



Society : Riverside Players
Production : Pinocchio
Date : Saturday 10th December 2016
Venue : Memorial Hall
Report by : Terry Hunt

Show Report

My first visit to the Riverside Players' pantomime of Pinocchio started with a very warm welcome from Director **Susan Pickles** and the Front Of House ladies (..and Roger of course). I very much enjoyed the opportunity to meet group members, both before and after the performance.

Thank you for making us so welcome.

I must, however, say that approaching the venue from the outside wasn't especially 'inviting' with the bright lighting giving the impression that we were arriving for a rehearsal! Perhaps including a few theatre 'flood lights' with coloured gel as part of rig, would help warm the ambience of the auditorium?

The extended apron with entrances downstage of the proscenium works well to extend the acting area. The pastel, multi-coloured fabric drape was nicely done, bringing together the proscenium and additional downstage entrances, and along with various toys for set dressing, added some much needed colour. Using black for the downstage masking was rather heavy...especially given everything around it was so light. Perhaps the multi coloured fabric (organza?) could have had a dual purpose if it had been repositioned to replace the black masking, both dressing the stage and acting as masking? When lit from an angle, it would have acted like a gauze and appeared fairly solid to the audience.

The cloths were of a good quality and I appreciated the fact that the upstage legs were dressed with detail appropriate for each scene.

The bleed through of the pre-set tabs during the prologue was a nice opening. Scene changes happened smoothly and silently, with no sign of any stage crew (apart from when unavoidable, but it was in a blackout). In this respect, the design was well thought out, enabling scenes to flow fairly seamlessly. Clearly, a lot of thought had gone into the set, so well done to the design team and stage crew.

I feel that paying attention to 'finish' would help improve the overall look of the show. Painting the stage floor (if allowed) and rostra, so it's a uniform colour/design; the visible edges of the black downstage masking was a little ragged and the off stage treads were crooked and had a slightly tatty appearance. It's sometimes worth remembering that the audience spend a lot of time looking at the what's in front of them for the entire show, so keeping the fore stage tidy makes a difference.

No-one in particular is credited for props and set dressing, however there was plenty here to find. Well done for the collective team for such thoroughness and nice little detail such as school books tied in a bundle.

I LOVED the whale. It was clever and simple at the same time, but wonderfully effective in a very pantomime way.

I was pleasantly surprised at the standard of lighting. **Roger Lewiston** did a commendable job given the limited facilities. Lot's of rich colours, with a significant and noticeable difference between the outdoor/daylight scenes and inside a whale, for instance. The cast and set were evenly lit, with no

noticeably dark patches, and cues all well timed. There were some lovely touches such as the wave effect on the ceiling when in the whale, and projections over the proscenium. I'm not always a fan of projections for 'traditional theatre' productions, but these were an enhancing addition rather than a lazy alternative to scenery. Being in the front row, I didn't always get the full effect of projections, but that's the way the cookie crumbles I guess.

Although the show didn't really suffer for the lack of a follow spot, it might be worth considering one to add a further dimension, in particular the to scenes focused on the apron, as they were the only times lighting was a bit uninteresting. i.e. picking up the Blue Fairy in a soft blue light would have enhanced her magical etherealness. It would also have been nice to have had a lighting effect (even if was a blackout), along with ticking clock to help with the passing of time when Geppetto went to sell his coat. In all though...very nice work by Roger.

I was equally impressed with the quality of sound. Clear, clean, well balanced backing tracks versus mic, and a good, overall level. All sound effects (burps, fog horn, etc) were nice touches, well timed. Perhaps a bit of reverb when inside the whale may have added some interest, but in all, a very proficient job, so well done to **Mark Hastings**.

With Geppetto as a toy maker, there's a wonderful opportunity to use all sorts of costumes you might not otherwise have many opportunities to use. This was taken full advantage of for the chorus. There was a bright array of colours across the cast with good style/design for the characters - and the costumes fitted!!!

The costumes all looked to be of a good quality, and there didn't appear to be any skimping.

I had a couple of question marks over some colours e.g. although Jiminy matched the Blue Fairy, perhaps a green, of a similar tone to the Blue Fairy's blue, would have been more appropriate for a cricket, and Foxy's leggings could have been a 'fox' brown rather than black. These are just picky points, however one thing which leapt out at me was the varying array of footwear. I do feel that the dancers in particular should wear the same shoes OR appropriate to their character, however there appeared to be a random mix and match of black dance shoes, ballet shoes and plimsolls.

Correct me if I missed something, but did Geppetto go to sell his coat...and then continue to wear it for the rest of the show?

Make up for most characters was quite inconspicuous... which is a good thing. I appreciated the inclination towards blue eye make up for the Blue Fairy; Stromboli as the stereotypical villain from a Victorian melodrama,,,and **Hayley Weller's** zoological themes for Foxy and Catriona. All worked very well.

I feel as though Pinocchio himself would have benefited from visible joints..and even wood grain, both of which can be done with the use of stocking which will easily push into socks or sleeves, giving the added benefit of a proper 'transformation' when he becomes a real boy. A missed opportunity for some 'magic' I feel.

The 'nose' business was unfussy and effective. Simple often works best!

Vicky Arnold was clearly very busy, in charge of music and choreography (as well as performing, publicity and programme design!). There was an enjoyable mix of music, with something to suit just about everyone. It was a while before it even dawned on me that there was no live orchestra, however the recordings generated a good sound and didn't detract from the overall enjoyment. Only some incidental music was missing on occasions. Vocals were all good, and clear, with some lovely harmonies!

One of my frequent criticisms is when actors lose their character as soon as they start singing. For

once...I have to write to the contrary. Even in Pantomime, if the cast have the singing talent, the audience will appreciate a great song being sung to the best of their ability. During 'The Climb' I absolutely applaud Nadeem and Alex for singing 'in character'... however... it rather detracted from the beautifully sung lead vocals, which in this case, was a shame. It could have been made into a more significant 'moment' in Pinocchio's journey, focusing on Blue Fairy and Pinocchio, with everyone else blending into the background a bit more, both visually and vocally.

There was quite a lot of music, which isn't a bad thing, but on a couple of occasions it did feel as though a musical number was there 'just because'. Fewer numbers would have been fine, but make more of them, because ... moving on to choreography... not everyone was confident with what they were doing. By having a few less numbers, there'll be less routines to learn and more time to spend on the ones you do have. Even one or two of the chorus/dancers looked at though they were concentrating during the routines. Clearly they are all competent enough, but a big smile and a confident appearance, will carry you through...even if small mistakes are made!

If there is an opportunity, perhaps the more experienced dancing girls (or boys!) could offered the chance to try their hand at choreography? Even if a couple work together on one routine, I feel it should be encouraged to help build their experience and will also add some variation to the style of choreography.

It was lovely to have the U.V included. Having the yellow/green fish, 2 sided would have enabled them to swim back and forth across the stage..rather than having to move backwards...and remember to keep the animation going until either off stage, or the UV lights are off. Lovely Jelly fish being folded up to get into the wings (I assume) can spoil the illusion!

Vicky Arnold, as the Blue Fairy, looked regal, magical and had an appropriately caring/motherly air about her. Lines were delivered with confidence and perfect intonation, and what a stunning singing voice! An enjoyable, quietly confident performance from Vicky. Well done.

Not so 'quiet' but equally confident was **Simon Arnold's** performance as Jiminy Cricket. Simon has a natural ability to build a good rapport with the audience and was endearing enough to deliver innuendo with a suitable air of innocence! As the character who mostly carries the show, I felt as though 'Jiminy' was in very safe hands. Simon didn't look terribly comfortable with the dance routines. With the exception of the Finale perhaps, I feel it would have been perfectly OK for the 'magical' characters of Jiminy and Blue Fairy to not dance as part of any choreographed routines.

Great characterization from **ValechaNadeem** as Geppetto. It was a wonderful, physically animated performance with a consistent accent but lines were delivered at a good pace with great articulation, so remained clear. Nadeem engaged nicely with the audience. Make up was good...but his moustache needed greying!

Although the obvious character to be a Dame, I didn't feel the part of the Momma Geppetto was terribly well written in that her place in the story was simply 'another character', with little to make her a 'Panto Dame'. I missed the BIG entrance/introduction and dominating flamboyance of a Dame. **Alex Taggart** was working hard to make something of the role and was getting there at times...mostly in the 2nd act, although he gave good responses to name suggestions.

A general lack of eye contact with the audience and the cast suggested Alex wasn't feeling terribly confident and I feel more attention needed to be given to the role. As already alluded to, this shortfall may well have been about the script as much as anything.

I felt Momma looked a little too young to be Geppetto's wife.

Samantha Somerville was ideal in the eponymous role of Pinocchio. Good facial expressions and line delivery, coupled with Samantha's slight build and consistent 'puppetesque' gait made for a credible characterization. Samantha seemingly breezed her way through the show with the appearance of ease and innocence! Samantha clearly has a good singing voice, and much as 'I've Got No Strings' and 'Give a Little Whistle' were very well performed, I feel it was a missed opportunity not to have given Samantha something with a bit more substance.. as part of a 'transformation' from puppet to boy, perhaps?

I'm assuming the character of Dylan was written as a male? Changing the name to something less gender specific, the character could have unquestionably been female... especially in the wake of X Factor's Honey-G. (Dilly - G?). **Serena Kelly** had a nice relationship with Pinocchio, showed a good stage awareness by reacting well to other characters and coped well with the rapping, although Serena was still a bit too well spoken. Dropping 'h's and replacing 'th' with a 'd' would have completed the characterization... although it may have been amusing to make MORE of it and turn 'Dilly - G' into a posh girl trying to be a rapper...badly? A solid performance, however.

Anna Shaw as Foxy Loxy and **Susan Bell** as Catriona made a wonderfully entertaining partnership, both giving confident and assured performances. Anna and Susan's interaction appeared very natural both in relation to each other and reactions to each other. I loved Susan's utter conviction to 'Messy Dormouse' and little touches like wiping her nose on Foxy's tail. Anna was fabulously 'lovie' and has great range of facial expressions which were used to full effect!! Very enjoyable indeed. Easily done, but Anna did refer to Pinocchio as 'she'! Opps!

Tom Weller looked the villain as Stromboli, had a great 'evil' laugh and ranted at the audience well. Starting off as 'unpleasant' rather than a villain, Tom eventually got into his stride, however, for the purposes of Panto, the baddie needs to make their mark early! Also, I wasn't sure of the relationship with **Trish Weller's** Linguini, not being sure who Linguini was to start with. Trish added some nice touches, such as sulking with a Teddy Bear, but reactions/displays of emotion, etc, would have benefited from being much more exaggerated.

Well done to **Phoebe Picton** and **April Stanford** for holding their own against Foxy and Catriona. It would be easy to be upstaged by two such larger than life characters, but both did well, with their lines delivered clearly!

The supporting cast made all their entrances and exits without fuss and crowding at the wings. In small groups there were some nice reactions to events in the story line when appropriate. In essence, they 'supported' the characters well. 'Better When I'm Dancing' was sung and danced particularly well.

Handing out the basket of sweet to the entire audience.. although nice.. did rather disrupt the flow and felt unnecessary.

In all, I thoroughly enjoyed a colourful, well paced, well produced pantomime. For me, the two areas I feel need focusing on are 'finishing' the set, ESPECIALLY because it was detailed and well thought out, and more confidence in the dance routines. As previously mentioned, the dancing ability ability is there, so either fewer routines OR more rehearsal...and bag loads of energy...will step things up!

I hope the administrators of the venue appreciate what a wonderful gift they have for the community in the Riverside Players' very traditional and well produced Pantomime...and long may it continue. Very well done to everyone.

Terry Hunt
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