

Cumnor Panto: A Cumnor Christmas Carol



December brought the Cumnor Players happily back to the stage to give a series of new twists to Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". As always the detailing of the presentation was excellent – carol singers outside the Village Hall, scenery that slipped from Victorian murk to Victorian party, a fantastic steampunk 'Meanometer', great costumes (for the entire company, including front of house, ice cream-selling bellboys and Madness-inspired scene shifters) and eclectic music provided by the ever excellent Pantones.

The scene was set in Victorian Cumnor where Scrooge runs Scrooge and Marley's Knicker Company. Scrooge himself (Andrew Down) was possibly missing some of the pantomime malevolence usually found in the villain of the piece, but made up for it with grumpiness and assorted toilet and knicker jokes. ("He's on a job", "Is it a big job?", ... "lots of paperwork"; Queen Victoria "on the throne for 30 years ... no sign of a royal flush".) S and M Knickers became M and S Knickers during the course of the show, allowing an excellent spoof of the breathy "not just M and S" advert campaign that oozed over our television screens for so long and illustrating how food joined underwear as their staples. There were local jokes for local people – references to Doric Properties (loud boos!) and Cumnor history in the graveyard.

Holding the plot together was the

recurring Meanometer, hauled on and off stage by Flora and Nora from the knicker factory ("excellent tarts" excellently and funnily played by Jules Pottle and Jacqui Lewis) which allowed the audience to score Scrooge's meanness, making clear the moral of the story for those unfamiliar with the story or distracted by turkey chases. The three-act story of the giant raffle-prize turkey (Paul Bobby), interspersed with dashes through the audience, a stirring rendition of jazz staple "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens", finally saved from its Christmas fate by Tiny Tim's love, was a victory for vegetarians everywhere.

This year's dame (marvellously upholstered, as one would expect of the ex-co-owner of a lingerie company) was provided by Tim Pottle as the double



cross-dressed Marley's ghost – a man dressed as a woman who'd spent her life dressed as a man... A quirk that allowed a traditional mopping up of the singletons at the end with the singing of "All I Want for Christmas is You" to the new and improved Scrooge.

Scrooge's journey to redemption involved three ghosts, a Tardis-like bed, the love of a boy for his turkey and the magical power of Bob Geldof's "Feed the World" lyrics. The ghosts (in chronological order: Hazel Bannerman, Deborah Cooper and Emma Kowal-Cooper) were beautifully costumed and cleverly played in rhyme to differentiate them from the living, bringing elements of pathos, comedy and fabulous gothic weirdness and satire in the graveyard from Yet to Come.

The Cratchit family afforded regular amusement throughout the show, culminating in Tiny Tim's insistence on a proper death scene – confidently writhed through by Oli Lewis in his first speaking role. The family were used to ironically show us the true meaning of Christmas – "presents and turkey"!

The music choice ranged wide but largely reflected the age of the grown ups and the sounds of their youth. Ska classic "Ghosttown" was an obvious choice and the Suggs-a-like scene shifters subtly added to the pleasure. Bella (Emma Kowal Cooper) gave a lovely version of "Price Tag" in Scrooge's past life. A ghostly Dick van Dyke seemed to hover around the hall for "Me Ol' Bamboo" and "Chim Chim Cher-ee" – choreographed by Delyse Hobbs and Donna Murphy and ably executed by the younger members of the cast. Reputed drug use and the rave scene made good in the final scene as the Shamen's "Ebenezer Goode" finally came into its own, lauding Scrooge's improved score on the Meanometer and hinting at the rave past of several respectable Cumnor parents on the stage.

With profits from the performances going to our local school and preschool and the obvious joy of all involved, the Cumnor Players remain a boon to our village. Charles Dickens, a huge fan of AmDram, silliness and jigging about, would surely have given his seal of approval.

Cindy Cave

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