

## **The Wizard of Oz – Parish Players – 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> January**

As your programme notes, ‘The Wizard of Oz holds a place in the hearts and memories of everyone who has ever seen it.’ It does indeed. And therein lies the challenge. Never mind the lion - any group that takes on *The Wizard of Oz* is going to need courage aplenty.

Most of us approach *The Wizard of Oz* not at all as we approach traditional pantos such as Captain Hook or Mother Goose. Because when we come to this show we can’t help but bring Judy Garland, Toto and Over the Rainbow with us. The weight of expectation that comes with seeing a different interpretation of such an iconic Christmas film is in danger of creating a tornado of feeling – and potentially disappointment - before the first gust of wind is felt. More than with any other show perhaps, we come to the theatre with fixed ideas based not on panto but on a film. Or at the very least the RSC musical version that translates so directly from the film.

For this reason I think ‘Oz - the panto’ was a bold choice and you needed courage to make it. But, as we know, if the show is to be a success, you also need brains - to find ways of making us see *The Wizard* anew – or at least with green-coloured spectacles on – and of marrying the film we know so well with a traditional panto format. And, most importantly perhaps, you need a heart – because of course no show without a heart can possibly make our dreams come true.

I’m delighted to report that Oli, Jo, Max and Sam, and Parish Players, seem to be possessed of all three - courage, brains and heart - in abundance.

The Church hall does not seem the most promising candidate for transformation into Munchkinland, The Emerald City or even the Mid West and yet, magically, before I even walked in the door, Kansas came out to greet me on a cold snowy evening in January. The audience was wrapped in lavish clouds of smoke billowing out of the front doors - and thus the enchantment began. The warmth of the welcome made up for some un-Kansas like temperatures, while the hay bales, the straw on the floor and, of course, the capacious undergarment hanging on the washing line, created a world away from Merton Park. As too did the noisy enveloping wind and the entertaining radio show playing in the background and giving us, appropriately for a snow-obsessed London, a special report on the storm, while also cleverly reminding us to turn off our mobiles. It was the perfect way to start blurring the edges between reality and a land of magic.

It is a compliment then to say that it was hard to tell when the show itself actually began. The wonderfully boisterous entrance of the whooping band seemed to match the force of the wind, as did the entrance of chorus members hollering through the audience. The energy was marvellous - and perhaps it did not matter that the noise of the wind prevented

the words of the entering chorus from being heard. The intention was no doubt to convey energy and movement – which it did admirably.

I found the hand on the volume control of the wind slightly heavy, but this is pretty much my only criticism of the sound and lights for the show, which otherwise were remarkably good and, as always at Parish Players, played a huge part in creating the world of the play. From the magic of the illuminated windows in the toy house to the joyful pyrotechnics at the end of the first half, from the use of flashlight and u.v. in the flying monkey scene to the lavish use of smoke and trapdoors to convey a truly impressive melting, all the lights and special effects were, well, especially effective. I didn't expect anything less than professional standards on this front - and I certainly got them.

Set, costumes and make up were a similar joy. The psychedelic Oz backdrop and bright costumes were just right – and a marvellous contrast to the drear of storm-filled Kansas/London. Scene changes seemed minimal in this production, whether because they were truly few in number or because they were effected so super-efficiently I simply didn't notice them, I couldn't say. The principles' costumes were flawless and the chorus was brightly and imaginatively dressed. Whoever was responsible for the lion's mane deserves a round of applause alone. And as for the guards of the emerald city....suffice to say it was an absolute joy to see so many people in sparkly green eye-shadow. One tiny comment on the costume front - SILVER shoes? I had my heart set on ruby red. And from the intake of breath that went round the audience, I wasn't the only one. I'm being picky, of course, but that's the weight of expectation that comes with such a well-loved classic - and it seemed an odd choice to confound expectations so boldly and deliberately in this crucial area while mirroring, say, Dorothy's dress from the film so faithfully. For the footwear obsessives among us, it didn't help that the silver shoes were entirely upstaged by Caroline Chick's gorgeous sparkly emerald slippers which too closely recalled Judy's ruby ones to be ignored.

But so much for the, generally excellent, departments of smoke and mirrors. If *The Wizard of Oz* tells us nothing else it is surely that magic is created not only through special effects - beautiful costumes, fancy backdrops, smoke and bangs, awe-inspiring as they may be – but also through belief and total conviction. In that it is perhaps a good metaphor for theatre in general - a show that relies on tricks instead of the complete involvement and conviction of the cast will never be magical. This is of course particularly true of panto - where anything less than wholeheartedness on the part of the cast risks making the whole enterprise look silly. It is the ability of the cast to throw themselves into the show – to believe they are who they say they are, to delight in the corny jokes rather than running away from them and to be willing to look silly along the way if necessary – that makes us convinced we're in another world.

And convinced I was. The all round energy and enthusiasm of the cast were enormous. Everyone joined in - and the result was a joy to behold.

The youth of the four leads contrasted with the maturity of their performances. They were truly impressive – each actor was splendidly controlled and yet totally convincing. Olivia Cheetham as Dorothy was very well cast – her performance was utterly charming. She never once let slip her air of innocent bewilderment, beautifully conveyed not only in the delivery of her lines but also in her reactions to other characters and, perhaps most strikingly of all, in the way she moved and carried herself throughout. She held the audience's attention and affection from start to finish. It didn't hurt that she has a lovely singing voice too.

Joe Reeves' scarecrow was also immediately likeable. His goofy laugh endeared him to the audience from the moment we met him, as did his finely-judged ability to break the fourth wall and talk to us in good panto tradition. Joe too used his movements well to convey character - his initial controlled slapstick was joyous. His concentration never faltered and his sympathetic portrayal made us feel genuinely affectionate towards the scarecrow.

The tin man's off-stage groans followed nicely on scarecrow's clowning and kept up the pace well. The character change in his first scene, brought about by the lovely alliterative luxurious lubrication, was well done. Indeed, Henry Perryment really relaxed into the role – both as the evening and the week went on - by the second half of the Saturday matinee he was in danger of stealing the show at points – quite a feat, given the competition.

All the main characters need to be sympathetically played, but perhaps Lion especially so. Amanda Roberts' made the most of the opportunities for cowardly silliness - her increasingly dramatic snoring in the poppy scene was hilarious for a start – and she certainly won over the younger audience – my daughter was a big fan.

But the willingness to throw oneself in and at times just be plain silly - and thus convincing - was not limited to the four leads. Both good witches were a delight. Caryl Court played the Nice witch of the North in good panto tradition – with a touch of thigh slapping, a dash of prim school ma'am and a generous dollop of good fairy. She was a joy in pink to behold and the twinkle in her eye showed utter commitment. I take my life in my hands perhaps by wondering why the choice was made to make the nice witch speak in clipped rather upper-class tones when there would have perhaps been an obvious advantage to Caryl's playing up the traces of her accent in her role as a witch from the NORTH.

Lindsay Litster's fun portrayal of Glinda gave the show a new burst of energy at just the right moment to get the audience singing along to the song. She was ably abetted in this by Henry Perryment whose tin man really came into his element egging on the audience. Since Lindsay seemed carried along by energy and the appearance of not taking anything too seriously, her merriment was infectious – she was hilarious even when taking a prompt.

And of course Maggi Chick's wicked witch of the west was also a triumph of great panto evil. From her terrific entrance number to her dramatic melting she never let the pace flag. She

was great fun to boo and her conviction meant my daughter found her genuinely scary. The flying monkeys – well lit and imaginatively choreographed as they were – were another moment of real terror.

Caroline Chick's performance was also magnificent. Her opening number was a show stopper – beautifully and powerfully sung and all done absolutely straight with real high drama. She was a powerful presence who commanded the stage every time she appeared. Her pairing with Sam Litster - echoing the good team work and strong characterisation in the performances of Richard Warner and Thom Bricknell at the beginning of the show - worked well - his seriousness making her hot air all the funnier.

It is never easy making an entrance late in a show and by the time we get to meet the Wizard himself the audience expects a lot. Roy Perryment did not disappoint. His convincing accent, appearing as it did late on in the show, brought us nicely full circle to the radio show at the beginning, the only other place where American was spoken. Beyond this, Roy established the wizard's character immediately and convincingly. He was also a major reason that the penultimate number – what else but the deeply satisfying 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' - brought the house down.

The chorus showed their concentration and application no less than the individual roles, whether conveying the joy of the witch's death, the sorrow of their imprisonment or their utter conviction that everything should be painted green. Danni Matsell's excellent choreography was well executed throughout and the musical numbers were all sung with appropriate gusto, though for my money the big up tempo numbers tended to work better than the slightly more touchy-feely ones.

Special mention at this stage has to go to two actors. The first is whoever was hit by the tin man's axe on the Saturday matinee. It is a long time since I've heard such a spectacularly lengthy and funny off-stage death. Well done. And I'm only being slightly flippant here actually. It was a small detail, but typical of the sense of fun and enthusiasm shown throughout the whole production.

The second special mention goes to the band – not only for some excellent sound effects and music – including some terrific original music –but also for their engagement in the show throughout as actors as well as musicians. By leading the panto calls and responding so closely to the actors on stage, the band gave the show a whole new element blurring the lines nicely between audience and performer. I thought the choice of musical numbers was excellent. I also very much liked the snatches of songs familiar from the film played in the scene changes – a few bars of 'We're off to see the wizard' alluded nicely to our expectations and somehow helped blend that 'timeless classic' with the panto tradition. I'd actually have liked more of these myself – other scene-changing snatches – The Simpsons theme and Moonlight Sonata for example - seemed more puzzling choices with less to add

to the production. I'm being picky again. The music and band were excellent – congratulations.

Overall I felt the show was directed with brains and heart. There were some wonderfully imaginative moments – the transformation of the washing umbrella into the tornado, the energetic entrances through the audience, the use of the trapdoor and exit to the back of the stage. You weren't afraid to allude to the film in the frequent arrangement of the four principles in their iconic poses front of stage and echoed in the silhouette in the beautifully done programme. And there were of course some traditionally sweet touches - the addition of sweets and livestock to the matinee performance was much appreciated by the kids, particularly the bunny in the curtain call.

So did I believe it? Did the dreams that you dared to dream really come true? I think so. It was a fun lively production, I tapped my foot and smiled the whole way through and I was genuinely moved at the end - glad when the scarecrow did his long division and oddly affected by the rush of cold air and the glimpse of the natural world at the back of the stage when Dorothy made her final exit.

So well done to all involved for a Christmas classic well re-imagined. It was great entertainment. My troubles melted like lemon drops.

**Claire Hoult**