

MILLENNIUM PRODUCTIONS

REVIEW

For
"ALICE"

REVIEWER: John C. Draper
COMPANY: Richings Players
PRODUCTION DATE: 5th February 2001
VENUE: Iver Village Hall

STAGING & SET

ROBIN BISHOP & ALAN OXLEY had done their usual good job
The sets created a wonderful progression of excellent contrast and design The caterpillar set was wonderfully simple but along with LES BREWER'S lighting was fantastic and the kitchen was great. The tilting table for the Mad Hatter's party was magnificent and they maintained this standard throughout

LIGHTING

LES BREWER is an unbeatable lighting engineer. The various excellent effects were enhanced by the imaginative mood creation and the building of appropriate atmosphere. I have watched him building the plot and his meticulous attention to detail pays off handsomely.

SOUND

ROBIN & LES make a formidable team with Robin's attention to detail matching that of Les. He is amazing with his technical skill giving wonderful seamless sequences in an appropriate sound track. The record scratching which joined the chase music was a superb and amusing idea.

COSTUME

This was a triumph for a great team: LINDA LUCAS, SARA WILLIAMS, KATHERYN PIKE, JOAN GIBBS, TERESA DAWSON, ROSE NICOLA and BETTY SIDDALL must have laboured long and hard and their results were the icing on the cake. The caterpillar/ and butterfly were inspirational designs. The ballet dancers could not fail to milk the aaaaaaaahhhhh factor.

The Mad Hatter, Rabbit, Cook and Hare were all brilliant caricature costumes and the more romantic cast members were just right. Very well done.

THE CHORUS

I always like to start with these very important people because they are the backbone of a pantomime. The cast need to feel confident that what is going on behind them is of a high and reliable standard. This production showed a lot of enthusiasm and some very hard work and the appropriate credit is due. The Flamenco Flamingos were absolutely great and the guards drill sequence was sensational. Apart from being hugely entertaining, it was technically very accurate. I sense a military man somewhere in the background. Thank you for "King Carractacus" I haven't heard that since I was in the Scouts.

THE CHARACTERS

ALICE: - BETHANY PERRY. Young lady, you could go far. You looked just right for the part and although some of your early words were lost because your delivery was too quick; and when you started your first song you showed signs of nerves, you then got into your stride and as your confidence grew you showed what a good voice you have and built to show tremendous strength and depth of sound. For just one brief moment you parted company with the music and you looked as though you were miming but that was a momentary blip which did not detract from a great performance where you built the character through various moods showing great interaction with your fellow actors.

THE WHITE RABBIT: - RICHARD CAMBELL was excellent. His body movements and gestures gave him a great stage presence and his voice showed a great flexibility of expression. This was a very perceptive interpretation of the role which built a great character. He was a good singer and had good dancing ability "I need a Hero" was great.

THE SERGEANT: - HOWARD GIBBS was a "Sergeant First Class" "It Ain't Half Hot Mum" figured highly and why not? That's what makes pantomime so much fun and it was very well done indeed. Howard either had a spell in the armed forces or a very good Tutor. Brought back memories!

Mr DUM & DEE: - MICHAEL PENFOLD & JOSH WEBBER were well matched and played the fools very well. Some of Michael's words were lost, (e.g. "Licensed to drill" was wasted) which was a shame. You both need more practise in delivering one-liners. This will come with experience but the punch lines need; well – more punch.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS: An absolutely magnificent performance from FLICK CAISLEY. She looked and sounded like the character exactly, with wonderful gestures voice and body language. Her facial expressions completed the job.. And she has a great and powerful singing voice. It fact it was sometimes too nice for the character. That, however cannot be counted a fault and Flick could put a rasp in her voice when needed.

THE KING OF HEARTS: TIM EADY was a great foil for the queen. His delivery of the wonderful descriptions of his wife was excellent It takes a good actor to play second fiddle to a dominant partner and Tim hit exactly the right balance. Just beware of talking over audience laughter which masked some of your words .

MARY ANN: - SHELLEY DAWSON was a delight to watch. That lovely smile, her characterisation and stage presence helped her make a success of one of the most sugary roles in pantomime. She played this usually bland role with perfection and gave it some spirit.

THE CATERPILLAR / BUTTERFLY: Once again, NIGEL GRAVETTE doesn't have to say a word to captivate the audience, make them laugh and raise admiration all at the same time. And the metamorphosis was cleverly and attractively achieved.

THE KNAVE :- SARAH PINKNEY has a great pedigree for someone so young and lives up to it. Some words lost at the start, but she built a great relationship with the audience and her singing was excellent. "Happy Together" with Alice was excellent.

THE COOK (alias **The DAME**); The most envied and coveted role in pantomime with a history of famous comedians making the part their own. **ADRIAN UZZZEL** has joined an elite group with great showmanship. His first impression was hilarious and his moves and gestures were just right. Possibly slightly repetitive and he could bring in some additional and more varied expressions and gestures. The **Les Dawson** face and moves were brilliant, but with such versatility you could create some of your own. A great performance and **Adrian** showed a great ability to work an audience

THE CHESHIRE CAT: **WILL TORRENT**, in a word was a star. My very first note says "bloody brilliant!" His sarcasm shown in word, moves gestures and voice built a character of many characteristics. "Stray Cat Strut" was a show-stopper and together with the knave created great audience involvement.

THE MAD HATTER: **MICHAEL LUCAS** played the fool with a worrying degree of madness. He briefly joined the lost words club but his animation and exuberance were infectious. He was full of energy and contagious madness and **THE MARCH HARE** caught it brilliantly. **CATHY WEBBER** was supremely abrasive and had a cutting disdain in an accent which was like a contrasting breath of fresh air.

THE DORMOUSE: **KATHY WILLIAMS**- you were a simple delight. Lying centre stage for long silent periods is never easy but you were cue-perfect and your sleepy voice sounded just right

KATHRYN & DAVID PIKE, PETE GIBBS % ANTHONY SALOMONE waiting for "their brief hour upon the stage" but they made an important contribution to the final stages of the show. Remember, "They also serve who only stand and wait" but I'm certain they weren't idle back stage.

THE SCRIPT This was a very professionally written script by **JOE GIBBS**. with all the traditions of panto and all the usual trimmings and great characters. There were inevitably some peaks and troughs but the peaks were high and the troughs shallow. The epithets used by the king describing his wife for example were good comic writing and if you are going to plagiarise, then "The Life of Brian" is as good a place to start as any. The thing to remember with writing pantomime scripts the main emphasis must be on children (I know; Adults love it too) but youngsters have a low boredom threshold and the pace mustn't flag. See next section.

DIRECTION

JOE GIBBS AND ALISON ELCOAT did a good directing job with some bursts of pure genius. The **Morecombe and Wise** kitchen routine was one of these. I wrote "copper bottomed brilliant" and the applause showed the audience agreed with me. The queen's final exit was a bit messy. And two adjacent front of curtain dances stretched the fidget factor amongst the younger audience but they did make a marvellous cover for the scene change. The guards drill scene was absolutely first class and you had some highly talented people in the group.

Unfortunately you created a huge problem for yourselves.

It was an excellent idea to hold a workshop for youngsters in advance of the auditions but it appeared that you accepted every child into the show who had attended the workshops. In any event you had far too many people on stage for too much of the time and some of them were not up to it. The concentration and stage presence was good in most cases but unfortunately markedly less so with others and this created tremendous variations in performance. Again it's unfortunate but ones' eyes are drawn to the weaker members. Another disadvantage was that half the time, half the children were masked and the excellent choreography seen in the smaller groups was wasted on the big production numbers. A prime example was the overcrowded stage for the chase. I understand that every child on the stage means extra bums on seats and enhances the volume but you use the best people for every role and if you can't find the right people, don't do the show Here

you did have the right people and you should have been content. If you had you would have achieved perfection.

MUSICAL DIRECTION

MARG ABBOTT had brought together a very talented team of musicians and the choice of music and her arrangements were very good indeed. In fact I feel you could have used your talents to have played some of the tunes for which you used pre-recorded tracks. Using these creates uneasy changes and cause comparisons to be made. However the music was excellent and you gave great support to singers and dancers and enjoyment to the audience.

CHOREOGRAPHY

LEY DOBSON & SARAH PINKNEY did a brilliant job especially considering the overcrowded stage. The Morecambe & Wise kitchen routine was excellent both in choreography and performance. It must have taken a long time to achieve such excellence. Stray Cat Strut was superb and the moves you created for "Happy Together" were wonderful. The routine you created for "Bonkers" gave the audience a marvellous end to the first act. "Whistle a Happy Tune" was a well staged and inventive number.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

PAUL HUTTON kept the production running smoothly in such a way that his efforts were not noticed. As I mentioned, the clever positioning of the covering F.O.C. numbers meant there were no long pauses between scenes which meant Paul & his team did a great and unobtrusive job. The sets still had to be changed though and their work was still crucial and very well done.

FRONT OF HOUSE

I have always thought you should open the doors earlier. You cannot get 80-90 people to their seats in 15 minutes through the one door and sell programmes and wine to more than a fraction of the audience and means you always start late. As the curtains were closed for the walk-in it was even more important to have walk-in music. The audience had nothing to look at or hear. It helps to heighten expectations especially with pantomime. The team were their usual competent selves.

PROGRAMME

KATHRYN PIKE has made the programme her own task and is very good at it. It had great content, and artwork, layout and font well chosen. Thank you for the NODA acknowledgement.

FINALLY

This was a wonderful traditional pantomime and the audience left feeling good- and so did I. You included all the expected aspects of panto, but brought in several innovative touches. One word of caution, and this is not really fair, for it is unusual for a reviewer to see all the performances but I did, and each one was better than the one before. That sounds great but shouldn't happen. Wednesday's audience paid the same ticket price as Saturday's and should have seen the same quality of performance. You must hit the ground running on the first night and not subscribe to the "Not bad for the first night" philosophy. Nevertheless it was a great show and I thank you for inviting me.

Best Wishes to Sylvia Taylor for "THE WEEKEND"

John C. Draper
Independent Theatre Reviewer
7th February 2010