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Society : Cumnor Players
Production : Robin and the Hoods
Date : 11th December 2016
Venue : Cumnor Village Hall Oxfordshire
Report by : Rob Bertwistle NODA Rep. District 12

Show Report

Many thanks to Jacqui Lewis for the kind invitation to review the Cumnor Players annual pantomime. As this was the groups' tenth anniversary year I was sure that I was about to see a fitting show to celebrate this milestone year of entertaining the local community and beyond with fun, laughter and frivolity. I wasn't to be disappointed!

I always look forward to attending the Cumnor Panto as the group certainly works so hard to create wonderful sets and amazing costumes. They also create characters which are lively, larger than life, colourful and certainly different!

Cumnor Village Hall, the venue for tonight's show, was filling up fast and I noted that more seating had to be arranged to accommodate the arriving audience. Thanks to the Front of House Staff for the warm welcome and for reserving a *front row seat* for me which I accepted with, I must admit, slight trepidation. However, I'm pleased to say the evening passed by without me being dragged kicking and screaming onto the stage and for that, Cumnor Players, I give you eternal thanks!!

After the usual 'house-keeping' announcements from the director the show got under way.

The tabs opened to reveal an impressive 'forest' scene dominated by a large and very realistic oak tree. The '3D' effect was very striking with the tree branches extending out and up into the lighting area. The set remained largely static except for some clever changing of back drops attached to cross members. Tim Claridge and his team of set designers and builders had created a simple yet very functional acting space which the actors were able to use and move around in with ease. The painting and scenery design by Jacqui Lewis was most impressive with the evocative use of shape and colour.

Amelia Smith made an amiable and believable Robin of Cumnor with just the right degree of sardonic humour. Amelia displayed good comic timing and some amusing facial expressions in audience 'asides'. Her diction was very good and she used the stage well. A well-judged performance.

Eddy Hyde was excellent as Robin's trusty steed Red Rum. He captured the characteristic movements and mannerisms of a horse perfectly and was aided by impressive make-up by Kim Heffernan and her team and a very striking costume design by Ally Baker. Although Eddy did not have many lines to learn...notably a lot of 'neighing' he gave an assured and convincing performance.

Jules Pottle as Frankie of the Valley, Jo Coffey as Little Don, Archie Chesson as Fredo Tuck and Ally Baker (a *very* busy lady in this production) as Will Scarface were perfect as Robin's quartet of merry men aka the Hoods. Their timings and characterisations were very good and they certainly worked very well as a team. I was particularly impressed with Archie's mature and hilarious contribution to the proceedings.

Lorraine Aspell was very funny as the topically named Miss Merry Berry whose culinary skills left quite a lot to be desired! Lorraine used her face to great effect with some wonderfully comic expressions and the excellent timing of her lines gave maximum effect. Well done!

I liked Eva Heffernan as TLD (Tiny Little Don). She obviously loved being on stage and her face radiated this - resulting in a delightful performance.

Clare Denton almost stole the show as the vain, pretentious, preening and most definitely over the top Prince John. There were some memorably amusing exchanges with the audience as the 'Prince' showed his disdain for the lowly people. The characterisation was spot on and the lisp and protruding front teeth all added to the fun. Clare's theatrical experience certainly showed and her strong vocal delivery was easily a match for some of the quite challenging music. This was a fine comic performance.

I liked Mike Meldrum's laid back and laconic interpretation of the slightly camp, Sir Wiseguy of Osbourne. There was some very amusing exchanges with the audience and other cast members and his costume was also very funny. I loved the way the long toes of his shoes were supported by attachments to his knees – hilarious! Mike captured the character perfectly with good diction and stage presence.

Another hilarious performance was given by Jacqui Lewis as the Sheriff of Botley. This was a wonderful characterisation veering (to my mind at least) between Quasimodo and Mrs. Overall from Acorn Antiques. This was a gem of a performance with great comic timing and some very funny audience interaction. The costume with the hump was genius. Congratulations.

Jan Kowal was very good as Big Chief Running Gag and later as the regal King Richard. Great comedy timing and facial expressions made this a stand out performance. Good stage presence and clear diction were also very much in evidence.

Hannah Peel, Charlotte Peel and Alexandra Shirley were perfect as the Big Chief's posse of Squaws. The three youngsters really performed well and were always in character reacting to the action on stage very enthusiastically. Their dancing was very good and they knew every step and movement. Well done to the three of you.

Thomas Lewis was suitably stern and straight-faced as the 'Brave'. His diction was good and he used the stage well. He really enjoyed this part I'm sure.

Tim Pottle as the dame - 'Made' Marion was excellent. He really captured the essence of a panto dame extremely well. He interacted well with fellow performers and his banter with the audience was very amusing. I think Tim really had fun in this over the top performance. Well done!

Gina was played by Emma Claridge and I noted in the programme that this was Emma's first speaking role. She certainly gave a confident and assured performance and I hope that she will be encouraged to take part in future productions as I believe she has potential to become a skilled performer. She delivered her song with conviction and with clear diction. Well done!

I really liked Alice Wightman's portrayal as Matilda. Here was another strong and quite mature performance from a young person. Alice displayed some good comic timing and facial expressions while her diction and projection were also first rate.

Poppy Smart was suitably authoritative as the Sergeant and used the stage well. A very good overall performance.

The children's chorus of Squaws and Braves were played enthusiastically by Pippa Denton, Ellen Deacon, Eleanor Whittaker and Luca Shirley. These four young people gave spirited performances and were really 'in role' when on the stage. They knew all their words and of course every step and movement in the dance sequences! Well done to you all.

Direction by Erika Harris was very good and the brisk pace was maintained throughout the production. All the principal characters were well defined and the actors gave strong performances. It was nice to see some younger people taking on the more challenging principal roles and they rose to the challenge admirably. Entrances and exits were managed smoothly and unobtrusively and the stage area was used to good effect. Well done!

I believe some of the costumes were brought in from other sources - Prince John's for example - but most of the wonderfully colourful and inventive costumes were designed and made by Ally Baker and her team of costume makers - Sarah Bannerman, Anna Deacon, Richard Pickett and Doreen Lewis. The costumes all looked amazing!

Stuart Newton's lighting design worked well and enhanced the action while Richard Edmonds sound design was excellent. The clarity of the sound from the shared hand held mikes was first class.

The props department headed by Margo Mills had assembled a multitude of wonderful and inventive props. The cauldron looked most impressive. Well done all of you.

The programme by Amanda Gaydon and Becky Smart was full of interesting snippets about the group and the playwright together with the usual cast biographies and some colourful rehearsal photographs.

This was a wonderful evening's entertainment and certainly put everyone in the 'Christmas Spirit' so thanks once again to *everyone* involved in tonight's production.

I hope you all had a peaceful and happy Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all.

Best wishes,

Rob

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