

North-West Essex Theatre Guild - Full-length Drama Festival, 1988-89.

"Aladdin" - Little Waltham Drama Group.

The Pantomime, as staged, followed the traditional story pretty faithfully. The author was uncredited in the programme but with the plot self-evident and enough local colour and topical references to spice it up, the action potential was obvious. The Presentation was lavishly mounted in terms of costume. The initial black-and-gold theme, reversed according to male or female, was a very striking conception and individual outfits such as those for PRINCESS LOUIS BLOSSOM; the minimal silver for the FAIRY OF THE RING and the filmy gauzes and magnificent headresses for her acolytes in the cave and the EMPEROR's entire wardrobe were sumptuous.

I found ABANAZER's - I always spell him with an "A" before the final "R" - first garments rather drab but I take the intention to be that he should appear later on richly dressed and this he certainly was! The finale was positively overwhelming with so much gold thread in evidence, again I imagine, to suggest the non-stop acquisition of wealth through the GENIE OF THE LAMP, and I would have liked one or two patches of colour to offset all that dazzle and glitter.

The opening setting I liked very much with the pagodas against the clear blue sky and fluffy clouds - though it is worth remembering that clouds of their very nature seldom stay in one place for long! The rocks in the cave looked authentic but heavier darker outlining in the Palace would have emphasized its features more distinctively. The frieze of FOO MANCHU faces and fans above the prosc. arch and the Chinese pictograms on the banners front-of-house were a very bright idea and established the right atmosphere immediately.

Make-up was extremely good with particular emphasis on extending and narrowing the eyes a notable feature. and attention had been paid to hair-styles as well.

Props. were also in keeping - I liked the Photo-Fix even if it needed speeding up a session and the EMPEROR's footstool to give him added height and domination was another sensible and effective touch. I didn't like the apparent carte-blanche given to someone in the audience to keep flashing away that infuriating camera. Perhaps a note in the programme might cure things in future.

Lighting was very much on cue with the stobe-lit departure and restoration of the Palace very effective.

The follow-spot intelligently used and the flashing blue light for the Police excursions evocative. The drum-beat that resounded during the abduction of the PRINCESS beautifully integrated into the whole lighting/sound set-up and the hunt noises underpinned the situation in question. The police siren also registered.

The orchestra, as I have come to expect here, was very much part of the show and made a major contribution to its success. The choreography sensibly concentrated on doing the simple things well for the ordinary mortals and let the very beautiful Faify of the Ring and personable partner extend their skills in that long but always captivating dance routine.

The Production had plenty of life and vitality with a sense of orchestration in the variation of pace and tempo as the situation demanded. There was a good, lively opening and some ingenious grouping throughout which defied the limitations of a relatively small stage and made full use of the possibilities of the auditorium and the main and kitchen ^{entrances} and exits.

There was very little masking and the direction had seen to it that the chorus were not just stage dressing and spare bodies but an integral set of characterisations. Only once were they too subdued and that was when ALADDIN was outlining his ambitions when much more accumulatively strong reactions would have helped.

It is always difficult to tell where the "Ad-libs" are rehearsed and when they are spontaneous in pantomime but either way there were some gorgeous puns from various quarters. I loved the "Castella" quip and "Peking Tom", made even funnier by an arch glance to point it by the Dame and the SKODA joke was another that tickled my somewhat bizarre sense of humour. The stage management was smooth and efficient and Front-of-House pleasant and welcoming.

The Acting had the right happy feel to it with every one working for each other and there was an outstanding performance from the Principal Boy.

ALADDIN - she of whom I speak - Extremely personable and full of personality with good legs and a singing voice that could belt out a number with the best and likewise lilt and even croon with the softer and more romantic numbers. She also had the invaluable gift of being able to "cheat" songs that theoretically were out of her considerable range. Absolutely knockout in "I have confidence" and in duets with

Princess and Sweet-Pea. Fairly throbbing with bounce and verve but always under control, this was pantomime playing of the highest order.

WIDOW TWANKEY One of the coyly simpering school of Dames with a very amusing persona and an ability to point up a line with a curl of the eye-lashes or the most mock-demure glance. Very much in contact with the audience from the very first moment, this was a highly "refained" whimsical Dame that I enjoyed very much. Words got lost once and rather anticipated the desert sand ploy by getting ready too soon, but the "Honeybun" duet with SING-SING a model of timing in movement and vocal impact.

SING-SING The rabbit-teeth strangulated voice adopted took some time to get used to and made some of his early work fairly unintelligible to an outsider unused to the actor, but as the ear attuned, this grew into a very rich, comic statement of resource and flair. Interleaved well with the DAME and ALADDIN while awaiting PRINCESS' arrival.

ABANAZER Almost Jewish - and why not? - ring to his voice. Good strong presence and projection and worked well as an isolated character to enrage the audience. Needed to pick up cues more quickly from others to keep the impetus going once established.

THE EMPEROR OF CHINA Scotland must have sent its emissaries out with MARCO PDLO and over the ruling classes early on! This was a characterisation full of meek dignity with a nice line in self-defeating pomposity. Imposing presence with that drooping mandarin moustache and brought the house down with that inspired rendering of "Gonna build a Heaven", backed by a ear-shattering singing group. Well done!

PRINCESS LOTUS-BLOSSOM Very pretty and dainty and moved well. If you can have a Scots emperor, I can't see why his daughter in the crazy illogical world of pantomime can't have open (Essex?) vowels - this one did!

SWEET- PEA Plenty of spirit and attack. Attempted - and carried off - the traditional Chinese stage walk. Entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the proceedings and looked very fetching.

CHOP-CHOP Clear and articulate. Good legs. Nicely tongue-in-cheek flavour to the performance. Well done!

FAIRY OF THE RING Stunning to look at and expressed herself through her movement and dance with skill and appeal. For a disembodied Spirit there was a deal of sensuous body on show but I am sure that the male element in the audience at least were not

complaining!

GENIE OF THE LAMP Presented well. Spoke up with good projection. Supported the Fairy of the Ring without fuss and moved well in his own right.

LAGNEY / CASEY Worked visibly hard to extract some humour from the least-well written parts in the piece. Mock-truncheons that they could have belaboured each other and all and sundry with, instead of those lethal-looking specimens of police weaponry would have helped but their energy could not be faulted.

CHORUS Very involved and supportive and clearly enjoying themselves as did the small children concerned.

Summation A traditional production with a number of original touches that was superbly dressed and very much to the taste of its thoroughly entertained audience.

I enjoyed it too - very much!

Best Wishes,



L.R. James Adjudicator.

Lively Aladdin

Little Waltham Drama
Group — Aladdin
Memorial Hall

I FOUND it hard to believe I was seeing their first night. From the word go right to the finish everyone put bags of energy into Gretta Brannon's production and everything was all right on the night. Little Waltham are the group whose pantomimes other groups ought to be sent to see for their liveliness, sense of fun, and wicked jokes which this year included Chiang Kai Cheque, the Great Wall Street Journal and the Essex Chronicle. Aladdin is played as some-

thing of a rascal by Samantha Brannon who has a way with a song, and Fiona Butcher is the pretty Princess. Glyn Jones is the evil Abanazer and Jim Bell a Scottish Emperor of china, with a perky Susan Butler as Chop Chop. There is a very superior sort of sprite from Catherine Bell as the Spirit of the Ring, while Andrew Ford's Genie is very bossy.

Alan Double and Paul Scott are Lagney and Casey the cops, complete with filofax and an original way of involving the children. Wally Greaves as Widow Twankey.

MARY REDMAN

A highly enjoyable homespun pantomime

LITTLE Waltham Drama presented a highly enjoyable version of Aladdin, directed by Gretta Brannon, which was full of life, vitality and childlike fun.

All the traditional pantomime ingredients were present — a script full of corny jokes, a chase round the hall, a good strong story line and a welcome touch of good, old fashioned, unadulterated romance.

The cast included many Little Waltham members, all of whom, without exception, gave their best perform-

ance in panto yet.

Samantha Brannon tackled the title role with new found confidence and zest, and Wally Greaves brought real warmth and charm to the role of Widow Twankey.

In this Aladdin the role of the Brokers' Men were undertaken by a couple of American cops Lagney and Casey (Alan Double and Paul Scott), and very well they worked together too.

Glyn Jones brought extra light and shade to the baddie Abanazer, and Steve Craske made a real character

out of the myopic suitor of the widow, Sing-Sing.

Jim Bell displayed a great deal of humour as the Emperor of China, Fiona Butcher was a charming Princess Lotus Blossom, with Susan Butler bringing a lively sense of fun to the part of Chop-Chop.

But the real star of the evening was Gretta who bound all the performances in this homespun panto into such an enjoyable package of pure entertainment.

PA