



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Cumnor Players
Production : Treasure Island
Date : 11th December 2015
Venue : Cumnor Village Hall, Cumnor, Oxfordshire
Report by : Rob Bertwistle NODA Reg. Rep. District 12

Show Report

It's that time of year again – oh no it isn't – oh yes it is and so I was very pleased to accept Jacqui Lewis's very kind invitation to review Cumnor Players seasonal panto production - Treasure Island. This indeed was a real 'find' – lively, colourful and with a slightly quirky take on the traditional pantomime experience.

On arrival at Cumnor's well-appointed village hall I was greeted warmly by the Front of House staff. It was nice to see your nomination certificate for Best Pantomime 2014 proudly on display in the entrance foyer. The auditorium was filling up fast and there was the usual pre-performance excitement and anticipation.

As the 'tabs' were already open there was time to study the impressive set depicting the interior of the 'Admiral Benbow' the well-known inn from the famous Robert Louis Stevenson novel on which tonight's performance was based. The set had been well constructed and dressed appropriately with the trappings of an 'old world' inn with a central 'bar' area which formed the basis of a clever sight gag later in the production. This used the well-tried formula involving the removal of various outlandish objects of differing size and shape, including a very large umbrella, from a small 'sea chest' - very clever!

This was a very ingenious set in other ways too, as later in the production, it was amazingly transformed before our eyes into the deck of a sailing ship. Finally the 'ship' (during a cleverly staged 'storm') became the Treasure Island of the title - complete with beautifully painted palm trees and sea! Set designer Jacqui Lewis and her team of set builders must be congratulated on achieving such a remarkable and versatile playing area. I particularly liked the 'roller blind' effect which enabled various backgrounds to be quickly and unobtrusively changed.

This production was quite a different 'take' on the traditional pantomime theme with a largely adult cast and a small children's chorus – only four children in fact and three slightly older children with quite considerable amounts of dialogue who played the 'Rats'. There were certain elements of traditional pantomime here but these were fairly underplayed. Of course this did not detract from the entertainment value it's just that on one or two occasions it did not always 'feel' that you were watching a 'panto'. Director, Erika Harris, used the various talents in her ensemble to tease out all the humour and make the situations amusing on a number of levels. There were many inventive ideas and her cast gave largely strong performances. Good use was made of the playing area and entrances and exits were smooth and unobtrusive. Congratulations.

Ellie Baker Mullhall was good as Jim Hawkins with clear diction, some lovely interactions with the audience and also with her fellow actors. Ellie used the stage well and had good stage presence.

Eddy Hyde played the 'Dame' - Mrs. Hawkins. Eddy did not seem to be completely at home with the character initially but he soon grew into the part with a little audience banter to get things moving. Very amusing interactions with cast and audience. Clear diction was present although I felt Eddy was struggling a little with the higher pitching of the dame's voice. Eddy used the stage well and seemed to be really enjoying himself.

Sasha Jeffery was Mabel – Jim’s love interest. Sasha was very funny and played up appropriately at the running gag about her name rhyming with lots of amusing words for example ‘able Mable’ etc. etc. - you get the drift!. This was a well-judged performance with clear diction and excellent stage presence.

Clare Denton as Long John Silvia was excellent. I have worked with Clare on several occasions and always find her to be the consummate performer. She had great fun with this rather quirky role - the leader of an unusually motley crew of female pirates - giving a convincing characterisation with good diction and strong vocals.

The ‘motley crew’ of pirates – Hazel Bannerman (Blue Beard) Deborah Copper (Grey Beard) Millie Gaydon (Black Beard) and Helen Stevens (Red Beard) gave strong support and each had developed their own individual character They interacted well with each other and all used the playing area to good effect. The diction was good from all these actors. Well done!

Jacqui Lewis was very good as Billy Bones but really came into her own as one of the ‘alluring Mermaids’. Similarly, Jules Pottle’s Blind Pew was suitably scary with a convincing characterisation (helped by some wonderful make-up) but as the other ‘alluring Mermaid’ she really shone. These two actors worked well together and were very amusing as the half woman, half fish creatures from the depths! Their costumes and make-up were very good with elaborate wigs to complete the effect. Clear diction and strong vocals made for two memorable performances.

Paul Bobby was suitably creepy and lecherous as the Doctor and worked well with Jan Kowal as the ‘dim but enthusiastic’ (how he describes his character) Squire. These two actors were amusing and gave convincing performances with clear diction and good stage presence.

The three Rats – Robert, Louis and Stevenson were played very well by Harry Irving, Daisy Millin and Olivia Stevens respectively. These three young actors blended well and gave convincing performances – again helped by some very clever make-up and excellent period costumes. I did have to strain to hear all their dialogue at times so it’s very important to encourage projection techniques from an early age. However, well done to the three of you.

The children’s chorus – Pippa Denton, Eva Heffernan, Thomas Lewis and Joe Smart were delightful and really looked like they were having a wonderful time. They knew all their words and they certainly had all the moves and dance routines off to a ‘T’. It’s very encouraging to see young people enjoying being on stage. Well done to you all.

The sound and lighting was good and the teams responsible had worked hard to achieve some clever effects. The ‘lightning’ effects were particularly impressive. The hand held mikes (used in the vocals) were used well and the sound was crystal clear.

The wardrobe, hair and make-up teams had done an incredible job! The make-up was very good and the costumes were first class. I think you make all your own costumes and this must be quite a feat to create such a range of colourful and well thought out costumes.

Musical Director, Rich Marshall and his two fellow band members Rachael Claridge and Jon Buxton produced some lively musical effects and accompanied the songs effectively. I did think some of the songs were rather obscure but that may be down to my age!

Ian Bannerman's witty script went down well with the enthusiastic audience with the usual local references and 'in-jokes'.

I was very impressed by the novel and clever programme design by Amanda Gaydon and Becky Smart. The programme was presented in the form of a treasure map complete with a red ribbon to keep it rolled up. The one unfortunate drawback was that once it was released from the ribbon it kept wanting to roll up again and was quite unwieldy but nonetheless this was a most unusually presented and themed programme. Perhaps you can consider entering it into the Programme & Poster competition so please retain 5 copies which should be submitted to our Regional Councillor Jacquie Stedman by December 31st with the appropriate form for 2016 which can be downloaded from the London section of the NODA website. As well as the novel design the programme contained some interesting background to the plot and cast photographs and biographies which are always interesting to read. The excellent finish on good quality paper made this a very interesting and quirky addition to the evening's entertainment.

This production was not exactly typical of the more traditional form of pantomime but was very enjoyable nonetheless.

Obviously a production of this scale involves a host of people who unfortunately are far too numerous to mention individually but without whom the whole thing would not be possible and I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank everyone associated with the production. I had a most enjoyable evening's entertainment and it only leaves me to wish you all Season's Greetings and the very best of luck with your next production.

Best wishes,

Rob

Rob Bertwistle

NODA Representative

District 12

NODA London

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