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## National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society : Riverside Players  
Production : **Merlin**  
Date : Friday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2022  
Venue : Old Windsor Memorial Hall  
Report by : Nick Humby

### Show Report

#### Overall Production Impression

It is so refreshing to see a new title in Pantomime and Merlin has all the right ingredients. A familiar story given a gentle twist, an outrageous Dame, a silly comic, a proper Principal Boy and Girl and an evil villain with two hopeless henchmen. Add in a songsheet, some familiar tunes, sweet throwing, and some traditional pantomime (or Music Hall) sketches and you have everything you need for a traditional Christmas treat. Limelight Scripts version of the tale of King Arthur does just that and Riverside Players threw themselves into it with great energy and some confident acting and singing to produce an entertaining show which was fun for all the family.

The production was very well staged to create slick scene changes using a beautifully painted Camelot back cloth and lovely pastel wood roller cloth, a very well-set Merlin's laboratory scene, a pretty scene setting false proscenium, and two good looking practical thrones. The costumes were wonderful throughout from the Knights of the round table with added legwarmers, to the Villain's helmet and tunic and the Jester's excellent Ostrich costume.

Even more satisfying was lovely quality of the sound system added into the village hall with a very good mix so every spoken and sung word was heard and very good use of underscore music and stings. The cast's good diction, smiling faces and sparkles in their eyes told us not only that they were enjoying the show themselves but connected us in the audience to them, so we shared that pleasure.



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## Cast

Every Pantomime should have a thigh slapping Principal Boy and a sweet and charming Principal Girl for us to cheer on to win the day and in **Jessica Davies's** excellent elegant Arthur and **Josie Clarke's** delightful confident Guinevere we had both. They both portrayed their roles very well and had lovely singing voices especially in "Holding out for a hero", "Walking in sunshine" and "Incredible". Two very good young actresses.

The three Knights of the Round table had some great fun, a sort of medieval three amigos, a comic trio with scene stealing lines especially from **Vicki Arnold's** Sir Dancealot with a very good running gag about entering Strictly as well as a nice line in legwarmers changing every scene. She pointed every line with great drama and balletic flourishes which created a wonderful amusing character. There was good support from **John Aherne** as Sir Loin, the neanderthal knight and **Elliot Whitehorn** as Sir Real with a magnificent moustache and confident clear voice. Together they made a very good contrasting trio who worked well as a team and carried off the Pythonesque horses exits well.

**Alex Taggart's** Dame Gertie was (as she should be) a larger-than-life man in a dress, an energetic man-eater with a strong clear voice and who built a good bickering partnership with **Simon Arnold's** Chester and a good rapport with the audience. Occasionally the innuendo was a little strong like the repeated knowing DIY references and Viagra gag. **Arnold** added pace and comedy with his ad libs, clever prompts to Merlin, topical reference to Meghan and Harry and his brilliant non-stop portrayal of Chester riding on an ostrich. His referring to Arthur as Alfred was hilarious and very well handled.

**John Wesson's** Merlin created the bumbling wizard perfectly and it did not matter that having had fewer rehearsals left him less practised than others. From his first entrance singing a few lines in "24k Magic" in a beautifully blue star-spangled floor-length tunic though to his Laboratory sketch scene he perfectly set the tone of Merlin. It would have been good to have seen him do a simple magic trick like producing flowers from nowhere. The Laboratory sketch was an excellent piece of writing and props, drawn from the classic "Who's on first" routine of Abbott and Costello. This is complicated business



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requiring careful timing and spot on intonation and their version of Y, A and O worked pretty well with **Izzie** and **Eloise Holdsworth** showing great potential as young actresses in their delivery.

The Villain Mordred, **Tom Weller**, was also very well cast and played. He looked the part with a good costume and make up and a treacherously evil cackle and made a good partnership with the comical henchmen , **Pam Walters** as Port and **Helen Clarke** as Cullis, with a neat detail of switched socks showing they are a double act! The delivery of “it’s a kind of magic” by Mordred was handled well using spoken lyrics.

**Roger Blackman’s** two cameo appearances as Lord Sugar and Simon Cowell giving the script a topical uplift were also well handled capturing their mannerisms if not quite their voices. The waistband of Cowell’s trousers could have been more convincingly created! Unfortunately, I was unable to see **Susan Bell’s** Ash the dragon due to illness (I hope she recovers quickly) but **Lorna Cottrill** seamlessly covered for her as the demure cute baby dragon and drew plenty of aah’s from the audience!

### Creative team

This was a very well-produced show and **Lorna Cottrill** had ensured a generally good pace, clear and well thought out blocking with good use of the rear rostrum and occasional use of the auditorium. There was a good ensemble feel to a lot of the business with everyone getting a turn in the limelight with some like **Vicki and Simon Arnold** milking it more than others but to very good effect. Occasionally the small stage meant we were left for several seconds watching a queue of cast leaving the stage which needed either use of more exits, some underscore music, or some business to cover. The sweet distribution scene was a nice idea, but the time taken to give everyone a sweet while leaving the stage empty felt overlong and killed the pace . It needed someone on stage directing those in auditorium or providing a commentary with gags to make it fit better into the show , even if they just kept checking with off stage if the scene change was complete!

The musical selection, backing tracks and sound effects by **Vicki Arnold and Mark Hastings** were very well done, all within the range of the cast and with



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very good touches such as the Harry Potter, Benny Hill and Dr Who themes (which I assume are cleared for use) and the sword swishing effect. The sound mix and balance was as good and clear as I have heard in Amateur theatre and definitely made huge difference to our enjoyment of the show. The songsheet choice did not work with a largely adult audience and it might have been better to have switched it with “Walking in sunshine” so the cast sang about Mordred after escaping from cave .

The choreography by **Vicki Arnold** was effective and appropriate and looked very well drilled with excellent routines to open Act 1 “24K Magic” and Act 2 “Green green grass”. It was all within the capability of the cast and created good-looking on-stage pictures but perhaps could have had a little more variation including even some lifts?

The lighting design by **Jonathan Stacey** and **Kay Smith** was also effective with a very good moonlight effect in scene 8 and strong red washes for the evil magic & dragon scenes adding to the atmosphere. I did note a rogue light in Act 2 scene 4 which seemed out of place!

The staging by **Simon Arnold, Roger Blackman and Pam Walters** and the cast was very good with a very well painted backcloth of Camelot and good generic wood half tab roller which set the scenes well. The two thrones looked the part as did the large magic spell book and the detailed props and setting for the Laboratory scene . The Jousting scene with the Tilt at an angle down the stage could have been more effective with more space and it would have been good to see them lining up and preparing to charge more clearly. The Proscenium arch clouds and pennants representing the good and evil stage right and stage left was a good touch.

Stage Manager, **Susan Pickles** and her crew made sure the scene changes were generally slick and quick (with just the duelling scene set up being unduly long) and there was a good foaming glass to open the Laboratory scene. There was some appropriate makeup to enhance faces for Mordred , the Dame, and the Dragon and clever dripping nose icicles for Port and Cullis.

The costumes looked very well coordinated and stitched by **Helen Clarke, Lorna Cottrill, Susan Bell, and John Wesson** and were all very appropriate well



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thought out and made. Mordred looked evil and threatening , Chester silly and frivolous, the knights consistent with individual touches, Arthur elegantly regal, Guinevere beautifully demure, Merlin magically bonkers, the Dame outrageously flirtatious, the Dragon cutely shy and Port and Cullis disgustingly dirty.

The Programme by Vicki Arnold was simple and useful although it is always good to have short bio's of cast and the NODA paragraph is missing so it does not qualify for the competition. See [Programme and Poster Competition - NODA](#)

As always there was a warm welcome front of house, and it was great to chat to everyone before and after the show which gave a good sense of the teamwork in the society to get the show on stage. I look forward to seeing a fuller programme of shows from Riverside in 2023 as you have the talent and age range to do more than Pantomime.

Thank you

**Nick**

Nick Humby - NODA Representative - London Region - District 14