

REVIEW
For
PANTO IN THE JUNGLE

REVIEWER: John C. Draper
COMPANY: Richings Players
PRODUCTION DATE: 29th January 2009
VENUE: Iver Village Hall

OVERVIEW

As a member of The Richings Players, I needed to make sure, even more than normally, that I did not be too effusive and give biased praise where it was not deserved. So I've told it exactly as it was.

STAGING & SET

Having the set visible as the audience entered was a good idea, especially when the set is as good as this one. ROBIN BISHOP & ALAN OXLEY had created a most impressive setting with excellent multi levels and the clever ability to move the trees to create new scenes was an ingenious idea. The proscenium title was both attractive and very effective.

LIGHTING

LES BREWER had done a great job. The lighting was as unobtrusive as it should be and the subtle change of venues and moods hit just the right balance. The more sudden changes for impact were sensational. The atmospheres set by Les & Robin on the sound desk for more striking occasions, (e.g. Wichity Grub's entrance were a great example of team work giving an excellent result. The chorus numbers were very well lit with no-one in shadow. The silhouette of the gorilla was highly effective bringing a very satisfactory gasp of appreciation from the audience. The silent lightning would have been even better with thunder, (see next section)

SOUND

ROBIN BISHOP lived up to his high reputation and did a very good job with effects on cue and at the right volume. The absence of thunder was a technical glitch because I heard thunder during the set up time. Robin is the kind of sound technician directors love to work with. He is a model of calm efficiency and lets his results speak for themselves. Which they do, with great eloquence.

COSTUME

I could easily run out of superlatives on this section. LINDA LUCAS, SARA WILLIAMS, BETTY SIDDALL, JULIE EADY, ROSE NICOLA and KATHRYN PRICE created a range of wonderful costumes to match each character perfectly. From Jungle-man's minimal cover to King Pong's entire encasement the costume team were very much painters of a kaleidoscope of colour, variety fantasy menace and humour. Congratulations to you all.

THE CAST

Let no-one ever dare say "I was only in the chorus" I am a firm believer that no matter how good the principles are, the backing singers and dancers are crucial to the whole process of creating spectacle and painting animated pictures.

And everyone did just that. The singing, dancing and whole-hearted support was absolutely first class. And there was something very unusual about this production. There were no exceptions. You can often see someone, or more than one who is not quite up to scratch with perhaps rhythm words or tunes. Not for the splendid team I saw last week.

The principle characters need to have confidence that there are people behind them on whom they can totally rely. You can all be sure that your performances were the icing on the Richings Players cake.

I would just like to add a personal note. In 1960 I saw a famous West End show called "Stop the World, I Want To Get Off" starring Anthony Newly and Anna Quayle which was a huge success. At the very end of the credits, the last of the chorus members was a name you are more likely to recognise; "Marti Webb" So you see that everyone has to start somewhere.

THE CHARACTERS.

GINGER & NUTS

Both LOTTE FLETCHER JONK & MICHAEL LUCAS gave amazing performances as the two buffoons. Their facial expressions, gestures and movements were hilarious and supremely well synchronised. Their rapport with the audience was just right and as the warm-up duo after the rousing start, they had the audience with them into the action and in the right mood within the first minutes. I loved the little simultaneous leaps and their wonderful appearance and accents were enhanced by crystal-clear delivery showing huge infectious enthusiasm.

TIGRIS

JOE GIBBS was a highly successful "leader of the pack" She presented a wonderfully sardonic, almost world-weary "tiger of the World". Her changes of mood were seamless and her delivery and stage presence were confident and powerful and she delivered her comedy lines with perfect timing and expression. The little leg flip backwards on "number two" was a priceless moment. And then, there is her singing. I was enthralled by "Little Voice" and here we saw her in such a different but equally successful role with a strong, melodic and powerful rendition of every song. Your programme notes say how much she enjoys panto. Joe, it showed through every moment of your excellent performance.

WITCHETY GRUB

This wonderfully named villainess had an actress well worthy of the roll. Playing the baddy is a far more taxing role than many people appreciate. It is tempting and sometimes too easy to go O.T.T. LINDA BAINBRIDGE resisted the temptation and gave the character exactly the right balance. She very sensibly created a feeling of hate and fright but tempered it with humour. Her first entrance was beautifully done with great support by effects, music and lighting which set the character and the mood perfectly. Then she gave a great interpretation of the song "I Want It All" It was brilliant - strong, tuneful with a touch of malevolence Her make-up was very well done indeed. Her relationship with the audience was an excellent example of very fine tuning to create just the right balance. A very well crafted performance.

CARA LOFT

SARAH PINKNEY gave a good performance in this role with a good “principle boy approach. Her first entrance didn’t take full advantage of the vine and she spoke a little too quickly on occasions and some words were lost. “Does your Mother Know” with Richard was wonderfully staged and excellently sung and the two of them created a highly effective synergy throughout the whole show. Well done. Sarah has had a good start with her degree and just needs more experience to increase her stage presence and confidence. Mind you: she has mastered the art of thigh-slapping.

NIGEL GRAVETTE as JUNGLE MAN gave a great display of skin and talent. He used the vine entrances with great effect and it’s not many people who get a round of applause before they say a word or even touch the ground and Nigel got three. He obviously relished playing this part and it showed along with perfect recall of his lines.!

KING PONG

WILL TORRENT gave 120% to playing this part with great activity and hard work. The result was a suspiciously life like gorilla. His grunts and stance were very close to the real thing. (another worry for the group!) and his overall use of voice, posture, gestures and movement were perfect. All that and an excellently well sung “King Of The Swingers” He lost a few of the words at first but soon remedied that and gave us a highly entertaining version of a great song which was presumably a (very wise) late addition.

MUSIC & MUSICAL DIRECTION

ANNE TORRENT had put together a very effective group of excellent musicians and the music they made was first class with appropriate variations of tempo and moods adding to the excellence of the sound. Musicians are notoriously enthusiastic and have been known to drown out vocalists but Anne kept this well under control virtually throughout the whole production.

The choice of music was just right and the two songs, presumably added after the programme had gone to print, were both inspired choices which made a winning difference .

One of the most beneficial parts of Anne’s direction is the enthusiasm which she shares with her team during each number.

I believe, however she needs more recognition and the beginning of the evening needs tidying up. The band casually wandered in over a very long period then stood chatting to each other and even eating! Tuning up should be part of creating audience anticipation and expectation and not just a series of disjointed sounds. I believe that when the band is ready, the orchestra pit needs to be lit for Anne’s entrance. Her high reputation will undoubtedly earn her a round of applause She will possibly be recoiling in horror at this suggestion but this is a two-edged sword. It’s the professional way of doing things and The Richings Players have a professional philosophy.

CHOREOGRAPHY

This was the jewel in an already beautiful crown.

LEY DOBSON and SARAH PINKNEY did a superb job. I made seven pages of notes on the night and wrote “great choreography” or its equivalent eleven times.

From the opening number which gave a fantastic start the stage was filled with beautiful movement in inspiring and very clever routines. And became very clear how much of the cast’s strength which I highlighted earlier, can be credited to Ley and Sarah

I loved the variations from rousing production numbers with the stage bursting with excitement to the calmer “Love cats” and the ethereal dancers in white. You both deserve the highest congratulations

DIRECTION and SCRIPT

Dual direction can sometimes be difficult but this exercise worked well and obviously successfully. DAVID BAINBRIDGE and MICHAEL LUCAS gave us a great evening. The whole stage was sensibly used and they took full advantage of the clever idea of the moving trees and pillars so the action moved swiftly with no delays or pregnant pauses. The cast positioning, entrances and exits were smoothly done except through the U.S.L. entrance which seemed to be a tight squeeze. The gorilla in the audience was a nice touch which enthralled the children.

You used your lighting, sound and special effects well and the metamorphoses were brilliantly staged, as was the entrance of Witchety Grub.

The "behind you" bits avoided the usual obvious risk of bad timing. The major production numbers were well set and the walk down and final curtain were excellent. The striper scene was good but there were too many other things going on at the same time so it was difficult to decide where to look in case you missed something. Don't over-egg the pudding.

The baboons bum was a great touch.

The Chase and Chariots of Fire were very amusing and would have been even better with a strobe light. You could have left it out on the first night but used it for the rest, warning the audience and use it in short bursts.

The two extra songs were a good choice. Without them there might have been something of an anti-climax.

I have a suggestion for the beginning as well as the earlier one about Anne and the Band.

Let the audience in to very low stage lighting simulating a jungle night. The house lights also need to be reduced slightly. No music or sounds. What you are about to do is create a jungle dawn. As the hall fills you start the jungle effects very softly. After a few moments you simultaneously increase the volume and the stage lights including a filter to give an impression of sun rise. Continue this until the sound reaches full volume and with 5 minutes to go bring in the band very softly. [This exercise calls for expert synchronisation and F.O.H. co-operation but the effect will be stunning and the audience will realise they are in for something special and be in the right mood to enjoy it.

David and Michael you did a great job with a fantastic, well crafted script. You had created a truly traditional pantomime with everything people expect and you turned an already strong group of individual performers into a team of stars.

FINALLY

To mention every single name would be impossible but I feel I have given credit to every department, but every name in the programme made a great contribution.

Having made as sure as possible that I had covered all the good bits I then debated whether, apart from the items included in the main report, there were any other problems needing attention. The answer was "No". The Richings Players can be very proud of a wonderful group effort and a great result.

My Grandchildren aged 4 – 9 loved it and this reviewer, a little older, did the same. More importantly, so did all the audience. Like the cast, they left animated and happy. Thank you for inviting me. It was a great pleasure.

John C. Draper
Independent Theatre Reviewer

P.S. Don't forget my first paragraph.