

ROTHERFIELD PLAYERS: BABES IN THE WOOD
FRIDAY 5TH FEBRUARY 2010

If you want to test your linguistic and communication skills try and explain the plot and purpose of a typical English panto to a Frenchman, if not just sit back and enjoy the absurdity of it all. Our recollection of the original Babes in the Wood story is sketchy but when you add in the Sheriff of Nottingham who turns out to be a murderous imposter, and a girl dressed as Robin Hood who is the rightful heir to that title, its probably best just to sit back and enjoy the jokes and obligatory songs in this slick and well paced performance.

All pantomimes pivot around the Dame character, and in this production James Gallifant, as Mrs Piper, proves he was probably genetically modified for damesmanship, holding centre stage at every opportunity with his usual high octane delivery. Mind you, he needs to watch his laurels with upcoming talent such as Owen Miller playing Mrs Piper's son Tom with great panache and obvious enjoyment, cheekily stealing scene moments from under the Dame's skirts.

This production has been a vehicle for projecting new young talent. Adam Hardy has emerged from the background extras to become a fine young actor able to play the malevolent child hating but bungling Sheriff with real conviction and stage presence, whilst at the other end of the spectrum the diminutive but precocious Esther Akehurst plays her lost Babe with real poise, as does Harry Chittenden as her stage brother. Director Sarah Truelove has skilfully got the best from the cast, highlighting Jess Lunn's sweetly luminous Maid Marion at one end of the spectrum whilst giving the obviously experienced newcomer Brian Wright space to really be Friar Tuck in the flesh.

It's a panto and if a thigh has to be slapped it might as well be one attached to the delightful Amelia Simmons who used the Robin Hood character to show she can carry a principal's role in an entertaining manner. More new talent emerged with Jess Hardy and Andrew Burnett playing the Sheriff's comedy henchmen with obvious enjoyment and later showing good stage confidence in leading the traditional audience dividing singing competition..

There were some lovely little bits of stage business – so essential to hold the attention, Chris Walton Turner as the interactive radio presenter peering out of an old radiogram was quite memorable. A clever and well drafted script with some genuinely funny jokes helped the evening rollick along.

The chorus line benefited by having some very experienced and accomplished company members taking lower profile roles than usual, and all involved clearly new what they had to do, and did it well. The odd fluffed line led to some quality ad libs that slotted in like a glove. Professional quality costumes, expert lighting, well designed sets and a decent little orchestra all contribute to a fine performance that is a lot of fun to watch.

Peter Thompson