

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOW CASE FESTIVAL 2021/2022

ADJUDICATION

Group	Brantham Amateur Theatrical Society
Venue	Brantham Village Hall
Date of Adjudication	26 th February 2022
Production	ALICE IN WONDERLAND
Director	Tom Hitchcock assisted by Mark Hinson
Adjudicated by	Dawn King
Assisted by	David King

FRONT OF HOUSE

All pre-attendance arrangements were efficiently made, and we were warmly received on the night. It was our first visit to see this society and the friendly front of house staff settled us in well. The programme was superb and very professional – both in content and presentation. It had a good balance of information pictures demonstrating both rehearsal and technical activity, and in readable font. What became very evident, even before the performance started was that this was an incredible community project, with a vast array of people providing input.

LIGHTING

It was observed that the hall has a limited number of minuet lamps a small number of LEDs and some profiles. A modest lighting rig, it was effectively used throughout the production.

Traditional motifs associated with the original story were projected during the opening number from the White Rabbit and the lighting effect on the solo singer created a surreal effect that was echoed throughout the production. There were some significant lighting challenges – the chess scene / the caterpillar which were extremely well addressed.

SOUND

Good balance was achieved between band and singers in most cases. SFX were limited, but well timed. There were a lot of individual mics to balance, which worked pretty well on the whole. However we were concerned that the individual sound amplification for some characters was not right. On the night we came, the White Queen was not always audible in her singing numbers.

SET, STAGING AND STAGE MANAGEMENT

The stage area had been extended to create an apron at the side for musicians, and a larger acting space. The front had been painted with hearts and card motifs so that there was a strong visual even as we waited for the performance to begin.

Flats were beautifully painted, and the changes between scenes were impressive – quietly and efficiently dealt with

The tree trunk on stage left was a great idea, and must have taken some weeks to create. It provided a very neat “hole” for various characters to disappear into thus capturing the spirit of the play, but also bring the action forward. Sitting where we were we noted how well the actors got into the space – this had clearly been well rehearsed.

We also really liked the way that the Caterpillar number was staged and lit – it was very effective.

COSTUME, HAIR AND MAKE-UP

This was a very large cast, and the overall impact of the costume, hair and makeup was very satisfying, and had a sense of coherence, balanced nicely with the set colouring, whilst remaining loyal to the original illustrations from the books. Attention had been given to cast groupings, so number 10 contrasted nicely with Ace, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum were visually strong, as was the Rowena outfit.

Of particular note was the Queen of Hearts costume, which Natalie wore with confidence, the outfits for White Rabbit, March Hare and Dormouse, the neat concept for the playing cards, and of course both incarnations of the caterpillar!!

This production also called for a significant investment in character makeup, and this had been dealt with extremely well too.

PROPS/FURNITURE

I have mentioned the impressive tree earlier. However other props were imaginatively conceived and executed. The larger than life teapot housing the dormouse, and the three spouted teapot were excellent, and all other props fitted well into the story and were handled well by the cast.

MUSIC

The sight of a 4 piece band with projecting into the auditorium on a thrust stage caused an initial sense of dread. However we need not have worried – the short overture demonstrated that this band was super talented and it also settled the audience nicely to appreciate the opening White Rabbit sequence. Members of the band provided excellent support to the cast, and with an obvious enjoyment of their part in the overall performance. The choice of music might not have always moved the story forward, but it was absolutely integral to the style of the production, and not the traditional panto fare. It was tackled by the cast extremely well, and in appropriate style to their character, with clear diction and meaningful delivery. Some numbers could possibly have been abbreviated in length.

CHOREOGRAPHY

With limited space, the room for adventurous choreography was limited. What we got was relatively simple movement, but slick and well-drilled, with every member of the cast engaged and presenting well. Again, opportunity had been used to build character through movement, - I'd pick out particularly the Cheshire Cat and White Queen, and the movement in the tea party was beautifully managed chaos without being over the top.

The set piece moves of *If I did not work for the Queen* made me laugh more than I can remember for a long time – it was incredibly well done, and the commitment and enthusiasm of the cast members participating was infectious.

PERFORMANCE – SPECIFIC

Alice – Georgie Spall. Georgie was a delightful Alice, looked every bit the part, and imbued her character with a sense of confusion, matched with a determination to resolve the chaos around her. Good clear diction with a sense of confidence and assuredness. She also sings nicely. Great potential for the future - Well done!

White Rabbit – Sophie Reid. Sophie demonstrated great stage presence, and a musical storytelling ability as evidenced in the opening solo number, which was beautifully delivered. She was always in character and engaged, even when not active within the action, and ensured that the pace of scenes was sustained. Sophie also moves well. Another one with great potential for the future - Well done

Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum - worked very well together, and were very empathetic. Lewis and Toby obviously had a good time, and this communicated itself to the audience. We thought they were particularly strong in the scene in the second half in the playpen and their routine with use of beachballs etc was great fun and much appreciated.

March Hare David Chilton. David created a rather distinguished March Hare – beautifully dapper, with neat movement, a sense of intense energy and a good comic timing. He was a great foil for the Mad Hatter, and extremely focused, so that the pairing worked extremely well. On occasion the sound was not quite balanced between Hatter and Hare so that we couldn't always hear David.

Mad Hatter – Ben Cook. What a rumbustious, larger than life, energetic performance this was, and the energy levels were sustained throughout! Ben was a dominant presence in all the scenes he was in, and is light on his feet with good comic timing. Good vocals in *I want to Break Free*, although with occasional loss of pitch. A slight loss of clarity of diction on occasion didn't detract from the overall excellent performance.

Dormouse -Amelia Ramsay. Amelia was an adorable dormouse who popped out of the teapot to give us a charming performance using physically appropriate movement.

White Queen – Elizabeth Diamond. Elizabeth is a lovely dancer and brought a sense of physical serenity to her role. A very striking contrast to the Queen of Hearts.

Step Mother – Clare Fraser Hopewell. A difficult part to create –not quite a “wicked” stepmother, but one who is showing concern on the one hand but is acutely irritated with her husband on the other. Clare was able to show us both sides of the character, albeit with some hesitancy. For the future, perhaps you could work on technique to avoid too many sentences ending on an upward inflection.

Father/King. Richard Heath. Covering the role of Father at short notice, Richard demonstrated a good sense of comic timing and ability to throw a line to good effect, making us chuckle several times! Father was a likeable father, where we were never quite sure if the memory loss was real or a means of self defence against the stepmother. In his portrayal of The King the character, was somewhat more pathetic than Father. This was a solid portrayal, but I did wonder whether there could have been more humour in it if he had developed a repeated “terrified” move, or always retreated backwards. This is just a personal observation, as my colleague felt the portrayal was sound.

Caterpillar – John Hoskyns. An interesting and very ‘in your face’ portrayal with the song delivered in a style reminiscent of Sean Connery. John’s metamorphosis was neatly conceived and delivery of dialogue was strong and confident.

Cheshire Cat – Lauren Carrigan. Excellent movement as the Cheshire Cat and in the dance number for I’m a Believer. Nicely developed cat characterisation, with strong stage presence.

Queen of Hearts – Natalie Dwan. From the first confident and strident entrance, this was an accomplished performance, more than a little reminiscent of Black Adder’s Queen Elisabeth, and delivered with style and pace. Great variation in vocal tone and pitch, and there was good use of the stage space. The contrast in behaviours was finely drawn.

Ace – Arjan van Heuveln. What a smoothy!! Arjan inhabited that white suit as if he really felt he was Brantham’s own John Travolta, and the scenes with the Queen were particularly entertaining. His audience engagement was good, and he and Number 10 worked well together.

Joker -James Wetherall. James had an easy style about him, which was perfect for the role of Joker. His gag sequence was well delivered (and well written), and provided a good shift from the story-telling of Alice and Rabbit into “panto mode”.

Number Ten – Roger Weeley. I enjoyed Roger’s portrayal of this role – there was enough of the current PM caught in the characterisation – and sufficient difference to make it entertaining on a number of levels without being offensive to a family audience or too stereotypical. Again, good timing allowed us to pick up the humour.

2 of Hearts/4 of Hearts/ 6 of Hearts/ 8 of Hearts – Unfair of me to group these characters together perhaps when you all worked so hard, but the great strength of the cards was their individual characterisation, brought together in some really strong ensemble playing. Identically costumed apart from the shirt decoration, these four used their individual physicality and performance strengths to create quite unique presentations, which all blended well. As an ensemble they generally kept up a good pace, and were very empathetic to each other on stage, which bore fruit in the *If I did not work for the Queen* number! Pippa Revell’s drunkenness developed really well over the evening and her rendition of Shakespeare was a highlight.

Knave of Hearts – Oscar van Heuveln. What a cheeky Knave of Hearts Oscar was. Whether sitting patiently in the opening court scene, running off with the tarts, distributing flower petals, or moving things on the stage, he gave total commitment to the role.

Nell - Angie Heath. Although not clear from the programme, Angie was contained within a rather cumbersome grey box. She helped us to understand that this character was a ‘screen presentation’, through the use of a monotone robotic voice, which was sustained throughout her dialogue..

Rowena – Sarah Twinn. Stepping into the role due to covid, Sarah needed to find a way to demonstrate why she shouldn’t be upset rather than rely on physical size. Her wailing was a more than adequate substitute!! A nice cameo – well done.

DIRECTION/ PERFORMANCE – GENERAL

This was an extremely well written piece, with naturalistic dialogue and an avoidance of long speeches which bedevil so many pantomimes! It had a strong and clear overall concept and managed to tell a complex story in a way that flowed.

The production was well cast, and it was delightful to see so many young people participating – not just as a token chorus - but in substantive parts demanding characterisation and ability. Their youth and enthusiasm was well matched by older members of the cast, with some very fine performances. There was great ensemble performance work, and the various ‘pairings’ of characters had worked well on their scripted lines and movement to create really entertaining pieces within the whole production. Pace was well maintained throughout.

The loss of a traditional dame was not an issue for me in this piece – it would only have served to confuse the story-telling I suspect. The comedy lines were

appropriately pointed and well distributed across characters, so that we were constantly entertained and smiling.

The direction of the piece was good. Blocking and use of space was excellent, and with really good touches. We particularly like the staging of the chess game, which was well lit and cleverly imagined. The way that the story images were introduced in the White Rabbit prologue was a clever touch, and the production did well to avoid the complexities of any “*drink me /eat me*” sequences. We were less convinced about the use of Nell’s screen contraption for the security guard, as the movement of the piece tended to slow the action considerably – but this was a minor issue in what was otherwise a very slick production.

Thank you for the opportunity to see this production.

Dawn King
12/3/2022