



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Quince Players (junior section)
Production : Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Date : 19-21 September 2019
Venue : Cordes Hall, Sunninghill
Report by : John Woodward-Roberts

Show Report

INTRODUCTION

Alice In Wonderland holds a special place in many people's hearts, including this NODA reviewers, which means that one can't help arriving to see it performed without expectations as to what Lewis Carroll's fantasy land will look and feel like and, particularly, how your favourite characters will be presented.

Well I needn't have worried. The Quince Players started with a fresh and inventive adaptation by Simon Reade which I read won the TMA Award for Best Show for Young People. It's a reworking that avoids the Disneyfication of the story where all characters are fluffy and cute offering just enough magic and imagination to hook the audience's collective involvement.

I loved the show: It was fresh, quirky, enchanting in parts with a performance energy that sprang from a junior cast and production team that clearly was invested in both its build and delivery. I saw it on its first night and hope that audience numbers picked up for the subsequent performances.

DIRECTION

In a recent conversation with Jenny Faulkner-Hooper I learned that she took a collaborative approach to directing the show relying directly on the creative talents of the children and juniors from her drama workshops in several areas e.g. choreography. Locating the story as part of Alice's dreamscape she harnessed these talents in ways that were both entertaining and enchanting establishing both an individuality in Carroll's mad and diverse characters as well as a sense of place and community. Individual and ensemble performers were well defined and drilled and had clearly been offered a guided space, where appropriate, to develop their performances in line with their talent and maturity. This enabled the audience to meet them with Alice in a strange and different world that was idiosyncratic, eccentric and, at times, edgy. Jenny referred to the production period of the show as a happy experience and this came through delightfully at the performance.

MAIN CHARACTERS

There are no small parts in a production of this nature. Everybody is important although some characters are onstage more than others. Here is feedback for those characters:

YOUNG ALICE/ALICE played by Sophia Hayward and Olivia Law

Alice, both young and older, is a tough call for any performer. Onstage, more or less, throughout she arrives in Wonderland from a stable and orderly world and has all her certainties challenged by its madness and eccentricities. I enjoyed both performers insatiable curiosity to what was going on and the openness to the new and different that they displayed. Alice is changed by Wonderland but is never overwhelmed or made powerless by it as it gets curiouser and curiouser. Both Sophia and Olivia got this just right.

THE WHITE RABBIT played by Daisy Hanson

The frantic, harried White Rabbit is, perhaps, one of the most recognised characters in children's fiction and Daisy needed to suggest, yes, his importance, but also his rather confusing personality: Manic, timid and every now and again, a tad pushy and irritated. My impression of the rabbit is that he is not always easy to be around, and Daisy got this just right calling in on the action and moving Alice on to other adventures without engaging with it and her. An impactful performance informed by Daisy's previous stage experience.

CHESHIRE CAT played by Lucy Robinson

The Cheshire Cat is one of the few characters in Wonderland who actually listens and is kind to Alice. Lucy demonstrated this winningly and delivered her remarks that taught Alice the 'rules' of Wonderland clearly and logically. And let's not forget the cat's ability to gradually appear and disappear performed here by Lucy through the clever use of her cloak. Lucy had presence in the role.

CATERPILLAR played by Kirsten Sabey

I really liked Kirsten's approach to Caterpillar. Another character designed to help Alice navigate the Wonderland she is exploring with some useful advice about changing shape and size. She caught the insects mysterious and aloof presence well and I smiled a lot at its familiarity. I note her experience with Quince.

THE DUCHESS played by Fiona Myers

An imperious and unfriendly character although she does soften. Fiona brought presence and volume to the role and backed it up with a performance energy that worked. Her work with FASBAT and her school stage experience really shone through.

THE MARCH HARE played by Amy Dean, THE MAD HATTER played by Belle Whitbread and DORMOUSE played by Mia Csernus

How do you play out perhaps the most famous scene in the story? Namely, the Madhatter's tea party. Well with well defined characterisations and good ensemble work and Amy, Belle and Mia caught both of these things well. Both the Hatter and the Hare exist to frustrate Alice, the Hatter impolitely, the March Hare taking pleasure from it and, of course, the dormouse just drifts in and out of sleep. I will remember the teamwork in this scene but also want to give a particular shout out to Mia who I had the pleasure of directing recently in the Hope Trust's Oliver. Her love of singing, dancing and acting always comes through.

PLAYING CARD SEVEN and FIVE played by Hannah Sabey and Sofia Swift

The playing card gardeners are some of my favourite characters in the story and their task of painting the roses the colour of the Queen of Hearts is an ingenious part of the narrative. I have a picture of them as fearful and fumbling particularly when the Queen is around, and Hannah and Sofia represented this confusion well. Sofia's aim I read was to put smiles on the faces of the audience through her performance and she certainly succeeded with this audience member.

QUEEN of HEARTS played by Amelie Barker

It's always satisfying to play an out and out baddy and the Queen of Hearts, domineering, severe and, seemingly, in love with capital punishment, is certainly an out and out baddy despite the fact that she is only a playing card. I read that Amelie relished the part and this came through in how she filled the stage with her characterisation generating fear and anxiety in everyone including the King. A big performance from Amelie who clearly drew on her extensive experience to deliver it.

A small aside: In the story the Gryphon later informs Alice that the Queen never actually executes anyone she sentences to death so playing her as someone in love with the sound of her own voice is just right.

KING of HEARTS played by Ava McCarthy

Well done Ava for playing the King as the weak and ineffectual creature he is. Almost like a mere servant to the Queen and, therefore, not always likeable but a useful balance to her bloodthirstiness. Ava had impact in the role because she played out this contrast well. A first timer with Quince I read but you'd never have known it.

MOCK TURTLE played by Florence Hooper

A standout performance for me in the show. Florence played the character as a friend to Alice and put across her exceedingly sentimental and self absorbed qualities well. Her performance energy backing up the characterisation was spot on and I'm not surprised that she was the lead choreographer for the show as she moved with all the definition I would expect from an experienced dancer. Very good!

And now a big shout out to all the other junior performers who took part in Alice in Wonderland: Betsy Horgan, Sophie Littleboy, Annabelle Jacklin, Sadie Ratcliffe, Milton Ilia, Scarlett Hanson and Reuben Von Sachsen. Thank you for the energy and commitment that you brought to the stage. Your teamwork was a major contribution to an entertaining production.

I'd also like to thank the choreography team, Belle Whitbread, Daisy Hanson and Florence Hooper, for their inventive dancing. The spooky white rabbit dance particularly, atmospherically lit, was a memorable moment.

And a big congratulations to the technical team for the magic they created with lighting and sound. It was smart and clever in ways that really added to the enchantment of the evening. I was impressed particularly with Alice's eat and drink me moments and how her physical transformations were suggested mostly through lighting and shadow only.

Rather than scatter my review with suggested improvements I make 2 here that are thematic that the junior group might like to bear in mind going forward:

- 1) Projection - for the most part I heard every word but there were a few moments when conversations between characters on stage could have been projected outward more into the audience, and
- 2) Staying in character when you're not talking or moving – this challenges us all but it is important that we inhabit the person completely when we're onstage even when we're just watching what's happening.

I know the Cordes Hall well and really enjoyed its transformation for this production. It was as if the whole theatre had become a delightful set with a green lawn front of stage, ivy on the row dividers, big red flowers

fronting the proscenium, umbrellas and charming signposts to the tea party. Many of the costumes had to transform characters into Wonderland creatures and it was good to see the effort that had gone into this.

The play's programme, with its cartoons on the cover – just right for the production – and containing high quality and contemporary cast and production pictures together with just the right selection of information was a good read. And complimentary too! A surprising bonus. It was good to see the group's website and NODA membership receiving pride of place within its pages.

QUINCE is a well established group in the local community that has existed for decades. The Cordes Hall is very much its home and they use it well and efficiently. My partner and I felt very welcomed and very well looked after during the evening with friendly faces both selling raffle tickets and drinks in the bar. We were there on charity night and it was gratifying to experience the seriousness with which the group took this and the time it devoted to fund raising.

Thank you for making me so welcome and I look forward to the next production.

John Woodward-Roberts
Regional Representative
NODA London District 14