



Society : Quince Players  
Production : **THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS**  
Date : Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> January 2014  
Venue : Cordes Hall, Sunninghill  
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

## Report

On the evening of Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> January I was delighted to be invited to watch the last performance of Quince Players pantomime *The Wind in the Willows*.

I know that this is a popular pantomime choice for societies, mainly as it gives opportunities for mixed age groups and the opportunity for makeup and costume designs. Personally I do not think it works as a pantomime as I felt the traditional pantomime elements (the panto animal, the dame for example) seem at odds with plot.

That being said, Quince Players production was slick, well rehearsed with excellent makeup design and application. A lot of thought had been given to extend the set out into the auditorium – with toad figures on the walls (and on the wall in the bar), fairy lights along the ceiling and the cast having toads and strawberries dangling from fishing rods over the heads of the audience. The show was very well cast with the “animals” giving excellent mannerisms to enhance their characters.

### **Toad (GORDON COE)**

Playing the part of the Toad, I thought Gordon was excellent, capturing the character perfectly. His facial expressions were particularly superb. He constantly looked mischievous, and one believed the various scraps he got into. This was a lovely performance by Gordon, well done.

### **Mole (FIONA BARKER)**

This was a splendid characterisation by Fiona. Her mole had a regional accent that worked very well indeed. I liked the additional items for her character – miner’s helmet and thick lens glasses; all which helped the characterisation.

### **Badger (NICK TEALE)**

I loved the idea of the streak of white in his hair, giving a very distinctive look. This certainly helped Nick to perform a wonderful characterisation of the Badger. Nick also sung very well, and I particularly enjoyed his rendition of “*Twist and Shout*”.

### **Ratty (MELANIE TRAPNELL)**

Melanie produced a superb characterisation of Ratty. This is an actress who uses her mannerisms to excellently emphasise her character and this worked very well for this part. She also uses her eyes to very good effect.

**Aunt Millie (KIM HALLIDAY)**

I am not sure how it was scripted but I was surprised the “traditional dame role” was performed by a female and as a result lost some of the usual impact one associates with the part. Despite this, Kim performed well, providing a good character and sung confidently. This confidence was also portrayed with her audience participation.

**Lofty (STEVE SMITH)**

This was a small role acting as love interest to Aunt Millie. Unfortunately there was not too much to the character for Steve to get his teeth into but what there was, he made a good attempt. Scenes with Aunt Millie moved at pace and did not allow any kind of relationship to develop. As I noted when I last saw Steve on stage, his volume was spot on as I heard every word.

**Primrose (EMILY HEMBROW)**

Emily portrayed a typical principle girl role very nicely indeed. She looked perfect for the part. The character was very well defined and performed. Emily produced a lovely singing voice that fitted the part perfectly.

**Prince Alastair (LUCY HEATH)**

Lucy started the show confidently with a short introduction that set out her character and the scene perfectly. I liked the characterisation portrayed by Lucy as the principle boy. Her dead pan face was excellently set throughout and her thigh slapping well timed. There were some wonderful moments with Primrose, particularly the dance sequence. Lucy has a lovely singing voice and fitted the choice of songs very well.

**Bubble (PIP TOMKINS)**

**Squeak (MEGAN VOICE)**

The pantomime baddies were represented by the two weasels, a double act who looked to ruin Toad (and even shouting him to be hung). Pip and Megan worked hard, and I was impressed (like so many of the cast) with the mannerisms they applied to their roles. I felt they needed to interact a lot more with the audience, to allow us to get a chance to get to hate them. This is more an issue with the script which restricted the usual business with the audience.

**Kitty (SIMRAN JOHAL)**

Simran did not have a single word but despite this, she gave an impressive performance as Kitty. She crawled around the stage and had wonderful facial expressions, reacting to what was going on around her. Well done.

**Driver/Waiter (RORY O’CONNOR)**

Rory performed a number of small roles, including some of the chorus numbers. He added to the humour with the “ladies who lunch” memorably as the waiter. Although brief in appearance, each of his roles had a defined character.

**PC Plod (GEMMA SWAISLAND)**

It is lovely to see Gemma taking bigger roles on stage as her confidence grows. She looked at home as the archetypal village constable and gave a credible character. I hope we see her on stage a lot more in future.

**Judge Snodgrass (DAVID JOHNSTON)**

A wonderful characterisation of the drunken judge! His wild eyes reminded me of Father Jack in Father Ted. But it worked wonderfully!

**Ladies who lunch (HEATHER KING, ALISON RAMSDEN)**

I was not quite sure of the relevance of these two characters – certainly not to the plot. However, their roles did allow time to cover some of the scene changes. They certainly entertained us with their tennis balls (you had to be there), their Gucci bags, and screaming at the weasels. They both gave excellent backing strength to the chorus singing and acted as backing singers to *Vogue*.

**Zebra Crossing (TOBY ADAMSON & RICHARD EMBERSON)**

This also seemed an irrelevant addition to the show – it is a pantomime so it needs an animal – and the least expected animals one would find by the river bed. However, that being said, these two entertained us (especially the youngsters in the audience). I would have liked a little bit more interaction with the cast – but being a zebra it was always going to be difficult.

**Chorus**

Good opening number and dance. It was lovely to see so many youngsters on stage looking like they were enjoying themselves. I have noticed on previous pantomime visits to this society, without exception, all the young chorus smiled throughout their songs and dance numbers. They acted throughout (particularly the young lad who played the young mouse).

**Director (BRENT WHITTED)**

There were some deft touches by Brent. Mole's first entrance, appearing from the trap door centre stage was an unusual but very effective opening of the show. The fight sequence was well devised and I particularly enjoyed the nice tableau the cast set at the end of show. All of the cast were well rehearsed and, with one exception, all of the exits and entrances were very well observed. The exception being when the Dame exited up stage left after the scene that featured "*Vogue*". The Dame's exit was immediately followed by Ratty and Mole entering from the exact same spot. It could have easily worked with the Dame exiting USL. I was impressed at the energy levels of the whole cast, all of whom looked like they were enjoying themselves. This was particularly impressive considering this was the second performance of the day. I thought Kim did very well but was surprised of the casting of a female as the dame role is traditionally filled by a man and thought some of the humour and some potential gags were lost. I thought the casting of the other roles could not have been bettered, with everyone portraying their characters superbly.

**Musical Director (STEPHEN JOHNSON)**

I thought the choice of musical items for this pantomime fitted the performers perfectly. All of the principals sung very well. I was pleased to hear a "live orchestra" rather than backing tracks, this definitely enhances the musical aspect of the show. The balance between the small orchestra and singers was excellent.

**Choreography (MOLLY MATTHEWS, RUTH MATTHEWS & PATRICK McCARTHY)**

I enjoyed the various dance routines in this production. They looked well rehearsed with everyone knowing what they were doing. The routines were varied and interesting to watch and very well performed.

**Stage Manager (JULIE VOICE)**

**ASM (ALLISON SHARPE)**

The stage was very well managed on the evening I watched this show, with quick scene changes the kept the pace going. All the properties appeared in place and on time. All the effects seem to be on cue.

**Backstage Crew & Properties**

The crew performed their tasks very well with quick and efficient scene changes. The properties were in place and seemed relevant to the genre. The car and caravan looked particularly well made and appropriate to this production.

**Sound (CHRIS EVA & ANDY CURTIS)**

Good use of sound for this production, with the principles being mic'd, the balance between the orchestra and cast was just right. A mixture of pre-recorded backing tracks and live orchestration was used and such was the quality of the sound mixing, it was difficult to distinguish any difference.

**Lighting (PETER FITZWATER)**

Lighting was well designed with the use of colours and changes to plot. All of the cues seemed on time and I managed to see all the faces and was not aware of any shadows.

**Makeup Design (SOPHIE TAYLOR)**

**Makeup Assistant (KRISTY CHITTY)**

The makeup for this production was one of the most effective I have seen for many years and both the design and the application are to be applauded. To makeup so many parts with such precision must have taken a lot of effort, but on the stage and under the lights, they looked amazing and certainly added depth to the characters. The detail, for example, to the weasels and Toad, were exceptional.

**Costume Design (DIANNE GOSDEN & HEATHER KING)**

One can clearly see that a lot of effort had been put into costuming this production. Some of it looked simple, but the result was very effective. For example, the badger being dressed in grey, and Toad in green, but the choice of their colours and the style worked perfectly – especially once the makeup was applied. Costumes for the weasels again was simple (long black coats) but was equally effective. Primrose in a floral dress, the judge all in black (with a white shirt) and a long black coat/cape again added to their characterisations. I loved the feet on Toad! I did feel the dress on Aunt Millie was a little long and she clearly had difficulty going up and down the steps and I was a little concerned that she would end up tripping over her hem. However, she successfully lifted her dress and managed the feat without any calamity.

**Set**

Using the blue cyclorama allowed for good use of space and the addition of hanging willow trees and painted flats gave good perspective. The flats were set on a spindle allowing them to be turned promptly in between scenes to reveal toad hall. The hall in particular was very well painted with excellent detail.

**Programme**

Once again, the 24 page coloured programme produced by this society is of the highest quality and one of the best I have seen. I liked the idea that every page had a green banner, fitting in with the green theme of the show. The pictures were a very good size, clear and sharp. I found the biographies interesting. I would have liked to have seen a list of songs. This is more me being inquisitive as some of the songs were unknown to me.

**Front of House**

I was made to feel very welcome by the busy front of house staff. There is restricted front of house area and thought it would be useful if the front of house team wore badges or something that would make them stand out from a busy audience. I enjoyed the bar area, in particular the choice of real ales that are always offered at this venue.

Overall, this was a very polished production. Even if it was not a traditional pantomime and I felt some of the elements were juxtaposed to the original piece, every aspect of this production was of a very high standard. I look forward to the player's next production, *The Vicar of Dibley* in May this year.



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