

or

## Bathford Players Present Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood

The first thing that struck me about this production was the knowledge that the adapter and director had about the venue, and the skills on offer from his cast. Equipped with these factors he knew exactly where the strengths of the venue and players lay, and duly made the best possible use of them.

There was a lively sense of anticipation in the hall before the show started which was in no way dampened by the cheery 'House Rules' speech from the Director. With no live musicians and Musical Director out front it was natural that the audience took just a moment or so to settle. The choice of spectacular sets and set dressings was obviously not an option, but what was placed before us was a series of well lit scenes which made maximum use of the acting space available.

With all the lighting placed out front, please excuse me if I am wrong in that assumption, and a stage where the width was far greater in proportion to the depth, the Directors could easily have created many a muddle unattractive looking gathering. It says a great deal about the clear vision they had about the visual side of the production that that it invariably looked attractive, and rarely over crowded.

The not over complex movement introduced into numbers was always well within the comfort zone of soloists and chorus. As a result apart from the odd person with 'two left feet', every company has a few of these wonderfully enthusiastic performers who never quite know where their feet have got to and therefore spend most of the number staring at the said objects, everybody appeared to be completely at home with the movement they had been asked to undertake. Because of this we in the audience were also always comfortable and ready to enjoy the pictures they placed before us.

There were times in fact when a little more ambition in this area would not have gone amiss. In the opening scene the three men at the rear of the stage could have been far more animated without detracting from the action taking place in front of them.

We had an early example of the quality of the 'back' cloths the first one to appear having a prospective that gave the impression that the stage had a far greater depth than it actually did have. In this same scene the Sound Team showed their metal with a fine effect as Robin fired off an arrow to recover the coconuts. That Robin Hood theme, which came from the 1955/59 TV series where Dick James sang it before all 143 episodes, was despite its age a good choice still being remembered by many in the audience. Later Mr James turned his had to publishing founding, with Brian Epstein Northern Songs, the publishers of most of the Beatles numbers.

Not to be outdone the Lighting Crew came up with an ideal change of lighting for the entrance of Mildred and Morgana. They also rarely missed a chance to use their lighting skills in order to illustrate the deviousness of the Sheriff of Nottingham. One place they failed was after 'If I Were a Rich Man'. The fairy Fairy of the Greens was picked up at speed in an ideal light, but when the Sheriff re-entered no green light came with him.

Songs also benefitted from the skills of the Lighting Crew, Marion and Robin's first romantic/comedy duet 'The Song That Goes Like This' received some expertly timed changes which helped its cause greatly.

I wasn't quite so certain about the merits of a reddish light for the enthusiastically sung 'Another Brick in the Wall', but once again when it came to change for full lighting in the School scene the change was immaculately delivered.

The blue/white light which greeted Marion at the start of 'Holding out for a Hero' seemed a trifle harsh for the occasion. The 'Disco; style lighting which took over was much more in keeping with the sound and style of the number.

It was an interesting idea to finish Act1 on a gentle note. With another excellent 'Back' cloth behind the action all was set up nicely for this final scene which had it had a stronger focal point. The Babes positioned on the ground on the face of it provided this, but were to many, including me, out of sight because of the sight lines in this 'flat' hall, and therefore they lost their impact.

The timing of the first Act, 1 hour 15 minutes, was just acceptable. Always remember with a Pantomime there will always be a large contingent of youngsters in the audience with a limited attention span, and anything over that sort of running time is asking for trouble. On that same theme what a good idea to place that row of small chairs in front of the original front row in order to give as many of this younger age group as possible a clear view of proceedings.

With 'canned' music there was obviously no MD to march out and silence the audience before the start of Act2, and with that in mind once the lights in the hall were turned down the action should have commenced immediately. As it was the slight pause that came before the commencement of Act 2 allowed the audience time to fidget a little making it that much harder for those involved in the first scene to draw them into the action.

Lighting and the musical input helped the chase sequence considerably, and the well choreographed 'Do You Wanna be in my Gang' number.

'If I were not upon the Stage' is one of those 'Panto' favourites guaranteed to bring a warm response from an audience, always providing of course that it is well performed. This presentation rehearsed within an inch of its life can be termed one of the great successes of the evening.

Each person that appeared sang their part of the number with verve and style, and liked perfectly into the humorous movement. All of this ducking and diving whilst remembering your own lines may appear to be a very simple task to the onlooker, but as someone who many moons ago was actually part of this number, with very different words, I can assure them the opportunities to get out of sequence are many and easy to succumb to.

Another nicely lit 'Back' cloth appeared, this time depicting Nottingham Castle. The way, in which the company followed the flight of the arrows, more good work from the Sound Team, aided the visual impact of this scene enormously. It also showed how strong the partnership between the Director and company was, for we have to presume that these actions were performed on his instructions.

I was a little disappointed at the visual aspect of the Double Wedding scene. It looked bright and cheery, but there was no coherent pattern of movement, just people jiggling around. Although the stage was indeed very full at this time there was room for the scene to have been more distinctly choreographed.

The final bows were nicely arranged, and although it would have been nice to have seen the principals in special finale costumes in view of the cost this would have incurred for that one scene it was perfectly understandable, and acceptable, that the good quality costumes that we had seen throughout the show should do duty for the finale.

'Happy Days' provided a fitting end to a Pantomime which had provided many happy moments throughout the evening.

## Individual Performances

### Robin Hood

How nice to find a 'Principal Boy' in the true sense of the word in the role of Robin Hood. All too often nowadays Directors shy away from the traditional cross dressing character of the 'Principal Boy'. Even when you have, as we did on this occasion some more modern satirical songs a traditional 'Principal Boy' still fits the bill extremely well.

Sometimes the Director might be quite happy with a traditional presentation, but is sabotaged by the player who is obviously not comfortable in the role. This was not the case with this Robin Hood who was always at ease in the presentation.

You took command of your 'Merry Men' leading them, Dame Nellie and the Babes off to Nottingham Castle in fine style accompanied by the TV theme music.

There was a particularly good into to 'The Song That Goes like This', a number that you and Marion handled extremely well. As indeed you did the more romantic numbers that came up during the show.

The trio of songs, in which you led the company, at the start of Act 2 required very different and vocal skills which you supplied. Just time here to mention once again how well the lighting team did during this sequence.

It was a neat idea to introduce 'hobby' horses for the joust and sword fight with the Sheriff. This tongue in cheek dual was played in keeping with the light hearted spirit of the production, and your portrayal of Robin Hood.

## Maid Marion

This Maid Marion was no demure half hearted creature content to merely exist on the edges of the action. Here we had a young lady with considerable spirit quite prepared to do battle for herself and friends whenever she thought the time was right. Both dramatically and vocally you presented the strong character you had created with a justifiable air of confidence.

Just one thing detracted from this confident facade, a tendency to clasp your hands low down in front of you, a position that caused you to draw your head and shoulders forward into an unattractive posture. Perhaps even more importantly it took some of the strength from the character which was out of keeping with the feisty lady you had created with such skill.

It says a great deal for the quality of your overall presentation, and talent, that this fault did not undermine the portrayal to the extent that it was ever anything but extremely enjoyable to watch and listen to throughout.

You showed your definite intent early on leading the line with some spirit in 'Walking in Sunshine'. A good sound effect accompanied your call for Robin on his own twisted horn. In the scene that followed in an attempt to add urgency to the situation you were inclined to rush some of the dialogue, something that always makes it that much more difficult for the audience to pick up the meaning of every word. This was not something I hasten to add that you did to any extent in any of the other scenes where your presentation and diction was perfectly clear and audible.

When it came to comic timing you were in top form during the 'The Song That Goes like This' sequence making the most of all the comic opportunities on offer. Vocally you were also at your best during this number.

I have already questioned the lighting effect for the beginning of 'Holding Out for A Hero'. No qualms about the actual delivery of the number, or the dialogue with Dame Nellie that led up to it, both of which you handled in fine style fairly belting out the song when required to do so.

The 'Love Song' duet with Robin required a much more muted vocal presentation, and this you delivered with the same quality as the more punchy and comedy numbers that had gone before.

As you showed with your contribution to 'If I Were not upon the Stage' here was a team player just as happy in that capacity as she was singing a solo or being the focal point in a scene. This was a full and positive performance that enhanced the production every time Marion appeared.

## Nurse Nellie of Norton

Whilst giving Nurse Nellie many comic opportunities this script did not make her character quite as dominant in that area as is sometimes the case. There must therefore have been a temptation to try and 'hog' some of the limelight in scenes where the comic opportunities were shared around. Fortunately for all concerned here we had an actor quite capable of judging just how strong an input was required in any given scene in order to gain maximum effect without upsetting the balance of the scene.

You were put on your toes from the start when it came to audience reaction with that immediate reply from the front row of 'Why' when you stated that you loved children. Having struck this positive relationship with the younger members of the audience you made good use of it from there on in.

I wasn't quite certain about that first speech to the audience once the chorus had exited. Full of nicely written dialogue as it was it was a little wordy, and probably would have benefitted from either being cut, or split up into smaller sections.

The 'He's behind you' routine may be as 'old as the hills' but it is still a guaranteed winner with any audience if played with the sort of belief that you, Jack and the Messenger displayed.

The cross talk routine with the Sheriff was played at a good pace, lines like the 'to wit, to woo' exchange producing an immediate response from the audience. The School Room was one of those places where, for all the lines you had to say, you were asked to be more of a 'stooge' than the funny man. This you did admirably allowing others to take the comic centre stage.

The exchange with Marion that followed the breakup of the school scene allowed you to take on the comedy mantle once again, and with expertly timed lines like 'She kneaded the dough!' which was helped by a perfectly timed musical effect, you were not found wanting. Back on tried and trusted ground with the 'Busy bee' and 'Oh no I won't' routines with Jack that rapport already in place with the audience came into its own once again helping these traditional elements of 'Panto' once again to prove to be a winner.

Despite the 'Flap Jack' business with Jack and later Marion being delivered at a goodly pace it was a trifle long baring in mind the notorious short attention span of the younger members of the audience at whom it was mainly aimed.

The audience participation song had no such problems with you and Jack presenting it in a punchy quick manner which kept us on our toes all too willing to join in the fun. This with those well delivered final lines of 'love' to the Sheriff ended this portrayal in a grand manner.

## Idle Jack

This role as traditional as the Dame, Principal Boy or Girl, can be anything from a leading comedy contributor to an occasional comic support. In this interpretation Idle Jack has been given as many chances as the other three to take centre stage.

From the moment you arrived to the strains of Marvin Hatley's 'Dance of the Cuckoos' the theme song of those great comedians Laurel and Hardy, you took up a position at the front of those allocated with the task of providing us with laughter.

This however was in no way a copy of either of these legendary comic figures, with much of the eighteenth century country bumpkin about him your 'Idle Jack' looked like a direct descendant of Oliver Goldsmith's Tony Lumpkin in 'She Stoops to Conquer'.

Not only did you strike up an immediate rapport with the audience but also carried those youngsters on stage with you along on the same excitable wave. When you were setting up the 'Jack Jack it's under attack' business a young player stood on the far right of the stage could hardly contain herself with excitement, obviously a star in the making.

This was a local Pantomime and therefore quite rightly it contained many local references. These are fine as long as they are not laboured, and in that first exchange with Dame Nellie you showed excellent judgment in the way in which you brought in the local references in the script. As a result they hit the comedy mark right in the middle. As did the literal way in which you muddled up the words Posse and Pussy.

You entered spiritedly into the School room sketch working well with the team around you to push the action along at a brisk pace. Nicely staged even the old 'Tipping bench' and 'Busy bee' gags garnered their fair share of laughs.

It was extremely nice to find some 'Slap Stick' comedy in this 'Panto' and someone like yourself not afraid to let themselves become fully involved with this always popular form of comedy. When it does appear all too often those involved are, unlike you, half hearted about it.

You had to wait a very long while for a solo vocal, but when it came in the form of the lively 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' you were ready willing and able to take advantage of the opportunity.

When you and Nellie combined to present the community song to the accompaniment of 'canned' music I have to confess to being more than a little apprehensive about the outcome. I need not have feared because in the hands of these practitioners the outcome, a rousing few minutes with the audience becoming fully involved, was never in doubt.

## Sheriff of Nottingham

When I think of this character I always conjure up a picture of that most suave of villains Basil Rathbone playing the role in the 1938 film 'The Adventures of Robin Hood' in which that ace of swashbucklers Errol Flynn played Robin Hood.

In his mainly black leather outfit and rougher down to earth battle hardened soldier image your Sheriff was a rather more rough hewn, but none the worse for that. From the moment we first saw you in Village Square being nasty to the peasants there was no doubting the sort of mean minded man you were setting out to, and immediately did, depict.

The self-assured narrow-mindedness you displayed also opened the door to the vulnerability in this man which was quickly exploited, often humorously by other characters.

Greed fairly flowed out of you in that first encounter with the Babes, that speech as you came too when Dame Nellie offered to give you the kiss of life, 'My dear children. Welcome to my humble abode. My house is your house. Please sit down and take the weight off your wallets.... I mean feet. Oh my little treasures! As good as gold, Gold...Gold, great clinking piles of lovely Gold!' was delivered with admirable selfishness.

Your big moment vocally 'If I were a rich man' in this case does not have the warmth it contains when Teye delivers it in 'Fiddler on the Roof'. Here it is partially an extension of your selfish greed. Despite this it is still a great and I would have liked to have seen you savour the moment a little more.

You continued well in this selfish vein as you gave Morgana and Mildred their instruction about the future of the Babes. Unfortunately some of this good work was undermined by a squeaky floor board which made its presence felt almost every time you made a move. When on their return Mildred and Morgana have to admit that they have failed in their mission you could have brought a little more realism into the portrayal without taking the character out of the realms of Pantomime. It is a narrow line to tread, but one which would have repaid you handsomely for the effort. It would also have made the second meeting with this hapless pair in your chambers, where as the script points out you are very angry, flow more readily.

The exchange with Dame Nellie, swapping insults, went with a rare old swing, In contrast the sequence where you announced the winners of the different competitions, all won by you, lost out to a certain extent because of the amount of movement you put into the scene which distracted our attention from what you were saying.

Back on much surer ground for the joust and sword fight you had the character firmly in place and nicely drawn ready for the final redemption and the ghastly prospect of life with Dame Nellie.

## Mildred and Morgana

Unlike some second line comedians, I refer here to your position in the plot not your abilities as 'Funny Men', the script writer did not merely give you scraps of dialogue and bits of songs to perform. That opening exchange between you was a decent length giving an opportunity, which you readily took, to establish the two characters, and exploit several local references which placed the 'Panto' firmly in the right area.

With that in mind I confess to not quite knowing why you appeared wearing Welsh wizard style hats. That being said I also confess that they suited the characters very well.

The relationship with Sheriff is a tricky one because although you are his henchmen you are certainly not cast in the same evil mode. Earning the description of idiots placed on you by the Sheriff without turning Mildred and Morgana into just a ridiculous uninteresting pair you stuck a good level of slow wittedness which suited the characters nicely. When the opportunity came with the Buggy Malone number for some vocal work you accepted the challenge keeping the characters intact within the vocals. That may seem to be a simple thing to do, but all too often players come out of character when they go into a vocal. You showed a good aptitude for physical fun with the bench business in the school room with Jack. In the same scene the comedy dialogue was handled with equal skill.

Another nice exchange with the Sheriff, when you had misplaced the Babes cemented your places as 'Fun' villains. As such you were a very welcome asset to the 'If I were not upon the Stage' routine. After that it was a case, as far as you were concerned of relaxing until it was time to appear and receive the well deserved applause that greeted you in the finale

## Fairy of the Green Woods

For those who like to appear as soon as possible in order to settle their nerves this was an ideal role. You arrived with a nicely performed Prologue which had the dual effect of setting up the story and settling the audience, both important tasks which you performed neatly. Those gathered around you at this time helped in the work of getting the show underway in a bright manner.

When you reappeared after the 'Busy Bee' routine you sounded like a representative for 'Health and Safety', but one who stayed fully within the character already established. With so many 'Panto's' now afraid to perform any 'Slap Stick' comedy for fear of transgressing 'Health and Safety'. In view of the shortage of 'Slap stick' in modern 'Panto's' it was worth this little lecture to see some on stage, and a neat way of cleaning up any mess left behind. In a very different mood you played a leading role vocally and dramatically in the sequence leading up to the end of Act 1. 'When you wish upon a Star', which was nicely staged, with that glittering globe and another good backcloth on view, was sung in a pleasant true manner, quite rightly going for tone rather than volume.

Another well delivered prologue started off proceedings in Act 2. I was not completely taken with the 'Eye Patch' routine, but have no complaints about the style in which you, Robin, and the Merry Men performed.

This in size is not the most exacting of roles; it is however key role and one which if ill played can damage the whole fabric of the 'Panto'. This fully supportive portrayal did very little, if any, damage fulfilling its purpose within the storyline admirably.

## Friar Tuck, Alana Dale, and Will Scarlett

We have become so used to this pair of characters having a distinctive part to play in any story about Robin Hood and his Merry Men that it comes almost a shock to find them having to fight for room to draw their characters to the full. Nevertheless that is how they have been written in this 'Panto' and if the players concerned attempt to steal any more of the limelight they will upset the balance in the scenes in which they are concerned. If played within the restraints of the script they can be, and these this group were, tremendous supports to the others with whom they share scenes.

Physically I could have done with Friar Tuck living up more to the description of being a rotund person. Why not a bit of judicious padding under the costume?



I confess that reading through my notes and the script to having become a trifle confused on the exact inputs from Will and Alana, so please excuse me not going into as much detail as I should regarding this pair. Will has the better chance to create a definite character, and this opportunity was not neglected. The absence from the programme of the name of the player performing this role is baffling.

As a group these were definite assets to the production in every way.

### Big John and Messenger

Strictly speaking Big John should have been included with the players in the previous group, but as this gentleman had also to create the important character of the Messenger it seemed only fair to give him a place of his own.

Like a pair of book ends you slipped easily into the guise of the Messenger, 'horsing' around nicely at the start of proceedings and handling a little comic dialogue well at the other end of the show.

In between you fitted neatly into Robin's Merry Men team pulling your weight throughout. All of that adds up to a very worthwhile effort which those around you, as well as those in the audience must have appreciated greatly.

### Horse

There is something about that most obvious of creations the Pantomime animal that makes them irresistible to audiences. Whenever they appear they are guaranteed a warm reception, and you, especially when on your first entrance you brought with you the classic he's behind you routine, was no exception.

All that being said you can still make a mess of playing such an animal if you mistimed entrances and responses. Yours, as far as I could tell were immaculate and therefore you were always welcome on stage to those playing with you and those watching from the hall.

### Gilly and Tilly-The Babes

Some Babes fail to reach their potential because they are either too confident or not confident enough. In the first scenario they irritate people by coming over as rather cocky and too self-assured. In the second they are often almost inaudible, and nothing irritates an audience more than not being able to hear the words clearly.

This pair struck a very acceptable note. Their dialogue was confidently and clearly delivered, and the personalities they drew were of two intelligent enquiring youngsters. As such they fitted into their part of the story easily. Their timing was good which ensured that their contribution came across with a maximum of effect.

You drew characters that were a good target for the Sheriff's avarice, and the loyalty of Robin, Marion, and even Nellie.

It would have been nice in view of the way in which you both handled dialogue straight and comic to have seen more use made of you in the School room scene. Your response to the situation you found yourself in at this time was well presented. As indeed was the vast majority of your combined input into the production throughout.

### Villagers, Fairies, Woodland Creatures

Each of these groups in their turn contributed strongly to the production. It was a rare occasion when you found one of their number not completely involved in the scene in which they were involved.

They handled the musical side of their assignment well, showed good discipline in their movement enabling the Directors to use a great many of them in a single scene without the stage looking cluttered and untidy.

Their contributions must have taken quite a deal of rehearsing, and it was therefore nice to find that all the effort had been worthwhile helping to complete fine pictures time after time. They were a definite asset to the production whenever they appeared.

Thank you for your warm reception and helping me to secure a seat where I could scribble to my heart's content without, I trust, upsetting any neighbours.

Gerry Parker