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Brantham Amateur Theatrical Society (BATS), 23 Feb 2019

Arrrr arrr arrr – it was away to the high seas with not one but two sets of pirates and dames in February when the Brantham Amateur Theatrical Society (BATS) set sail for four performances of the original pantomime, *Off to Treasure Island*.

In Lisa Butler's script, rival pirate crews – the fully female collective of the Saucy Sue and the 'only men allowed' gang of the Dirty Den – are competing for ownership of a treasure map. This being a panto, mistaken identities, a bit of romance, a talking animal that's cleverer than its owner and bawdy humour are all part of the ocean journey, at the hands of an energetic and enthusiastic cast. And befitting a sea yarn, there are plenty of threats around walking the plank, rubbish food produced by a ship's cook, and many tankards of ale!

Directed by Val Eldridge with singing direction by Len Stockdale and children's direction by Alice Harris, *Off to Treasure Island* provided more than 40 performers of all ages a golden opportunity to dress up in deftly-executed costumes and, for many, play several roles.

Pleasingly too, unlike the usual catalogue of pop songs that run through most pantomimes, the music utilised here consisted of well-loved sea chanteys and folk tunes, a refreshing and highly relevant choice. The band Rockin' Motion supplied the musicianship, from whistle and ukulele, to double bass and violin, and their musical interludes lent tuneful vibrancy to the goings-on. The Irish-style dancing performed as the major choreography element was also a real asset to the production, under the direction of choreographer Frankie Swan.

As, respectively, the dowdy Dame Dolly Dumpling of the Dirty Den and flamboyant Dame Long Legs Silver of the Saucy Sue, Geoff Hewitson and Mark Hinson charmingly demonstrated that two dames at sea are better than one. An episode in which the duo competes to create the best cake was a bright twist on the traditional scene in which the dame and the script's dim-witted foil attempt to complete some task.

Pippa Revell cut an authoritative figure as Captain Zelda of the Saucy Sue, keeping her crew in line throughout the journey, and Faith Arnold was a sassy Pretty Polly, first mate on the Saucy Sue and romantic

interest for Roger (Lauren Mercer), her opposite on the Dirty Den. Sophie Mercer was heroic Jane, a tavern skivvy turned seafaring adventurer accompanied on the Saucy Sue and guided by her savvy cat Ginger (a knowing Rosemary Butler). They were supported vociferously by quite a crew of women, and the twins Topsy (Jessica Ford) and Turvey (Amber Fisher).

Of the Dirty Den crew, Arjan van Heuveln was a stand-out as Cut-throat Kurt, successfully meeting the challenge of shifting vocal octaves as the story progressed. Ben Wilkinson also made himself known as the promotion-hunting Half-pint Percy, and Rob Warne as Captain Bertie Bones epitomised the rough-edged pirate captain of lore, who turns out to be a man with a secret.

Chorus member David Mitchell did a yeoman's job in a speaking role as the Tavern Owner, delivering a nicely tuned performance.

Other key points:

- The Rat Gang's Steampunk-style headgear was fun and added a raffish note to their look. Well done to wardrobe mistress Tina Burns!
- Narrator sprites Windy and Salty (Geneva Downes and Emily Jamieson) looked lovely and worked hard onstage; unfortunately, they seemed to be late arriving onstage from the back of the auditorium for every cue, and playing catch-up to get there dragged down the pacing.
- Sound equipment problems – crackling, primarily – popped up during the performance, distracting the audience from the action onstage.
- For the matinee audience, consisting of a fair few toddlers, the show was probably half an hour too long; a scene or two could potentially be cut, even for adult viewers.

This production had a number of strengths, from the music selection, band and choreography to several very strong performances, a script with nice twists on the standard panto, super costumes, and a cast that clearly loved what they were doing. Congratulations!

