

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD
SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2014-2015

Group: Brantham Amateur Theatrical Society

Production: Robinson Crusoe by Bob Heather and Roger Lamb

Venue: Brantham Village Hall

Date of Adjudicators' visit: Thurs February 19, 2015

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen – accompanied by Anne Sexton

INTRODUCTION:

A slightly unusual version of Robinson Crusoe which I would have said was being understandably “politically correct” by avoiding having a “native” Man Friday. However, there were still traditional-looking cannibals, so that might not have been the issue at all!

But it's always good to see a show which isn't performed as often as other pantomimes, so my companion, Anne, and I were eager to see how the tale would unfold.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

Always a pleasure to visit this friendly group, and the FoH staff wafted us expertly from one person to the next until we'd reached our well-situated seats. To the appropriate sound of recorded sea shanties, we settled down to read the unusually large (A4) and glossy programme. In fact, only the cover was actually in colour but it created an attractive first impression.

Interval refreshments were available in hot or cold varieties and the raffle was wisely picked off-stage and winning tickets stuck to the prizes. Always a great idea for ensuring the show is not held up.

SETTING & PROPS:

BATS have a way of extending the set, visually, to the whole proscenium arch and beyond. The projections on either side of the palm trees and miniscule desert islands set the mood, and we admired the “wooden” fascia used for the steps and front stage, which cleverly suggested a ship. This, along with the rum casks, boxes, sacks and a lifebelt, were good touches. I liked the inn sign for The Nag's Head – clearly a woman and probably our dame!

The higgledy-piggledy cottages of the village setting were colourful and quaint.

More projections were used for the back street along with droll touches, like the signpost proclaiming; “London – 70 Leagues – ish.”

There was a fair recreation of the deck of the Black Goldfish, complete with wheel - and we really loved the gag with the “speaking tube”, especially when it sprayed water and flour over Billy.

Credit also to the creators of the cooking pot and huge bones!

LIGHTING & SOUND:

Some good lighting ideas had been used for the show, and the team had been careful to give a brighter, hotter look to the tropical scenes, as compared to “Harwich”.

The lighting highlight (pardon the pun) was the beautiful UV scene, with fish and floaty weeds in vivid colours, dancing beneath the waves.

Red lighting was used regularly to create amusing moments. The Dame’s brief Do Ya Think I’m Sexy was one of them, while the most frequent use came with the mock-horror of the One-Eyed Willum gag. But we also enjoyed the deliberately slow curtain which left the characters struggling to maintain fixed grins in the red glow.

As for the sound, there was plenty to enjoy. From the cries of seagulls to headbangs to the ringing bell (or not!) and, of course, the thunder (and lightning) which accompanied each entrance of the wicked Captain Hand.

The recorded sound which augmented the live keyboards/guitar seemed fine, but the voice mics – especially Capt Hand’s sometimes took a noisy swipe. At times, sound levels were slightly high.

MUSIC & DANCE:

Patience Ling (keyboards) and Doug Newton (bass guitar) were firmly but discreetly in control from the “pit” whenever live songs were needed. No cue was ever missed, and Patience took part in some of the gentle humour.

There were, we felt, rather too many songs. It almost became a “popera”. But many of the numbers were kept brief, and overall the standard of singing was good.

Frankie and Kim Swann had made a good job of the choreography which was always watchable, and ran the gamut from rock n’ roll to a jolly hornpipe.

The young chorus performed their well-rehearsed dances and songs well, and there were some good groupings – I loved the careful height-graduation for Under The Sun of Love. When Will We get there made a rousing end to Act 1 while the last number, Pantomine, made a fitting end to the proceedings.

COSTUME and Make-Up:

We appreciated the thought which had gone into these very colourful costumes, and remarked how unusual it was to be able to take the Dame's costumes seriously. For here was a uniquely glamorous Dame, with well-fitting gowns (and a slightly different wig to go with each one). Yes, they were over-the-top and outlandish – but in a rather stylish way. Comical, but oddly alluring! “Her” make-up was in proportion to this, with huge eyelashes making John a very handsome Dame.

Olivia Crusoe's first dress was a glam, printed poppy affair, and was foiled by a mass of gingham topped off by a red mob cap and turquoise ringlets – plus gold boater boots, lest we should forget that this was a panto dame. A red, white and green frock added fun to the cookery scene. Also memorable – the walkdown confection of emerald and silver.

Captain Hand's look was very Johnny Depp in Pirates of the Caribbean, from the black velvet clothing to the long wig and dangly beads. The Cannibal chief and his minions looked wild and wonderful in their animal skins, while the younger natives had straw skirts, which looked appropriate.

The young chorus were given some very fetching outfits, but I felt that one or two of the adult ladies looked as if they had just found “a long skirt and top”. However, Polly was sweetly dressed and she and Robinson looked striking in their walkdown wedding outfits. The UV costumes were clever and effective. Robinson's thigh-length jerkin made “him” an ideal leggy principal boy.

I was puzzled to see the ship setting sail from Harwich with silkily-clad Turkish sailors on board, when I was expecting rather more yo-ho-ho costumes!

Nip and Tuck's contrasting dungarees were perfect for this daft duo, and Billy Crusoe's block-colour outfit of bright blue and yellow, with sleeves of green, looked perfectly in character.

PERFORMANCES:

OLIVIA CRUSOE: John Hoskyns made an outstandingly good Dame. Always in control and always in character, never snatching attention with extra adlibs and proving to be refreshingly attractive! His ongoing flirtation with the Scout leader in the row in front of us was genuinely funny and never overplayed. With his refined voice and gently sexy allure, this was a performance to remember.

ROBINSON CRUSOE: Lauren Mercer not only had the requisite long legs (ideal for traditional thigh-slapping) but also a lovely smile. Lauren was sincere and expressive, with a clear speaking voice and a nice tone for singing.

BILLY CRUSOE: Len Stockdale was a real cheeky chappie as Billy (I'm sure he could play Norman Wisdom or maybe George Formby). Len handled the audience with confidence. He had a good singing voice and was a mainstay of much of the comedy.

POLLY PERKINS: Laura Pitchell made an attractive partner for Robinson and exhibited a nice singing voice too. Principal girl isn't always a very exciting role (unless you're Cinderella) but Laura made the most of her role and worked well as part of a team.

SQUIRE PERKINS: Richard Heath's the squire was hapless, sometimes hopeless, amusingly grumpy and rather likeable. He had fun and we had fun watching him. His po-face in Three Steps To Heaven made me chuckle.

CAPTAIN HAND: Mark Hinson's Depp-like Captain Hand was comically furious and constantly frustrated by the idiocy of those around him. We loved the joke about how he got his name – because his hand had never got bitten off or replaced by a hook! Gruff of voice, with a wicked grin, this was a character that everyone enjoyed from the moment Mark stepped on stage.

FRIDAY: The premise that Friday is not a native, but Olivia's long-lost shipwrecked husband, was certainly unusual! Geoff Hewitson is very comfortable on stage and gave us an amusing interpretation in what was basically a cameo role.

CHIEF FAHATED: Experienced local actor Keith Raby clearly relished his role as the cannibal chief, and had some fun with his name. Scary yet amusing, he dominated his scenes.

NIP: Lesley Mercer. Another very experienced performer, Lesley always gives her all, and this was no exception. Her comic partnership with Alice worked increasingly well, and Lesley's zany antics and expressions went down a treat with the audience.

TUCK: Perhaps a little unsure to start with on the night of our visit, Alice Harris quickly gained confidence and turned in a good performance as straight man to Lesley's whacky Nip. Loved her bit with the non-ringing bell. If it was never supposed to ring, Alice was acting convincingly well. If it WAS supposed to ring, she was covering up with comic flair.

KOOKEE & RAGOO: Angie Heath and Caroline Chapman added humour to the grisly cannibal scene, using body language and gestures to stoke up the fun.

DIRECTION: Director Val Eldridge gave us a very refreshing show. Rather too many songs, perhaps, but plenty of colour and fun, with a dedicated cast and chorus.

One of my few bones (haha) to pick would be that at the start of Act One, the chorus came on, took up position, then started singing. If they'd strolled on already singing (or alternatively been lined up behind tabs) it would have been a smoother opening. But otherwise it's hard to fault this jolly production with its memorably glamorous Dame!

Thank you for inviting us to share this enjoyable Big February Show.

Best wishes

Liz Mullen (Adjudicator)

