

Society : Cumnor Players
Production : Jack and the Beanstalk
Date : 6th December 2014
Venue : The Village Hall, Cumnor, Oxon
Report by : Rob Bertwistle

Show Report

Arriving at the venue for the Cumnor Players production of Jack and the Beanstalk I discovered a packed house ready for the 7pm start. There was a tangible atmosphere of anticipation as 'curtain up' time approached. Therefore I was pleased to have accepted the kind invitation from Jacqui Lewis, on behalf of the company, to attend.

This 'Jack' had been transported and updated to the 1950's and there were some clever elements from that period threading through the story line. Another 'thread' was a reference to the movies and the transition from 'black and white to glorious Technicolor' as the programme tells us.

The Production was devised and written by two members of the company – Maria Jeffery and Mike Meldrum and so was packed with local references and 'in' jokes which the audience revelled in. The whole production looked and sounded fabulous with bright, colourful costumes, great scenery, some excellent 'live' music and some lively characterisations.

This was obviously a huge team effort and the enthusiasm and enjoyment could be seen and felt in every member of the cast.

Jack was played convincingly by Alice Bridge and she certainly looked the part - complete with side-burns! Her interactions with her 'mother' - Dame Has-Bean - played with relish by Eddy Hyde were very funny. Good facial expressions Eddy and you really took to the role though I think you could have been even more outrageous – the Pantomime Dame can get away with almost anything!

The villains – Ronnie Rumble and Rip-off Reggie were played by Jan Kowal and Andrew Down. You had great fun with these characters, gentlemen, with lots of eye rolling and a suitable amount of sneering and audience banter. Jozie Meldrum as the pair's wicked mother was perfect with some nice interactions with the audience whenever she was booed. I thought the motor-bike idea was very clever.

Bish, Bash and Bosh were played for laughs by Emma-Rose Bouffler, Mike Mills and Jacqui Lewis. All dressed as 'cool cats' from the Fifties. You worked well together as a trio.

Ella the pantomime cow looked really believable, and, complete with huge swinging udders was played amusingly by Esme Murphy as the front half (on the night I saw the production) with Helen

Stevens bringing up the rear – did you take it in turns I wonder to be at the front? Some lovely dance moves and well co-ordinated foot work!

Jo Coffey made an impression as Melody the magic harp. Her character was based on that screen icon Marilyn Monroe whom she captured very well. Jo had good stage presence and a strong singing voice. The harp 'prop' was very effective also.

I liked Flossie Pottle's 'Goosie' and her scene with mid-wife - Sasha Jeffery - delivering the golden egg was very funny indeed.

The mysterious and mystical Madame Dynamite who persuades Jack to exchange Ella the cow for some magic beans was captured well by Ally Baker. A well maintained French accent added to the fun. Good diction and stage presence.

This Jack and the Beanstalk's 'Giant' had a clever twist with the castle at the top of the beanstalk becoming the 'mansion in the sky' inhabited by a diminutive Elvis Presley played very effectively by Harry Irving. Great costume and wig and Harry sang the old Elvis classic 'Teddybear' very convincingly. You have a very good singing voice and produced a lovely cameo part. You obviously enjoyed every moment on stage, Harry.

The beanstalk 'tendrils' were played with enthusiasm by Ali Stephen, Poppy Smart, Louise Jamieson, Olivia Stevens and Samuel Down. There was a lot of energy from this quintet and they looked very striking in their green tendril costumes.

The children's chorus – Susannah Foster, Eva Heffernan, Thomas Lewis, Daisy Millin and Joe Smart – gave excellent support to the whole proceedings. Well done to you all.

Director, Jules Pottle, ably assisted by Tim Pottle had assembled a lively and committed cast. There were some strong characterisations and the action never flagged. Good use was made of the quite small playing area and the audience involvement was relaxed and hilarious at times.

The live band was excellent under the baton of musical director Pete Vecchietti and really added to the immediacy of the piece. It was a pity they were not listed more prominently in the programme along with the cast.

The choreography by Delyse Hobbs and Donna Murphy was inventive and had been well rehearsed by the cast. The children, especially, enjoy the dance sections and their smiling faces and enthusiasm certainly conveyed this to the audience.

The costumes were amazing and much credit must go to Ally Baker for her designs. A big mention must also go to the team that made them. All the costumes were colourful and looked very professional. Goosie's costume was particularly striking.

The set was imaginative yet practical. I liked the designs by Jacqui Lewis which had some wonderful attention to detail in the painting. The musical staves and notes inter-linked with the foliage in the

Act 2 set was very cleverly and meticulously achieved. Congratulations to the numerous team members concerned with set building and painting – it looked wonderful.

The lighting effects were well realised with some clever ‘spooky’ lighting changes whenever Madame Dynamite made an appearance which were achieved by lighting manager Stuart Newton and his crew – Richard Edmonds and Emily Newton – who also crewed for sound manager Dave Smart. The sound was very good and the hand held ‘mics’ worked extremely well with crystal clear sound during the songs.

The props team had assembled some amusing items for the cast to have some fun with. Well done!

The stage crew did a great job of scene changing and ensuring everything was where it should be at the right time!

Hair and make-up all looked very good so congratulations to Delyse Hobbs, Kim Heffernan and Lucy Heffernan

It is not quite clear who was responsible for the overall programme design and production but it was certainly packed full of interesting snippets of information and background material as well as some amusing cast biographies and colourful rehearsal photographs – all finished on a glossy and high quality paper.

In this type of production some people are listed several times in different ‘roles’ so please may I apologise to those who I have not mentioned individually - your contribution was noted and appreciated.

So, finally, may I thank **all** those who made this production so memorable - and for a wonderful evening’s entertainment. I hope you have great success with your next production and a Happy Christmas and Prosperous New Year to you all.

Rob Bertwistle

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