

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2014-15

Group: LITTLE WALTHAM DRAMA GROUP
Production: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Adjudication Date: 21ST JANUARY 2015
Venue: LITTLE WALTHAM VILLAGE HALL
Adjudicator: Dawn King accompanied by Sara Green

INTRODUCTION:

Having adjudicated the summer production *West End to Waltham* with Sara last year, we set off to see this production with enthusiasm. This version of *Beauty and the Beast* is a relatively new script from the Lazy Bee Script group, which I had enjoyed reading prior to the evening, and I was keen to see how the group tackled it.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

We were warmly welcomed into the hall, and provided with excellent seats and a brightly coloured, well printed programme. This contained all relevant company information plus a Wordsearch to keep youngsters occupied. However, it would have been useful to have identified who had supplied costumes or wigs, unless they were part of the company's own stock.

The live pre-show music from Dave Perry and Trevor Lee was delightful, well pitched and great easy listening music, which gave a warm welcoming sound prior to the opening music (Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*).

STAGE MANAGEMENT (SET AND PROPS)

The flats at the side of the stage were painted with a trellis and climbing vine, and gave some visual interest pre-show, although there were then scenes where they didn't really fit. A hard call this – but I wonder whether they could have been changed for the second act?

The farmyard cloth was very attractive, and well painted, as was the woodland scene and the castle interior. There was limited use of furniture except for the castle interior scene.

However there were a substantial number of props for other scenes. Those produced by Dick and Dom as Rose's presents were amusing, but much of the humour was lost because they were difficult to get out of their costume pocket. The tools produced in the Invention Chamber didn't quite work – they needed to either be more realistic or to be bigger – and the Rose-a-matic machine was something of a let-down – it needed to be noisier and have more lights.

Nanny Ivy's picnic hamper was excellent, and the picnic items worked extremely well – particularly the trifle!

The setting out of the table for dinner was appropriate in style and period.

The reveal as the Beast changed to the Prince was well conceived and well managed by the technical team.

COSTUMES:

The costumes were very colourful and lavish and presented very well (pressed and with no obvious attention needed). They added enormously to the enjoyment of the evening and production values. The village set for chorus, with the two tiered skirts (colour over black) looked very striking. The chorus cream and green set for the castle scene was lovely, as were the Lord and Lady.

Nanny Ivy Sap was larger than life, and her costumes were equally bold – I especially liked the blue check dress for Hey Big Spender. The detail was great too - over-sized buttons, matched by an over-sized nurse's fob watch. Dick and Dom looked great in their farmer smock outfits – I did wonder whether they would have been appropriate for more of Act 1 – certainly in the UV scene the white shirts created too big a block of white on the sides of the stage, which detracted from the action on the centre of stage (although they might have been less effective in the strobe sequence).

Fairy Snowdrop's outfit was excellent – good use of glitter on the chest – with a lovely little hat, and it contrasted well with the black and red of Witch Hazel. Witch Hazel's make-up added to her overall malevolence and was imaginatively done.

Marigold, Violet and Rose all looked most attractive in their first act costumes. Rose's blue dress at the Castle, in particular, was beautiful.

The Beast's first outfit and head/hand hair was excellent, but personally I wasn't so keen on the turquoise/pink dinner outfit – it seemed too "sugary" for that point in the story.

The animal outfits – Bluebell and Gorilla were well constructed and good quality.

The walk down set was a visual treat, and beyond our expectation.

Hair was extremely well done in almost all instances. The three principal girls and Nanny all looked great in their Act 1 wigs, which were very well dressed. I was less convinced by Rose's Act 2 wig. Nanny's walk down wig was magnificent!! Nanny's make up was also excellent - outlandish without being over the top.

LIGHTING/SOUND:

The lighting, some operated from a temporary gantry was generally good, and did exactly what was needed to alter our mood for the contrasting locations. There was a nice soft rose wash on the curtains prior to Act 2, and subtle dimming of the lights for the woodland scene. Spots on the doors and principals when they were in the audience were confidently handled and well-focused. The strobe and UV effects were well executed, and the side lighting for the Prince reveal was good.

The sound effects were efficiently handled. The repeated effect for Bluebell were consistently well timed, although the effect itself was a little odd – not a typical ‘moo’ sound.

MUSIC/DANCE:

As a general comment, unless there is some positive choreography or action set, then the pace of a pantomime is greatly aided if the music for a song is started under the preceding dialogue.

There was an oblique reference to song choices in the programme, and for both of us some of the songs seemed more appropriate than others – we particularly puzzled over *Rodeo Rome* for instance. Nevertheless there were some particularly good songs, some being particularly complex. *We go Together* was delivered with clear diction and good volume, as was *Everlasting Love*, and I very much enjoyed the arrangement of *Somebody*. Nanny’s rendition of *Big Spender* was a real audience pleaser.

Chorus numbers were imaginatively choreographed, from the high energy *Rodeo Romeo* and *We Go Together*, to the more traditional *Be Back Soon*, and by and large they were well executed. The finale *Best Song Ever* was excellent, and the Mexican Wave worked really well.

There were two other particular musical high-spots. One was *Yesterday* – an odd choice of song, but delivered beautifully by Rose, with real meaning. The other was *Love Changes Everything*. The singing was good and the growing intensity of the relation between Rose and the Beast was beautifully drawn as they danced together. It provided a serene interlude to an otherwise high energy show.

PERFORMANCES:

Fairy Snowdrop Looking every inch the good fairy, Vicky Weavers was a very enthusiastic in her role, and worked hard at engagement with the audience. Dialogue was very deliberate, and occasionally came across as patronising, and we felt that the direct delivery out front, even when it was a conversation with Witch Hazel which made the performance rather stilted.

Witch Hazel A nice contrast to her adversary, Julie Cole was very laid back and delivered her comic lines with insouciance and good facial expression.

However the ends of some lines were lost, and there were occasions when there needed to be more energy both vocally and physically. Again, the lack of engagement with Fairy Snowdrop meant that some of the barbed insults missed their mark.

- Nanny Ivy Sap Viv Abrey brought lots of energy to this part and had a very natural approach to audience participation which worked well (Ho di hoh). Viv had adopted a high pitch vocal tone to accentuate her characterisation, which was effective on first entry. However, such a pitch is not easy on the ear, and we felt that she perhaps needed to work on lower tones in some sections of the dialogue, which might then have made diction a little clearer. Nanny looked extremely good in all of her costumes and wigs, and delivered her solo, garter revealing number, *Hey Big Spender*, with panache (much to the delight of many in the audience).
- Dick Very lively and engaging, Ryan Chapman grew in confidence as the performance progressed. He and Dom were energetic and worked well as a pair. In the early stages I wasn't sure about Ryan's comic timing, which is so difficult with these one liners, but this was dispelled in Act 2, where the woodland scene was really well played. Dick and Dom did very well in the audience song participation.
- Dom Often set up in the script as the stooge of the duo, Ken Little's comic delivery in the role of Dom was good, and dialogue clear. Working well with Dick, Dom sometimes seemed to be the one that was keeping the focus in comedy moments, particularly in the workshop scene.
- Violet Kate Farrell made the most of a rather underdeveloped role. She was bright , energetic and attractive, and her haughty disregard for Dick was very believable. For future performances, Kate should try to ensure that she doesn't throw away the ends of lines by rushing them.
- Marigold Not quite as assured as her sisters Alex Lee used the limited dialogue she had to portray Marigold as a rather slow and 'not quite with it' character. I thought perhaps that a little more could have been made of the lines in Scene 7 to assert her character.
- Rose Rebekah Walker had good stage presences and a very naturalistic approach to the character of Rose. From her first entrance she managed to convey a sense of gentleness and warmth. Her diction in the dialogue was clear and well interpreted, and as I have commented elsewhere, the song "Yesterday" was beautifully done. She not only sang it well, but acted it too. We both felt that she was a joy to watch, especially during the dance with the Beast.
- Buttercup The duo of Sally and Dave worked well together. It was a pity she didn't have more to do to show off her footwork, either on stage during

the grooming scene or in the audience.

- Charlie Bill Murphy's undisputed stage presence and charisma was spoiled by a lack of certainty around lines and moves, and a lack of discipline in terms of audience engagement. This had the effect of slowing the pace in a number of places, but notably the Invention Chamber, and meant that much of the one line humour was lost.
- Beast Ash Cobden's had good stature which meant that he looked very imposing as the Beast, and he added to this with some nicely observed physical movement. His dance and song with Rose was one of the high spots of the evening. He managed the on floor transition to Prince well and the reveal was very effective. We felt that perhaps he could have adopted a gruffer tone when he was the Beast, and then contrasted by adopting a more cultured speech pattern as The Prince.
- Lady Chancellor Providing a good contrast to her husband Jenni Money made the Lady Chancellor seem dotty, yet reassuring and in control. A nice, well acted cameo.
- Lord Chancellor Another good cameo part, which Brian Corrie handled extremely competently, giving an assured and amusing performance with a good 'cod' French accent. There was an attention to detail in his characterisation which was good to see, and we particularly liked the deadpan delivery of some of his ad libs.
- Chorus The chorus had a good deal to do during this production and we felt that the directors MD and choreographer had worked well to get a range of numbers which were both visually and musically robust and could be tackled by a range of ability. A good point to note is that it's really important to look happy and confident even if you are not sure what your moves are. The smiling face is more noticeable than problems with the footwork!

DIRECTION:

Overall, this was a very energetic and enjoyable show.

I mentioned earlier, that the script had been a "good read", and this is attributable to the fact that it contained a large number of quick fire or one line jokes. Very few of us have natural comic timing, and in order to make such jokes successful, actors need to constantly practice and rehearse the delivery, always looking for the balance of action, intonation and expression, in order that the lines aren't thrown away or lost in the ongoing dialogue.

There was quite a long gap between the end of the overture and Fairy Snowdrop's entrance, and we both felt that it would have been more effective if she had been there as the music finished. As a general point both Fairy Snowdrop and Witch Hazel's entrances were always a bit messy. They both needed someone from stage management to pull back the curtain to reveal them so they could step forward, and then to provide them with a clear exit.

The small stage meant that the set piece in the Invention Chamber was difficult to deliver, and the large number of props involved probably meant that it had not been rehearsed sufficiently prior to production week. It might have been useful to consider how this might have been adapted so that pace was maintained and the risk of things going wrong because of props/equipment was reduced. On the night that we came, the production was let down by lack of concentration and discipline in some of the actors and the scene became tedious, It was also not clear what was happening in the UV section (where Dick and Dom's white shirts at the side of the stage were too dominant)

Conversely, the set piece in the Woodland was extremely well done, and appeared to be better rehearsed. The gorilla moved well, the interplay between Nanny, Dick and Dom was good, and the slapstick moments were well timed.

As previously mentioned, the singing overall was good, and well supported by the band, and the choreography enhanced the songs rather than detracting from it. There were some lovely touches too, like the forming of the heart in *Everlasting Love*.

Another good point was the audience participation song, which was upbeat, and well managed by Dick, Dom and Charlie – we were engaged and it wasn't too long.

I do hope that these two young directors will continue to direct shows in the future – the production values in *Beauty and the Beast* were good, and given the enthusiasm and capacity for learning, there is real directorial talent in this group which will undoubtedly develop over the years.

Dawn King
27th January 2015