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Society : Shinfield Players Theatre
Production : Aladdin and the Valley of the Dragons
Date : 21/01/2023
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to your production of Aladdin and the Valley of the Dragons. Director Carol Vockins wrote the script originally in 2006 and updated it for this year's January Pantomime. The show had all the elements of a traditional pantomime, but with a running time of three hours it did feel rather too long. As with most pantomimes, on the night I watched, the actors loved to ad lib and interact with the audience leading to much laughter and enjoyment. Maybe some judicious trimming of the lengthier parts of the script would have pre-empted this ad-libbing to keep the show to a more manageable length. Nevertheless, the show was very enjoyable with some excellent performances.

Cast

Charley Caswell (Aladdin) was dynamic and moved around the stage with great energy giving an excellent performance as the principal boy and always in character. She was cheeky and had lovely facial expressions both in her interactions with other characters and in her reactions to what was going on around her. Her chemistry with her brother Wishey Washey was very natural and comfortable. Charley was very expressive in her dialogue and her scream when she first saw the dragon was brilliant as well as being comical. She had a lovely singing voice and sang with expression, good dynamics, tuning and a pleasant richness of tone.

Gordon Bird (Widow Twankey) was the perfect Dame with bags of energy, exaggerated gestures, and a lovely, gossipy persona. Gordon had excellent comic timing and held the audience in the palms of his hands. His ad-libbing was comical without being over the top, and he certainly endeared himself to everyone. He engaged well with the other actors and brought some lovely physical comedy in his duet "Wild Thing" with the Yeti and "Boom Bang a Bang" with Abanazer. He had clear diction and an appropriately falsetto "Damey" voice both in his dialogue and his singing.

George Apap (Abanazar) was excellent as the pantomime baddie, and this was probably the best performance I have seen him give. George was deliciously evil with the audience booing as soon as he entered the stage. He was sly and scheming and clearly revelled in playing the baddie, and with his raspy voice, evil laugh and superb physicality he also looked the part. George was always in character and developed a clever use of his viper cane to hypnotise the other characters. His rendition of “Bad” had an element of mischievousness and his duet “Boom Bang a Bang” with the dame was hilarious.

Zoë Keys (Princess Lotus Blossom) definitely captured the character of the petulant, spoilt teenage princess, with her pouting looks and stropmy delivery of her dialogue. Developing more of the softer side to her character though would have given some contrast to her feisty side, particularly when interacting with Aladdin. Zoe had clarity to her singing voice, and sang with good phrasing and dynamics, but was at times somewhat less assured on the higher notes.

Janine McCoull (Mayling) gave a wonderful performance as Lotus Blossom’s maid with lots of character to her acting. Her frustration with the Princess was clear and her chemistry and comically romantic interaction with Wishey Washey was excellent. Janine sang with a rich tone and her duet “Walking on Sunshine” with Wishey Washey was great. This was, I believe, her first time singing a solo, so well done. I really enjoyed it, as did the audience, I’m sure.

Matthew Daniell (Wishey Washey) created a really likable character as Aladdin’s brother, bringing a charm to the role with plenty of energy and an engaging smile. He established a good rapport with the other characters and was always in role. He had great chemistry with Aladdin – this rapport being one of the highlights of the show – and his ‘girlfriend’ Mayling bringing some delightful interactions with them both. Matt sang well, leading the cast in “Walking on Sunshine” and “Bag Wash” which was another highlight.

Karen Bird (Pong) and **Derek Lockwood** (Wong) bounced off each other very well, mimicking one another with great humour and comic timing. Derek had developed the character of a slightly dense, but endearing youngster getting everything ‘wong’ except when he got it right! Karen with her

perfectly timed throwaway comments brought some lovely humour whenever a gap needed filling. Both spoke clearly and they led the audience participation song with appropriate enthusiasm.

Nadine Masseron (Genie) really looked the part playing the powerful spirit who lived in the lamp. She was a sharp witted “Essex girl” with a love of Reality Shows on TV who enjoyed answering back to Abanazer. Nadine showed lovely contrasts in character and skilfully acted the genie’s struggle with granting wishes to the owner of her lamp with guilt over having to perform magic that was not good.

Kaitlyn Chishick (Ping Ling) as Aladdin’s pet monkey was loyal to her master carrying out tasks even if she didn’t want to. Kaitlyn did not have any lines but communicated with the other characters with head movements and gestures, all performed effectively and characterfully.

Philippe Duquenoy (Emperor), although this was a small part, Philippe made a big impression. He had excellent characterisation as the elderly Emperor from his doddering gait to his wavering voice. He was clearly protective of his daughter, wanting to keep her safe, but also keen to marry her off so that he could replenish the Royal coffers he’d emptied to build The Great Wall. Philippe was always in character; reacting to what was happening on stage. His singing voice was rich, and tuneful and he sang his solo “Money, Money, Money” perfectly in character. This was a very enjoyable performance indeed.

Lucy Bolton (Empress) was serene and sedate in her role as the Empress. She had good chemistry with the Emperor, and, whilst clearly showing her frustration in her response to her husband’s decisions, she obviously still adored him. Lucy’s lines were delivered with perfect timing but on one or two occasions she could have been projected a little more.

Simon Trinder (Ni Hi) was serious and steady in his portrayal of the Emperor’s tax collector. He had good clear diction and was imposing in his stance.

Maggie Smith (Gate Keeper) As the mythical keeper of the dragon’s gate, Maggie really looked the part, dressed all in red. She was gracious and ethereal and spoke with a mysterious enigmatic voice as

she guided Aladdin and Ping Ling through the gate into the Valley of the Dragons. The character of the Gate Keeper is an excellent element of this script, contrasting superbly with the other characters and adding to the richness of the show.

Martyn Washburn (See All) was uncouth and bitter as the old woman who had been banished by her master, a sorcerer, for losing the magic lamp. He maintained his characterful old lady voice throughout, giving Abanazer as good as he got, but both actors should take a little care not to be too coarse in their ad-libbed lines.

Matthew Chishick (Voice of the Dragon and Guard) had gravitas and mystery as the voice of the dragon. He delivered the lines with clarity really making us feeling sympathy for the dragon even though he had stolen Widow Twankey's profits. As the guard, he brought some lovely humour, just in his facial expressions and physicality. He led the group in "I Saw a Dragon" well and sang with a rich, clear and tuneful voice.

Rebecca Chishick (Lychee) was definitely a little dragon with attitude! Despite having no lines, Rebecca with her dragon hands on her hips and a cheeky tilt of her head communicated volumes. Very well done!

Joe Richardson (Yeti and Guard) gave a lovely comic turn as the Yeti on a scooter. His dance with the dame to "Wild Thing" was hilarious.

Beth Everied, Naomi Sutton and Benita Venables (Dancers) These three interacted well with the main characters in Old Peking, joining in the group songs and dances. As the three demons, they performed their dance well with some lovely leaps and pirouettes.

Jamie Mansfield (Fled Erriott, Townsman) Jamie had a beguiling comic character as the townsman Fled. His repetition of the ends of his lines and his northern accent gave the audience some laughs even though it was a little unusual to hear the accent in Ancient China! His diction and volume were excellent and his singing in the audience participation song was strong.

Creatives

Carol Vockins (Director) assisted by **Graham Vockins** (Producer). Having written this pantomime and directed it in 2006, it was clearly a personal project for Carol to update it and bring it back to the Shinfield stage again in 2023. Carol had written an interesting adaptation with some clever story lines and imaginative features. Together with Graham, she had clearly worked very hard to bring together all the very many elements required to manage a show of this size, as well as being personally involved in many of the backstage tasks. As director, she had worked with the cast and production team to bring the show to the stage and even though it would have benefitted from a little more pace in places, the result was a great success, with the audience enjoying and participating enthusiastically.

Pippa Eden (Musical Director) Skilfully led the four-piece band to accompany the singers and led the cast in their performance of the songs. It is always so much of a treat to have a well-directed live band in a show.

Gilly Meeks (Choreographer) had choreographed simple but effective and vibrant routines that made good use of repeated patterns which were extremely effective. The cast had been well trained, and all looked comfortable and performed with great energy and enjoyment.

Sam Turner (Stage Manager) assisted by **Members of the Theatre**. The stage was well managed with the entrances and exits being kept clear so that the large cast could access the stage unimpeded. As there were pyro's for the entrance of the genie, I am sure that the cast were glad to be in the hands of a very experienced stage manager and pyro technician (**Graham Vockins**).

There were very many set changes with drops, trucks and set pieces which needed to be moved. These set changes were slick and did not delay the action. However, as the majority of the set changes occurred in a black out, the addition of scene change music in the longer changes of set would have been beneficial.

Matthew Chishick (Lighting Design) and **Graeme Rhodes** (Lighting Operator) The lighting had been well designed meaning that the stage was well lit, and spots were used appropriately. The use of a

green wash for the cave scene was very effective and the UV lighting for the dragon's flight very creative. Adding a spooky lighting effect for the demon's dance would have made it more sinister and increased the element of fear felt by Aladdin, Ping Ling and Lychee. The effect of turning on the stage lights when the light switch on the rock was pressed was perfectly timed and a very funny and surprising addition.

Pete Ashton (Sound Design and Operator) The sound was very well balanced between the band and the cast in the musical numbers and at no time did the band overpower the singing. Using mics for the principal singers meant that they did not need to strain and could be heard well over the band. The sound effects were appropriate and very well cued. The electric whisk in particular worked well, and I really liked the echoey voice effect used for Abanazer when he was at his most evil.

Graham Vockins (Set Design) with **Di Capel and Natalie Clarke** (Scenic Artists) assisted by **Tim Howling, Yvonne Mitchell, Graham Smith, Steve Toon, Sam Turner, Carol Vockins, Kriss Vockins and Debbie Wheeler** (Set Construction) and **Donna Hutt and Carol Vockins** (Set Dressing)

The set had been very well designed with some excellent hand painted drops and set pieces. The drops for Old Peking, the gardens and the cave were very effective and really added to the authenticity and atmosphere. There were some clever set pieces including a realistic boulder and a decorated gate to the valley of the Dragons. The steamer in Widow Twankey's laundry complete with bubbles and the dragon with an opening mouth, lights and smoke were very effective. Raising the dragon head up from the floor, however, would have been beneficial as it was often blocked by the cast so that some of the excellent effects were lost.

Carol Vockins (Wardrobe Mistress) assisted by **Debbie Wheeler**. The colourful and authentic costumes were excellent and really enhanced the production. Abanazer really looked the part dressed in black and gold, and Widow Twankey's dresses were all very appropriate for a dame. The kimonos, Chinese tunics and trousers were fabulous and definitely transported me to ancient China. The costumes for the genie and the keeper of the gate were excellent and very much added to their mystique. I really liked the hats with pigtails at the back but tucking them in for those actors who had their own hair in pigtails would have avoided some of the cast having three pigtails. I was a little

distracted by Lotus Blossom's high heels particularly when she stomped across the stage and whilst high heels potentially worked for the mythical characters, flat shoes or sandals would have been more authentic for a princess in ancient China. Similarly, sandals for the dame and furry feet for the Yeti would have been more authentic than black leather office shoes. Shoes apart, the costumes were very well thought out, brilliantly colourful and looked spectacular.

Debbie Wheeler (Properties) assisted by **Graham Smith and Carol Vockins**. The props were plentiful and appropriate, complementing each of the settings. The vendors stalls were excellently dressed and the props in Twankey's "Wash and Nosh" were well thought out and worked well. The addition of a 'flat and stretched' Wishey Washey coming out from the mangle was a very clever and amusing touch, it was just a shame that Wong did not hold its head up so that the audience could see that it was Wishey Washey.

Pam Dennis (Hair and Make Up) There were a lot of excellent wigs, not least those worn by Widow Twankey and they certainly added to the spectacle. The Empress and Mayling had lovely wigs which suited their characters perfectly. I am not sure if there was a specific reason for Lotus Blossom having her blond hair plaited rather than wearing a dark wig which would have looked more authentic? The make-up was well done, and no-one looked pale on stage. There was some lovely eye make-up, for the women and the Dame and Abanazer looked particularly fine.

Congratulations to the director and all the cast on transporting us to the Valley of the Dragons and for your energetic and enthusiastic production. I look forward to returning for you next production.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative