically, and we heard some confident and nicely presented harmonies.

CHOREOGRAPHY (Vivienne Fenton, Jenny Hansford & Patrick McCarthy). Overall, I thought the choreography was appropriate to the level of capability of the cast. The chorus numbers were simple yet effective and there were some nice patterns going on, making it pleasing to the eye, especially during the gypsy dance and 'Blue

Danube'. *The QP's* were obviously good 'movers' and their routines were a little more complex, which was more fitting and they coped with perfectly well. And the children's routine, with the dance of the goblins and spirits was delightful!

TECHNICAL (Peter Fitzwater, Lighting, and Kevin Marsdan, Sound). A performance well up to Peter's regular (very high) standards, the lighting tonight was sympathetic and appropriate to the action, setting mood well for the different scenes. The strobe light made a change from the UV that seems to dominate am-dram panto lighting these days. The lightning effect was nicely coordinated with thunder when *Crunchbones* was mentioned. Sound levels were well pitched – I think there was only one radio mic in use and that was kept to the minimum needed, so didn't overwhelm the other members of the cast. All in all, this was another successful and very smooth technical performance, gentlemen.

STAGING AND SCENERY. Another success for Stage & Scenery too! The back cloths were well painted: the bright rose cottage opening scene backdrop had good perspective and the simple addition of wooden cut-out trees for a scene change was very effective. It was also quite innovative to simply add a fireplace when the castle needed to be turned into a kitchen. The stage crew worked well as a team and consequently scene changes were very slick and were well covered by the music. Well done to all involved.

COSTUMES (Design: Dianne Gosden; Assistants: Derryl Darling & Juliet Shaljean-Tilley). Once more, the Players had pulled out all the stops and kitted out the cast with an array of appropriate outfits. The *Dame* wore a variety of garish, yet well-coordinated outfits, and the comedy duo had comical 'country bumpkin' dungarees and hats, adding to their performances. The principle boy this time had avoided the traditional fishnets and boots, and instead we had a more friendlier style of 'poor farm hand' with $\frac{3}{4}$ britches, waistcoat and patches, which suited Melanie's interpretation of her character. The chorus also coordinated well, with the addition of bright headscarves for the gypsy dance inspired. However, the real highlight as far as wardrobe was concerned had to be *The QP's* outfits: the black and white rock and roll dresses and large blonde beehives, sunglasses and long black gloves, complete with sparkling accessories looked perfect and ensured that they all looked the same – almost clones.

HAIR & MAKE UP. As with costumes, a lot of attention to detail had been paid to hair and make up this evening – especially character make up. *Queen Fanny* had a wide range of sumptuous wigs which clashed hideously with her outfits, as did the totally OTT make-up. As mentioned above, *The QP's* looked splendid in their blonde beehives, and their faces were made up perfectly in the style of the era. *Caspar* and *Hector* had wonderfully white faces with dark eyebrows, black spots, lipstick, and 'missing teeth', which gave them wonderful facial expressions, whilst *Crunchbones* and *Gruesome* looked suitably evil, using face paints to good effect. *Mother Goose* and her *Mini-Me* sparkled wonderfully under the lights (loved the cutesy ponytail!), whilst the chorus and others looked very fresh-faced and natural, without too much eye shadow overload! But as previously mentioned, I wasn't too sure why *Marjory Daw* was also covered in glitter and had overly rosy cheeks? Nevertheless, this was a good effort all round, so keep up the good work!

PROGRAMME. Once again, as is typical with the Players, tonight's programme was an extremely professional affair. The papers was of good quality, the photographs clear and of studio quality and the cast resumés were interesting and amusing. Advertising was discreet and the print was clear and easy to read. One thing that I have to note however, is the colour cover, which carried an image of a ginger cat dressed identically to the character in the film *Shrek 2*, in a very similar pose to that featured in the Disney film: I'm not sure whether copyright problems might apply here, as I'm sure Disney will have protected their image from unauthorised duplication.

FRONT OF HOUSE. I was made very welcome by the Front of House staff and had no problems finding my seat (or the bar – although, as usual, it was very cramped). Ices were sold in the interval, which was a nice touch and the Players had purchased some light-up magic wands and giant foam hands which they sold to the audience for a reasonable fee and encouraged the use of in the community song. I hope these proved to be good money-spinners for the group.

To sum up, although the production could have done with having at least 30 minutes chopping off it, this was a very enjoyable pantomime, with a good mix of humour for both children and adults and some very entertaining performances emerging from the cast.

I look forward to seeing you all again at your next production.

Kim Halliday