



Society : Riverside Players
Production : Rapunzel
Date : 9th Dec 2017
Venue : Memorial Hall
Report by : Terry Hunt

Show Report

One of the joys of producing a children's story not commonly staged as a pantomime is that there are fewer expectations. With tales such as Rapunzel, most people would only recall a vague outline of the story which gives the director a freer rein. However, even being able to exercise a good deal of artistic license, being a pantomime, it might be considered foolish to venture too far from the traditional formulae. I'm pleased to say that there were no such worries here. A funny script with a good storyline and all the traditional character types were enough to set Director, Simon Arnold and his team, in the right direction for an excellently produced pantomime.

On arrival at Memorial Hall, the lighting was cosier than my previous visit, which made it much more welcoming and helps to generate the more theatrical ambiance. Kay Smith and the rest of the FOH team were equally welcoming and the hall was buzzing, which all helped with the joyful atmosphere.

My initial impression was that the stage area seemed tidy, smart and 'finished'. Detail such as the ivy, was limited but looked well done, which is important in an area of the stage where it's going to be permanently visible.

I raise my hat to Simon Arnold for his set design and to the team responsible for its construction/painting. All too often, thoughts about HOW the show will run are left too late and can create quite a headache for the SM team at a later date, or the show becomes disorderly. For a venue with limited facilities, the scenes and scene changes flowed nicely, so it would seem that a good deal of thought had been given to this. Well done to the stage crew for their part too. Not only were there no scene change delays, they were also fast and quiet... especially notable for being well managed was changing into the hair salon scene.

The quality of the set is about how it looks from out front. The cloths were well painted and appeared impressively wrinkle free (quite rare!!). Adding appropriate legs, such as trees for the opening scene, add depth and a better sense of location.

The gold columns were all it needed to add a touch of opulence to the Royal Palace.

I liked the tower interior very much. Overlooking the dubious concept of a window directly above a fireplace, I liked the layout of it. Angled flats gave it depth, it didn't matter in the slightest that the walls weren't physically complete. Black masking works well enough, but what was painted looked good and solid from the front. (As there was already a 'window' over the fire, maybe you could have made use of it by adding a portrait with moving eyes or something, just for a bit of added interest?) One small point is that the chair in the tower stood out as modern and may have been better covered. Excellent work Simon and team.

I shall mention the projected tower, between my scenery and LX remarks, as it fits into both camps.

The projection quality was very good and I appreciated the continuity of having the same image as on the front of the programme. I understand that moving the location of tower would have had implications for the Panto Song, but it was the one thing that looked as though it didn't belong, because

of it's position. It would have been magical if the tower had mysteriously appeared amongst the trees ON stage rather than over it, even if the remaining LX needed to be dimmed at the same time? It's magic! Use of projection is a great tool, but even for the panto song, if looking at the words over the stage, the cast seemed very removed. This is nit picking if I'm honest. It's not that there was actually anything wrong with the projections, I just feel that perhaps the facility isn't being used to it's best advantage?

Moving on to LX and SFX, I must also congratulate the technical teams for their excellent work. Further proof that 'village hall' productions don't have to be below par, technically

Lighting cues were all well timed, with nice use of colours to help create atmosphere and location. There was a bit of spill over the stage, but there were no dark patches and everyone was well lit at all times. Well done to Roger Lewiston and Kay Smith. I'm assuming there is no electronic cueing system at Memorial hall which makes LX, SF, SM co-ordination more difficult? If that's the case... well done for some well co-ordinated thunder and lighting with Mark Hastings & Alfie Walters' sound effects. Timing for ALL effects were spot on from the slaps around Bob's head, to the drumming for making the rope ladder.

Sound quality was crisp at all times and the recorded music was well balanced with the live vocals. I can't fault it. Very well done!

Costumes, as coordinated by Susan Pickles, were a suitably generic line of 'Pantoland' frock coats, jabots and A-line dresses. All appearing to be good quality and colourful, with the villagers each being a variation on the theme.

Gentle Fairy Flora was appropriately dressed in delicate colours with matching delicate wings, while the vanity driven Witch Gothel looked stunning in her full length, figure hugging, blood red, dress. Bob and Curly suited their rather more plain shaped, plain green tops, and the wigs added the required comic effect. I felt the overly rouged cheeks were a bit too much, making them look more toy like. Maybe Curly could have had more freckles and Bob, blacked out front teeth?

The only costume I felt didn't quite work was the Queens. In style it was fine, but the plain dark colour didn't stand out, especially as the Royal Palace scenes were primarily blue, and she needed more bling. I felt the tiara and jewellery worn were a bit too subtle.

Dame Beatrix Bouffant could have done with more frequent changes of wig, given her name and profession, but the frequent changes of colourful costumes were welcome. Perhaps something less baggy and more (mock) seductive could have been revealed for the Tango, just to add relevant humour to the costume.

From where I was sitting I couldn't really see the leg or footwear, but overall, another job well done.

Vicki Arnold's music was a mixed bag with something to suit everyone, from classic musical company numbers such as Be Our Guest, which was upbeat and good fun, through to contemporary pop. There were also beautifully sung duets. I'm Your Man was vocally very together, as was Thinking Out Loud. Despacito re written was a great choice for the panto song.

I certainly have no problem with the excellent performance of Cry Me A River, however, in my opinion, it felt too serious for the baddie and almost TOO well sung!! I appreciate it is a very personal thing, but for me, songs for baddies work best when humorous or at least, comically scary/threatening.

Choreography too, was a bit of a mixed bag. The opening routine was nicely presented and very together; Be Our Guest was busy, with lots going on and worked well to set the scene of a bustling Palace. Set It All Free was also enjoyable with good energy. Even some of duets were nicely choreographed and executed, notably Thinking Out Loud. A Bit Of Tango was extremely humorous. I found Call Me Maybe very static and lacking any real vivacity. I was also disappointed with Santa Claus Is Coming To Town which didn't feel very 'Finale', coming across as though it might have been left until the last minute.

Initially, I thought a bit of oomph was lacking in Alan Payn's Dame Trixie, however by the time the line of hair puns had been nicely delivered, Alan's slower pace and Dame Trixie's character soon grew on me. Alan has great facial expression which is really what gave Dame Trixie her character, especially in her lust for the Captain of the guard, and served Alan well in his establishing a quietly composed interaction with the audience.

Alex Taggart was very endearing as Frankie, especially in his rapport with the audience. Character wise he came across as exactly what he was supposed to be. An ordinary, local lad, who'd done rather well for himself working for the Royal family. Alex looked slightly awkward in his role at times, but that actually added to his charm, and didn't come across as a lack of confidence or ability. Alex sang well and can move too, especially noticeable during Set It All Free. Alex's performance had a very natural feel about it, but he must be careful not to raise the pitch of his voice too much, so that everything sounds like a surprise or question.

As the young, male protagonist of a panto, it is of course tradition to have that character played by a female. Something we all accept, however it didn't seem right having a female as a womanising Prince Frederick, arriving with a host of adoring ladies on his (her) arm. Somehow it seems ok for a Gaston type character, but not the 'handsome Prince'. Again, perhaps a personal opinion and more a point of direction rather than anything to do with Samantha Somerville's portrayal. Of course it also comes down to the script to some degree, but having the Prince as a lazy and spoiled, good for nothing is ok. Womanising? Better inferred rather than being so pointed about it, I feel.

Once I'd got over my Maiden Aunt disapproval of Prince Frederick's first appearance and he'd been disinherited by Ma & Pa, the new Prince Frederick was someone I was much more comfortable with. A relaxed, expressive and confident, all round performance, although Samantha could have picked up the pace of her dialogue, a bit. A nice rapport with Frankie developed, and songs all beautifully handled. It maybe my age, but I very much enjoyed I'm You Man, with Alex.

Newbie Fairy, Flora was very pretty and sweet. Her lines were clear, pacey and well delivered. Although Lorna Cottrill is clearly a capable actress, I did feel as though Fairy Flora lacked any real personality. Panto characters need to be caricatures, so their individual quirks need to be exaggerated. That said, a competent performance with lots of potential from Lorna, I feel.

Casting Vicki Arnold as Witch Gothel was ideal. Dramatically striking in appearance; a strong, confident performance; excellent, clear projection and a nice sideline in sarcasm. Vicki uses the stage well and has a good general awareness in her interaction with other characters and handled props naturally.

As already alluded to, Vicki's performance of Cry Me A River was superb, I'm just not convinced it was the correct song choice for the character.

The pantomime clowns are rarely easy roles to play as you're having to mostly apply children's humour in such a way which will also be appreciated by adults. Pam Walters and Tom Weller were totally committed to the roles of Curly and Bob, with some great timing for the knockabout scenes and good pratfalls, which seemed well rehearsed, along with use of props. Some of the lines did feel a bit laboured though. I think this was because some puns were delivered in such a way as if being said by a child, rather than an idiotic adult. It was a positive performance from both Pam and Tom with a strong ability in the physical comedy, but perhaps not pitched quite right for some of the dialogue.

Playing the eponymous female role can sometimes be a challenge to make into anything especially interesting. Hannah Clare, as Rapunzel, all pretty in lilac, did make the most of the character when given the opportunity. Clare successfully managed to convey the various emotions of Rapunzel, from naivety and innocence, through to love, joy and sadness. It was another confident and competent performance, with songs well managed. The long golden hair was also handled effortlessly, as though she'd had to deal with it for years, so well done to Clare and whoever was responsible for making it workable.

Both Nadeem Valecha and Susan Pickles certainly created eccentric characters for King Geoffrey and Queen Gertrude. They really 'performed' throughout *Be Our Guest*, to great effect. Susan in particular, consistently reacted to others' lines appropriately, but this also applied to filling in some pauses in Nadeem's line pick up. Not sure if it was lack of rehearsal or confidence on the night, but Nadeem has a naturally good stage presence and is expressive and able to create a fun character, so perhaps he just needs to have more confidence in himself?

Sarah Rankin, Liberty Groves and Josie Blackburn displayed individual characters as Gracie, Lacie and Macie, which was nice, rather than all being generic 'villagers' reacting in the same way to everything. If anything, the various character traits could have been more exaggerated, to accentuate their individuality... especially given it's panto. It's better to be 'over the top' in rehearsal and have the director rein things back a bit, if need be. Josie, in particular, has a naturally open and expressive face, and generally looked as though she was having a lovely time on stage, which I found very endearing.

Well done to Roger Blackman for keeping going up against the advances of Dame Trixie, as the Captain of the Guard. There were some very funny moments between the two, and the Tango was especially enjoyable. I would encourage Roger not to look down so much.

On the subject of 'looking down', I would like to set a challenge to all future directors (of ANY company) to discourage their cast from looking up unnecessarily. It happened a few times throughout *Rapunzel* but it usually follows a line containing the word 'where'. ie 'Where is everyone?'....which is then followed by looking up. Whoever looks up when looking for someone?

Overall, *Rapunzel* had a great pace thanks to a confident cast, a technical team being on the ball, and good staging. As a Society, Riverside Players are to be congratulated for staging a good quality theatrical experience and maintaining strong production values. Not to say that there aren't improvements which could be made from a staging point of view, however I feel that expectations are already exceeded, so I encourage RP to maintain their standards in this respect.

In terms of performance, RP do have a strong core of actors, who have a multitude of talents, especially singing.

The area most in need of attention is dancing. Not so much 'choreography' because all levels of ability (or inability) need to be considered and catered for, however there is a inconsistency in performance.

With company numbers such as Be Our Guest, it's more about company movement which everyone should be able to cope well. It needn't be complex as something as simple as an arm movement in unison, or having everyone waving with the same hand... as in the Finale, can be impressive. Where everyone SHOULD be doing the same moves... they need to DO the same moves and get timing right! I noticed this especially in Rolling On The River, which didn't seem very together. Only practice can get this right, and don't forget to SMILE (...if appropriate of course).

For all the pointers and opinions expressed in my report, this production perfectly demonstrates the excellent standard of production which can be reached in community theatre. With limited facilities and time at the venue, maintaining high production values can be challenging, however with planning and focus RPs' hard work paid off.

Thank you to all at RP for a lovely evening of good company and entertainment.

Terry Hunt. - NODA Rep – London Region, District 14