

National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society : Quince Players
Production : **Adventure in Pantoland**
Date : Friday 15th January 2022
Venue : Cordes Hall
Report by : Nick Humby

Show Report

Overall Production Impression

What a pleasure to visit the Cordes Hall for the first time and see a new fresh take on modern Pantomime with this fun trip through five of the mainstream pantomime titles. With just a hint of Commedia dell'arte, the excellent script takes the Principal Boy, Principal Girl, Dame and Fool through the other stories in search of their true characters. The staging of this in the storybook pages set on the shelf of a library is wonderful with some beautifully painted backcloths for each location for Snow White, Aladdin, Jack and the Beanstalk, Dick Whittington and Cinderella.

In modern pantomime too often the Principal Boy and Girl get relegated to smaller parts in favour of the Dame and Comic but here they lead the show and the two young performers do so with great confidence and excellent voices with very good support from the rest of the cast including a well drilled juvenile ensemble.

The sense of enjoyment from the cast oozes across the footlights as they delight a partisan audience of family and friends with each song, gag and plenty of audience interaction. The warm appreciation at the end confirms that we are all glad to be back in a live theatre.

Cast

Tom Underwood as the Principal Boy has plenty of opportunities to demonstrate his fine singing voice and experience and delivers on each



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occasion. He confidently strides across the forestage, holding the audience's attention with his winning smile and is at his best in the duets of "I'm into something good", "Get Ready", "Happy together" and "Walking in sunshine". Occasionally he would have benefited from a prop or action to occupy his hands and arms rather than have them limply by his side, but this young man can develop into a strong performer.

Opposite him, **Amelie Barker** as the Principal Girl does very well in her first major role and gets an opportunity to develop different characters. With the help of some very good costumes succeeds in portraying them with charm and elegance. She is another very good young talent.

Dave Barker made a solid debut as the Dame. He clearly has observed how to play the role in previous shows and knows the way to react and deliver the mild adult innuendo with a twinkle in his eye. It felt that he was holding back a bit and could have played the man in a dress role with more gusto.

Steve Smith as the Fool gets plenty of opportunity to develop his character from the upright Buttons to the daft Muddles and points each joke so that audience is in no doubt that they should laugh! His dance routine with the Ensemble to "Life's a Happy song" was fun and appropriate. At times he looks like the third Chuckle Brother, past masters of Pantomime comedy.

Together these four are very good in their opening number "I'll be there for you".

The villain of the piece is Poison Ivy played by **Ellie Cornes**, another young performer with bags of confidence, a good stage presence and a strong sense of how to tease the audience.

Fiona Barker as Wizbad brought a strong physical comedy to the role of the steampunk henchman, making sure every movement and look could get a laugh and gloriously milking it! She was excellent as Abanazar and King Rat but slightly less successful as an Ugly Sister.

Toby Adamson made the most of the walk on parts of Herald, Mirror, Genie and Chamberlain especially with the good entrance business with the Musical Director and clever delivery of his lines as the Mirror.



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Nishi Kovvuri was perfectly cast as Fairy Honeysuckle bringing a gentle serene presence to the show which contrasted well with the general comedy mayhem. It was a delightful touch to have a folded story book as her fairy wings.

If ever there was a part created to steal scenes it must be the one played by **Molly Matthews** as a succession of “skin” characters. On each entrance without speaking a word and usually slumped against the proscenium arch she grabbed our attention with her disinterested reaction to the story unfolding and generated plenty of amusement.

The seven dwarfs (who also appeared as part of the Full Ensemble) were **Naomi Davies, Sophia Hayward, Elsie Georgeson, Millie Hamilton-Martin, Olivia Jachec, Bella Sousa, and Sophie Littleboy**. They looked the part in their brightly coloured dungarees and bobble hats and spoke their lines cutely in way that could not fail to charm the audience.

Mia Csernus had her moment centre stage as the Beanstalk adding a touch of magical dance (with some comical assistance from Molly Matthews) to a well-staged Beanstalk growing scene.

Lucy Brown and **Fiona Myers** joined some of the dwarf dancers as the Minions in two lively dance numbers and **Orla McCarthy** and **Maisy Pinion** were added for the full ensemble. Indeed, the best dance routines were when they were all together in “The Land of Make Believe” and “500 Miles” which were well choreographed with plenty of variation and good blocking.

Creative and Technical

The programme notes highlight this was a Matthews and Underwood family production and the production team is full of people of those names to underline the point! Together they have put together a very good-looking show, with excellent musical choices, varied and well executed choreography and created a delightfully happy looking cast who seemed to be enjoying performing.



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Sarah Matthews as Artistic Director and **Alice Underwood** as Technical Director have clearly led the team well with production Assistants **Ruth Matthews** and **Caroline Underwood** and excellent choreography from three sisters **Molly** (also in Box Office), **Lucy**, and **Ruth Mathews** (latter two also doing makeup!). **Lee Underwood** was in lighting team and **Alice Underwood** in charge of Props. **Lucy Matthews** was in charge of Publicity and Marketing. There can't be much doubt what has occupied these families during lockdown, but the resulting show was well worth their combined efforts.

The highlights of the creative process were the excellent sets painted by **Julie Voice** which fitted perfectly with the narrative and easily set each scene. The tumbler cloth and portals of leaves was also beautifully and effectively painted with great care. The auditorium and Proscenium arch was attractively dressed to adding to the festive feel.

The varied and interesting choreography from the **Matthews** sisters was another strong feature carefully avoiding a standard line of dancers and mixing up the movements and actions to create more interesting pictures to watch. It was also refreshing to see the Principals placed up stage to leave a clear view of the smaller Juvenile dancers. As well as the routines already mentioned I enjoyed "Shake it off" and "Everybody danced". My only surprise was the routine for "Flash, Bang Wallop" with drinking tankards rather than around photography !

The excellent musical choices under the direction of **Angela McCarthy** were also enjoyable from old sixties hits by Herman's Hermits to recent global phenomenon like BTS. It was slightly disappointing to have "Killer Queen" on tape rather than played and sung but it did give the dancers an upbeat routine.

There were some wonderful costumes by **Dianne Gosden** especially the Dame's Twankey dress, Muddles clown costume and Snow White's dress which looked well-made and perfectly dressed the characters.

The team used the stage and auditorium space well for entrances and exits varying the usage to keep it fresh and interesting and the use of the rear auditorium entrances worked well for Highgate Hill and Tommy's business in audience. I felt sitting on the stage steps was overused and a stage prop might



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have been used to vary that. At times I felt the pace could have been speeded up especially around those entrances and scene changes with the pauses being a few beats too long. There were occasional lighting dark spots and late bringing up of personal mics, but these are minor criticisms of a very good show.

This was a very well-produced show with an energetic and talented young cast who worked hard with a smile on their faces so the audience could not help but be fully engaged and some excellent sets, music choices and choreography. It felt fresh and entertaining and as confidence grows being back on stage and in a live theatre it will only get better as the run extends to a second week.

Thank you

Nick

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