

Wizard of Oz Critique

Sitting through two entertaining performances of this well scripted pantomime was no hardship, and very necessary to see the two excellent interpretations of Dorothy performed by Jess Youlton and Ruth Mason. Jo Evans deft and clever direction included the very sensible decision not to understudy the key role of Dorothy, but to have two players playing on different nights. Jess has a fine strong voice with pleasing tonal quality that matched the essential naivety of the character, whilst Ruth delivered a very strong stage presence on the back of a voice with a more ethereal quality. Both young actors held the audience's attention, both young and old alike, throughout the performance with charm and verve.

With such a large cast, it is impossible to give all the credit due to so many fine performances, but Derek Holland as the Cowardly Lion probably scoops the pool in the scene stealing stakes. An excellent singing voice and a personality as large as his hairy lion suit helped him create a really convincing character from no more than a bag of fur. Moving from a bag of fur to a bag of straw, Stephen Speeding as the Scarecrow must surely be double jointed to achieve the range of energetic movement he put into his very humorous and well defined rendition. He also has an excellent voice that projects well.

A very professional stage and lighting crew always helps the actors confidence, the clever set design and excellent musical support from the band helped carry the momentum through the show, and energised many of the cast including the Wicked Witch played with proper panto malevolence by Jackie Jenkins. You would not want to meet this witch on a dark night! More evil was sensually and slinkily portrayed by the innocent sounding Jitterbugs, who's sole role in life is to get travellers in the Great Forest to dance to their deaths, the choreography and music in this scene was one of the most memorable moments of the show.

On a lighter note, Lynn Lunn can be funny in any role, and got laughs as both the Coroner and later as the Wizard, her animated little face is hard to miss even twinkling at the back of the chorus. The role of the Tin Woodman needs a somewhat sonorous presence and voice to depict the absence of any heart, and Mike Baldwin brought just these qualities to act as a perfect foil for his fellow travellers on the Yellow Brick Road.

The strong supporting cast included Emma Williams as the beautiful Sorceress and the feisty Annie Darling as Tibia the skeletal assistant the Wicked Witch, with a whole host of energetic and enthusiastic younger players combining their musical skills with great effect. The production rollicked along at a good pace, transporting many of the younger audience members into paroxysms of delight, and pleasing all in the sell out crowd. One little bit of stage business which sticks in the mind is Brian Wright as the only soldier in the Oz army being drilled by the seductive Alison Organ and loony Louise Payne doing a very credible Frank Spencer impression.