

Society : Riverside Players  
Production : Beauty and the Beast  
Date : 13/12/24  
Venue : Old Memorial Hall, Windsor  
District : 14

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Show Report

## **Overall Impression**

Beauty and the Beast is a tale as old as time made famous by the Disney Musical, but Alex Jackson's script embraces the idea of pantomime with a different take on the story introducing a Dame and her comic son and a battle between a good fairy and a demonic one.

The cursed transformation from benevolent Prince to the hirsute Beast is less dramatic as he becomes a hairier grumpy version of himself as the story unfolds concerned over someone taking a book from his library without permission. It is a less dramatic plot and curiously means that Belle knows all along that he is a cursed man rather than a Beast that needs to be tamed.

The essential requirement for amateur pantomime is enough parts for the society members to get stuck into and a host of additional characters are in the show including a Princess, and her maid, a fairy apprentice, chambermaids as well as the usual French servants. This means that the Beast is hardly an isolated abandoned man but rather constantly surrounded by a caring team of supporters.

The result elevates the role of the Dame and her son to deliver the jokes and a prolonged bedroom scene and Skeleton sketch over the romance between Beauty and the Beast. It is a fun and entertaining romp which drew a standing ovation, but it is a long way from the drama and emotional heart of the Disney version.

## **Cast**

Once again it is wonderful to see so many familiar faces returning from last year's pantomime and building on their experience. It creates the sense of a community working together as an Ensemble to develop their skills and having fun together. It was especially good to see the younger cast members confidently deliver their roles.

**Jessica Davies** continues to grow as an actress, following last year's Miss Muffet, she wonderfully fills the role of Belle showing a good range of emotions in reacting to the other characters while conveying the sense of an innocent caring happy young woman. She also showed some good comic timing in setting up gags with repeated lines in the early scene. Her captivating smile and lovely voice was particularly good in "A thousand years" and in "The Joker and the Queen" where she confidently led the singing.

**Theo Fletcher** and **Ciara Bourne** made very smart apprentice Valet and cute beginner Fairy respectively. They both spoke with strong clear confident voices and very much looked their parts. Fairy Adore's short ballet dance in Act 2 was charming.

**Alex Taggart** as Prince Louis was almost too kind and gentle to generate any fear of the Beast and his gradual transformation into hairiness made the challenge to differentiate the two sides of the personality much harder to convey. His best moment came in the plaintive “Human” where his pleading gentle rendition did convey his feelings.

**Bob Wells and Adam Drummey** made a very strong double act as Dame Betty and her son Benny. They created distinctive strong characters with a good comic timing and delivery and plenty of energy and stage presence. The Dame’s banter with an audience member was handled very well and well sustained, while the enthusiastic Benny maintained his shout out and call backs to keep the audience involved. They were at their best in the front cloth scenes chatting to the audience. The long and rather weak Bedroom scene had some good ideas but was rather slow paced and with a poor payoff. It was a lovely moment with the sneeze shutting the Armour helmet and I enjoyed the Greg Wallace gag! The DJ routine was another good idea that did not work well enough.

The battle of the fairies was also enjoyable to watch with **Janna Fletcher’s** charming, accented Fairy Amour being a very good match for **Vicki Arnold’s** very posh Demon Vanite who spoke with great clarity and diction. I enjoyed her delivery of “Love doesn’t stand a chance” very much.

**Simon Arnold** made an excellent first impression as Gaviscon with a wonderful delivery of “The Best” partly due to his well stuffed tunic but also with his confident energetic movement and delightful comically pursed lips. The blow-up sax solo was a lovely bit of business. We needed to see more of this character and the comic potential of the bush disguise scene in Act 2 could have been developed.

Princess Florentine and Fifi played by **Samantha McCormack and Josie Clarke** added a fresh modern twist to the tale as influencers with camera in hand. They both had very good stage presence and moved and sang well in their numbers. As always to can spot the choreographer in the dance routines as they move with more precision and surety than other cast members!

The servants of Chateau all created distinctive and well-defined characters with a French flavour. **Jill Dady** as H’ousekeepere, **Jenny Hazell** as an animated Gardiniere, **Glenn O’Mara-Baldwin** as Cuisiniere and **Helen Clarke and Eliese Holdsworth** as the maids made a good team. Each had a moment centre stage with **Dady** delivering the romantic verse gag well, **O’Mara- Baldwin** responding well as the over excited Chef, **Hazell** spraying the bushes, and **Holdsworth** grabbed her moment to overreact as Villager no. 3! The maids also added sweetly to the Belle transformation scene. **Lorna Jupp-Rowlands** and **Annabel Wilson** supported well as the Villagers, and I suspect the Skeltons!

## Creative

I felt the script was less successful than last year’s Old Mother Hubbard and it would be interesting to know what additional material was added to the licenced script by **Simon Arnold** and Director **Kay Smith**. The localisation was very well done with references to Englefield Green etc and the topical references to Greg Wallace and Trump worked. The basic story was weakened by the fact that Belle knew who the Prince was throughout. The Bedroom, DJ routine and Bush scenes were good ideas, but the execution and pace was not sharp enough or the payoff big enough to really work, although they had their moments! The sweet handing out tradition is still too slow and needs some banter or interaction to build it up.

**Mark Hasting’s** musical selection was good with a strong rock vibe and with choreographers **Vicki Arnold and Josie Clarke** set up some good dance routines. There was good opening scene setters for each Act with “Good day to have a great day” and “September”, great fun with “The Best” and “Does

your mother know”, good solos for Vanite and The Beast , and a good sense of rebellious violence in “We’re not gonna take it”. **Hastings’** sound and effects were well balanced and cued. The lighting by **Jonathan Stacey and Kay Smith** was effective with good red and blue washes and some good use of the mover spots. The projected images over the proscenium arch of the logo , mirror images and song sheet words were very clear and effective.

The staging under **Pip Olding** was very efficient with well managed scene changes and good use of the front cloth to sustain the pace of the show. The backcloths and painted flats set the scenes well and the petal drop effect stage left was outstanding and even better than the usual smaller version seen in this title’s shows. The Props by **Mark Hasting, Kay Smith and Pam Walters** looked the part with a safe pair of garden shears, a good-looking handheld mirror, appropriate books for the joke titles and a practical bed. The ballroom table looked a bit scruffy and the screen in the ballroom seemed unnecessary unless Belle was going to transform her look during the scene. The three armour helmets also worked very well adding to the comic possibilities.

The costumes and make up by **Kay Smith, Susan Bell, Lorna Jupp- Rowland and Susan Pickles** all looked good with lovely gowns for Belle, Vanite, an amusing tunic for Gaviscon, very good matching outfits for Amour and Adore, and excellent character enhancing costumes for the Chateau staff. The Dame’s and fairy make up was very well done but the Beast facial make up until he put in mask was unconvincing.

The programme design was simple although it would have been interesting to have a couple of lines of Bio on each performer and the NODA logo was out of date. Full details on correct Logo is here: [Programme and Poster Competition - NODA](#)

As always there was a warm welcome front of house and a great atmosphere in the Hall.

This is lovely warm welcoming society and another well executed show and although the pantomime business was not as strong as last year, the cast and crew put on an excellent show with some lovely moments in song and dance and wonderful audience interactions.

I wish everyone a happy Christmas and a successful 2025 .

Nick Humby  
District 14