

Robin Hood – Shawford Pantomime 2015

Simon Theobalds has done it again – taking a familiar tale and reshaping it with wit and invention to meet the requirements of a Shawford pantomime. To those of my generation, Errol Flynn is Robin Hood and the 1938 film, the definitive telling of his story. Part of its charm was that it was slightly ‘tongue in cheek’, and I am confident that the participants would have enjoyed Simon’s version. Even with a cool, rapping Robin, a bit of a con-man, who was a disappointment to his merry men, and was not averse to a bit of cross dressing. (Well, even Errol wore a nifty pair of tights!).



After an immaculate Simon Forbes had discharged his ‘front of house’ duties and reminded us of our responsibilities as a pantomime audience, Ellen Campbell, who subsequently proved to be a redoubtable Little John, confidently led the opening song. We were then introduced to Robin’s mother, the Widow Locksley (expertly played by Jenny Walmsley), who provided an island of sense and normality amidst the general mayhem, which made it all the more surprising that she hadn’t oiled the hinges of her front door!



At the heart of the production, Marcus Whitfield (Robin) quickly established his character, and was soon deploying his marvellous talents for presenting a song, playing the audience and engaging them in the action, and exploiting any gaffes, ‘corpsing’ and misheard prompts to generate more laughter. Another splendid performance!

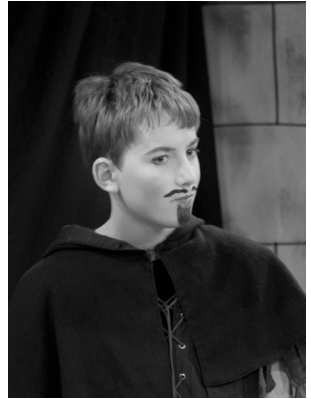
Liza Shatwell was a dignified and handsome Maid Marion who despite her ‘Green’ commitments was reluctant to espouse the outdoor life.



“When it’s muddy and damp in the outlaw camp she gets her shoes so dirty.”



Robin's band was represented by a genial and benign Friar Tuck (Anthony Fanshawe) and by three young, lively merry men; Little John (Ellen Campbell), was prepared to take on the villainous Clench, Will Scarlet (Emily Gaul) disappointed by Robin's absence from the forest and Alan-a-Dale (Dominic Pennycook) a frustrated musician. A prosperous looking Much the Miller's Son (Carol Chaplin Rogers) made a late entry to persuade us that he was not still languishing in the Sheriff's damp dungeon.



The company has a team of skilful 'baddies' who were in great form. Felicity Pennycook had style and authority as the grasping, but clueless Sheriff of Nottingham, who is readily conned to buy into Robin's bogus 'Barking' process for extracting gold from the trees of the forest. His two hardmen (Clench - James Marshall and Clutch - Bryan Green) looked impressively brutal and intimidating, ("If they ever crossed your path you'd wish you never knew 'em. They're truly bad, so when you see them make sure that you boo 'em."), but proved to be a few arrows short of a full quiver. Sheila Forbes, the Sheriff's resident Fool, effectively conveyed the bored resignation of one whose traditional commonsense and wisdom is perpetually ignored.



The impending arrival of King John was proclaimed by his elegant and stylish Herald (Claire Whitfield). Jon Hawkins, no stranger to portraying royalty, gave us a petulant monarch still smarting from the humiliation of signing the Magna Carta, but clinging to some of the 'perks' of absolute monarchy. The local aristocrats, Lord Brackenlea (John Amos) and The Count of Malms (Simon Theobalds), crotchety commentators on the action from the sideline, 'pulled rank' and claimed places at the royal banqueting table.



The smiles on the faces of the young members of the chorus (Grace Campbell, Lili Chaplin-Rogers, Cecilia Kime, Freya Murchison, Juliet Russell and Ella Turner) proclaimed their pride and enjoyment at being involved in this community event. Their frequent changes of roles and costumes gave the impression that there were many more than six of them.





Martin Harris made a major contribution to the production. Not only did he lead the indispensable and excellent band (Fin O'Sullivan, David Woodward, Richard Croker and Gordon Munro), which underpinned the action, plugged any gaps and drove the performance along, he also wrote all the songs and lyrics. The lyrics are full of wit,

unfortunately not always apparent to the audience, and the most excruciating contrived rhymes imaginable. Nottingham is rhymed with 'up-totting 'em'!

Director Eileen Gorrod, assisted by Sarah Hawkins, welded all these resources into a coherent and lively production, which cleverly exploited and enhanced every opportunity presented by Simon's script to amuse and entertain. They even had the temerity to present a charming and effective dance routine by the young chorus on the small, overcrowded Shawford stage. Mel Panario was an energetic and effective Stage Manager, who even found time for a bit of swift scene shifting. She also recruited husband Daniel to play a resounding trumpet fanfare to announce the arrival of the King.

Toni Bergstrom was again the experienced and expert prompter. The plethora of false moustaches and beards reminded us of the skills of the make-up team of Jude Vallis and Bee Welch.



The appropriate and colourful costumes, which were a significant feature of this production, were managed by Sarah Hawkins and Mel Panario, I suspect with considerable difficulty, in the prevailing conditions backstage. The effective set, designed by David Woodward, Richard and Hannah Osmand and Emily Gaul, and constructed by Mark Hegan, reached new levels of sophistication, employing folding scenery and including flying arrows (a great bit of invention by David Woodward). Next time a revolving stage, perhaps?! Kevin Hughes was responsible for the lighting system and made sure that the right lights went on and off at the appropriate times.

Other important responsibilities contributed to the smooth running and enjoyment of the event. Kate Kime efficiently managed the ticketing. Mary Amos designed the programme. The provision and management of the excellent refreshments were the responsibilities of the Wells/Panarios/Theobalds triumvirate.

In effect the Shawford Pantomime is some of our friends and neighbours 'having a ball' in which the audience is invited to participate. An invitation the first night audience readily accepted, giving us all a memorable evening of good natured enjoyment to savour.

R.E., ANCIENT SCRIBE