

Society : Riverside Players
Production : The Pied Piper of Hamelin
Written By : Limelight Scripts
Date : 11/12/25
Venue : Memorial Hall, Old Windsor
District : 14
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

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[Show Report](#)

It was a pleasure to stand in for Charlotte Gouldsmith-Leigh to review Riverside Players' production of The Pied Piper of Hamelin. It is always nice to venture out of my normal NODA patch to visit other societies and my trip to Old Windsor saw the first of this season's pantomimes for me. Thank you to director Simon for welcoming me and for telling me a bit about the society and the production.

This was a new version of The Pied Piper of Hamelin adapted by Limelight Scripts with an array of different characters and, instead of the evil protagonist being King Rat, it was a 'friend' of his, Gisela an ex-witch. The traditional tale, of the town of Hamelin being infested by a plague of rats which are lured away by the Pied Piper remained the same, but in this version, it was Gisela who stole the Piper's wage and encouraged him to get his revenge by kidnapping the village Children. Luckily in 'panto land', there is always a happy ending and Dame Stella Strudal, her sons, the Burgermeister and his daughter were on hand to rescue the children and thwart Gisela and her sidekicks Frank and Furter.

This was an enjoyable pantomime, full of original corny jokes and audience interaction, a messy scene which led to those of us on the front few rows getting a little wet and the fool getting a pie in his face. There were many exuberant and funny performances as you would expect in a pantomime and a lot of fun was had by both the cast and audience. The show had been well cast with some strong performances from the principals and the ensemble. Pantomimes often have very large casts, but this one with just 14 performers gave everyone the chance to shine and epitomised what village pantomimes should be about. It had lots of laughs, plenty of fun and energetic performances for the audience to enjoy, all supported by good tech and an efficient backstage team.

Cast

Vicki Arnold (Gisela, an ex-witch)

Vicki gave an excellent and compelling performance as Gisela, and was clearly revelling in playing the baddie, rotten to the core! She had great stage presence and was always in control of the proceedings. Delivering her lines with just the right amount of menace and a little hint of mischief, she interacted well with the audience, with lots of evil facial expressions and a wonderful cackle each time she left the stage. Vicki sang very well with a rich tone, good tuning and dynamics. I particularly enjoyed her performance of 'I Want It All' which she led with excellent expression and bags of menace. Her trio with Frank and Furter to 'Money, Money, Money' showed that as well as being a good singer, Vicki is also an accomplished and talented dancer, and this was another engaging and enjoyable number.

Alex Taggart (Otto Strudel, Stella's idiot son)

Alex played the part of the clumsy, but likeable idiot son of the dame very well. He was very engaging and established a good rapport with the audience straight away, with all his doughnut jokes. He had great energy running round the stage with bounce and enthusiasm. He was very funny in this role without being over the top. He was a little less assured in his singing and got a little muddled with the song lines, but this did not detract from his enjoyable performance. He threw himself into the messy scene with enthusiasm, not batting an eyelid when sneezing into the flour or being pried in the face.

John Aherne (Dame Stella Strudel, the Deli owner)

John interacted well with the audience and had them following his every word, particularly audience member Adam who was selected for a little personal attention and innuendo, but he took all with good humour. John certainly looked the part in his bright dotty outfits, colourful wigs and wonderful makeup. He engaged very well with the other members of the cast, particularly with his son Otto with whom he gave a very comical performance, and also the unfortunate Burgermeister who was the object of Dame Stella's 'romantic' advances! Together with Alex (Otto), John gave us a well-rehearsed messy scene with plenty of laughs. He sang with all the enthusiasm of a pantomime dame and maintained his chosen 'dame voice' in both his spoken and musical lines.

Roger Blackman (Klaus Kringle, Hamelin's Burgermeister)

Roger was perfectly bumbling and ineffectual as the town Burgermeister. At times he looked rather confused by the proceedings, so it was not surprising that he managed to lose a fortune and cause the town's children to be kidnapped. Roger had great comic timing and some wonderful facial expressions, especially when Dame Stella was flirting with him and he dealt with all the innuendos and physicality she threw at him without batting an eyelid. He just looked uncomfortable with her advances and gave perfect side-eye expressions to the audience.

Josie Clarke (Hans Strudel, Stella's sensible son)

Josie had good energy as the principal boy and commanded the stage with good physicality. She had lovely chemistry with Ingrid and a grudging tolerance of her brother Otto, and her mother the dame. She sang with clarity and a strong tuneful voice, and her duet 'Nice to Meet You' with Ingrid was well sung with some lovely harmony. Josie also led the song 'The Wonder of You', with Otto and Stella, coping well with their stupidity as she tried to keep them under control. Her interaction with Pete the sound man as he had to keep restarting the song for her was very well done. Josie danced very well with clean and precise movements and great musicality and looked like she was thoroughly enjoying herself on stage in the musical numbers.

Eloise Holdsworth (Ingrid Kringle, the Burgermeister's daughter)

Eloise played Ingrid with a delightful sweetness and a little bit of sass as she joined her father and the Strudels in their quest to rid the town of rats and rescue the children. She spoke with clarity and charm delivering her lines with good expression and characterisation. She was initially quite quiet when she started singing, but her volume increased as she grew in confidence, and she sang some lovely harmonies in the duet 'Nice to Meet You', with Hans. Eloise had a beautiful beaming smile which lit up her face, and embodied what pantomime is all about.

Janna Fletcher (The Pied Piper)

Janna started off playing the Pied Piper with an unassuming quietness, but as her anger rose at the being cheated out of her fee, she became more confident and assertive with some very meaningful facial expressions. She had a lovely resonant singing voice, leading the villagers and baddies in 'Keep on Moving with assurance.

Jill Dady (Frank) & **Helen Clarke** (Furter) (the comic villains)

These two worked perfectly together as the comic villains complimenting each other with great characterisations and comic timing. Arriving to the theme tune of Laurel and Hardy meant that we immediately knew that there was going to be hilarity and physicality in their performances, and we were not disappointed. Jill played the straight allegedly more intelligent of the two, and Helen was her dense sidekick. They played off each other very well as it became increasingly clear that they were both as useless as each other! They sang and danced well in 'Money, Money, Money' giving great support to Gisela in this number.

Theo Fletcher (Frederick), **Claire Whitehill** (Helga) **Ciara Bourne, Ellia Webb, & Beth Whitehill**
(Ensemble of villagers and rats)

Theo looked to be relishing his cameo role as Frederick, causing a great deal of hilarity as he hobbled on with a crutch as the young child who was left behind. He got a little muddled with his lines and ended up laughing at himself which was quite endearing. I am sure he will have learnt a lot from being in this show which he can take forward into the future.

Playing Helga, one of the distraught mothers, **Claire** had loads of character and threw herself into the drama. She delivered her lines very clearly face on to the audience, but turning a little towards the character she was speaking to would make her line delivery look a little more natural.

As villagers, baddies and rats, the **ensemble** joined in the group numbers with lots of enthusiasm lending volume and colour to the proceedings. They were strong in voice giving excellent support to the principals and led many of the group dances showing their talent as dancers. Always in character they acted and reacted very well to what was going on around them, contributing to the overall flavour of the pantomime. I loved the scene with the rats being chased out of Hamelin with each of the ensemble handling their multiple marionette puppet rats very well as they ran around the stage. This was such an imaginative idea as it meant that there appeared to be a plague of rats and was different to other versions of this story where the ensemble themselves were the rats.

Creatives

Simon Arnold (Director, with cameos as Spiderman, a Knight & Father Christmas!)

Simon clearly understands how to direct a good pantomime and had ensured that all the actors both principals and ensemble were well prepared and understood their characters and how they fitted together in the story. Each cast member delivered their character and their interactions very well and they had developed their chemistry so that they were very natural together. Pantomime is full of fun for all the family and Simon and his cast made sure that the jokes were delivered with perfect timing and there was just enough audience interaction for it to be enjoyable without getting out of hand. There were a lot of clever directorial decisions which enhanced the production. Creatively, the rat marionettes were great and enabled the small ensemble to handle a good number of rats which looked like a plague of rats. The messy scene was well controlled so that the stage did not become a safety hazard but still gave enough mess to be funny. There was also some well-designed action in front of the tabs which kept the audience's attention whilst set changes were undertaken backstage. The song 'If I Was Not in Pantomime' was an excellent distraction and very funny with lots of good props. The audience participation song also did the trick and I liked having the words in the programme which meant that the cast were not having to manage large unwieldy boards with words. Particularly clever and original was having Otto and the Dame coming into the audience to hand out a sweet to every member of the audience, a nice touch.

Simon is also a very accomplished comedy actor, and his three cameos were hilarious. Great facial expressions, wonderful physicality and perfect comic timing in all three 😊.

Vicki Arnold (Musical Director)

As well as playing Gisela, Vicki had worked with the cast so that they all confidently performed each song. It is not easy to sing to a backing track without an MD to bring you in, but the cast had been well rehearsed so that they were obviously confident to come in at the right time. The solos and duets were in the most part sung with good tuning and expression and some lovely harmony. The company numbers were performed with good volume, and great gusto.

Vicki Arnold & Josie Clarke (Choreographers)

Vicki and Josie had choreographed some clever routines with synchronised movements which all the cast had mastered very well. The choreography for 'Money, Money, Money' was especially enjoyable with some quite intricate choreography which Gisela and Frank and Furter danced very well. There

were clearly some accomplished dancers amongst the principals and the ensemble who led the dances, and everyone looked to be enjoying themselves. There was lots of energy on stage and the dances were a joy to watch.

Pete Ashton (Sound & Effects)

The show started with some rousing music to get us all in the mood and continued throughout. All the cast had head microphones and the sound balance between the singers and the tracks was excellent. The interaction between Hans and Pete whilst Dame Stella and Otto were messing about and getting the song words wrong was brilliantly timed. The sound effects were plentiful and perfectly timed for the action adding to the humour and hilarity. The thunder sound effect was so realistic that it made me jump!

Jonathan Stacey & Lorna Jupp-Rowlands (Lighting)

The stage was well lit with all areas covered. There were different lighting effects and colour washes which added to the atmosphere and the action. The lightening effect was very striking and timed perfectly with the sound effect. I really liked the coloured strip lights around the stage opening and these were very effective at adding impact as they changed colour during the songs.

Pip Olding & Susan Pickles (Stage Managers) with **Freya Wakelam & Pam Walters** (Stage Crew)

Pip, Susan and their team succeeded in ensuring that the show ran very smoothly from start to finish. The scene changes were managed behind the tabs whilst there was action in front and seemed to go ahead smoothly and slickly without any problems.

Simon Arnold (Stage Planner) with **Roger Blackman, & the Cast** (Set Construction)

The set had been designed with several painted drops to depict the different locations; the village, Stella's deli and the cave to name a few. The drops were very imaginative and well designed for the story. In front of the tabs were two constructed entrances stage right and left which gave an easy entrance from behind the tabs to the front of the stage. The cave had been designed in 3D with a sliding cave entrance which was effective. The set was well dressed for each of the scenes and there were plenty of appropriate props, particularly in the song 'If I Were Not in Pantomime' and in the messy scene. In the kitchen was an impressive oven which I presume was built by **Pam Walters** (Special Props Creator).

Helen Clarke (Costume Co-ordinator) with **Susan Bell & the Cast** (Stitchers) and **Lorna Jupp-Rowlands & Susan Pickles** (Specialist Makeup)

All the costumes were excellent and very colourful. Dame Stella and Otto wore vibrantly colourful clothes, Otto in rather fine checked dungarees and odd coloured socks and Dame Stella in several bright polka dot dresses with matching wigs. Wicked ex-witch Gisela looked the part in her black and purple dress and wig which were worked perfectly for her, and Frank and Furter looked great in their patched suits. Hans' principal boy shorts, fishnet tights and tunic set him apart from his idiot brother and Ingrid was perfect in her pretty pastel dresses. The Burgermeister's long coat gave him an air of superiority fitting for the town mayor, but he seemed to be having some trouble with it falling off his shoulder. The pied piper was dressed as one would expect in a pied costume of two contrasting colours.

The make-up team had done a very good job of the dame's make-up which was suitably over the top and Gisela's make-up which gave her a dark and sinister look.

Vicki Arnold (Programme) with **George Riddell & Jeff Whitehill** (Photography)

The programme with a brightly coloured design on the front had pictures of all the cast and a list of the scenes and songs. It also included the words for the audience participations song and a word search with all the pantomime characters included. I had fun completing that, I do like a puzzle!

Congratulations to all the cast and creatives for a very enjoyable pantomime and thank you for making me feel so welcome.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative on behalf of Charlotte Gouldsmith-Leigh (District 14)