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Society : Cumnor Players
Production : The Three Musketeers
Date : 7th December 2019
Venue : Cumnor Village Hall
Report by : Rob Bertwistle

Show Report

Thank you for the kind invitation to review this year's seasonal offering from the ever resourceful Cumnor Players. This year they delved into French history with their take on the famous Alexander Dumas story of the Three Musketeers - the panto version of course - penned by group member Hazel Bannerman. The story loosely based around the famous trio and involving a necklace and a very dodgy cardinal certainly delighted the audience on the night I attended. The Players put on one production a year so they really go to town on the costumes, scenery and always have high production values. This year was no exception and their thirteenth panto was definitely not unlucky for them. Peppered with lots of 'Brexit' jokes and topical Royal references the cast certainly worked hard to ensure a great evening's entertainment was had by all.

The three young people giving the opening announcements had excellent diction and poise and set the tone for some super entertainment. The opening number So Excited got the proceedings off to a lively start with some strong company singing and movement and we were soon in the realms of swashbuckling musketeers and double entendres by the score. The saucy dame was played with great relish by Tim Pottle as Madame Bon Bon who had good audience interaction and some clever comic timing. I did feel, however, that the character was slightly underused and could have done with more 'on stage' time.

Jo Chesson and Jules Pottle were great as two saucy staff members of the good Madame's Inn. They really played up their roles being suitably alluring and fluttering their eyelashes and flirting and swooning over most of the male cast in fine style. Both had good clear diction and Jo also demonstrated a powerful vocal style in the gutsy rendition of Natural Born Woman.

The famous trio Athos, Aramis and Porthos were played well by three capable young actors. Theo Furniss's permanently inebriated Athos was very amusing while Archie Chesson as the slightly camp womaniser Aramis and Dan Abrams 'jack the lad' Porthos had fun with their characters. They had good comic timing and interacted well with each other. They all had good clear diction and delivered strong spoken and vocal lines. Archie demonstrated a strong vocal style in his rendition of What's Love Got to Do with It.

Daisy Millin was good as 'principal boy' in the character of D'Artagnan with lots of thigh slapping and the usual audience interactions. Daisy used the playing area to good effect had clear diction and good projection.

Eddy Hyde was hilarious as the Unknown Soldier as he lost various limbs with more than a nod to the famous Monty Python Black Knight sketch. Eddy must be congratulated for hopping around so successfully for so long! Great stuff!

Charlie Stockford as Planchet delivered his occasional line expertly on time and with good comic timing. While Clare Denton as the front end of Balzac the equine leading character and Avinash Tuscano as the rear end moved expertly to the music and had some great comic moments with the other cast members. The head design for the horse ensured that Clare's strong and impressive vocals were always clearly heard as was the dialogue. I really liked the horse's skit version of I've Never been to Me! Very funny!

Andrew Down relished the hisses and boos as the dubious Cardinal Richelieu and was matched in dastardliness by Ffion Roberts as the very believable female villain Milady De Winter. They both worked the audience well and achieved lots of 'Oh yes he did' etc etc.

Ian Bannerman made a very flamboyant Duke of Buckingham and really got into the role - helped no doubt by the splendid costume and make-up.

David Klein as King Louis XIII and Helen Stevens as his consort Queen Anne made a suitably royal couple and had great fun in the process so it would appear.

Jessica Cooper gave us a demure and shy Constance Bonacieux who eventually gets her man while the Musketeers' pages and squires were played very ably by the team of younger cast members, Eva Heffernan, Ava Daci, Ruby Newman, Henry Furniss, Martha Gates and Elizabeth Widdess some of whom were making their stage debuts I believe. They all put so much into their performances keeping in character all the time (despite one of their number becoming detached from their mike which they handled beautifully with no fuss and great professionalism) interacting well with each other and other cast members and knowing all the moves and words perfectly. Finally the Singing Musketeers and children's chorus Amy Joyce, Pippa Denton-Dixey, Grace Corti and Celeste Moorbath were a credit to the company with their enthusiastic performances and broad smiles!! Well done to you all. I hope this fosters an even greater love of 'treading the boards' and this leads to many more future performances.

With shared directorial duties Jenny Furniss and Amanda Gaydon had assembled a strong team of principal and supporting players with some super children's ensemble players to create a thoroughly entertaining and amusing evening's entertainment. There were some great characterisations and lots of panto interaction with the audience. The pace was good and the comedy aspect brought out nicely. Well done to both of you.

Musical Director Paul Chesson had ensured that all cast members were word perfect and sang with enthusiasm and vigour. The diverse and sometimes rather unusual song choices offered some challenges which the whole company rose to. The four piece band were exceptional and reproduced amazingly faithfully some of the hit sounds associated with the songs. Very impressive I must say.

Clare Denton's choreography had a 'modern' feel to it which perfectly reflected the contemporary song choices. The movement and dance steps were relatively simple but were well executed with good synchronised movement from the whole company who performed the dances with style and precision.

Stuart Newton's vibrant lighting design certainly brought each scene very much to life while sound manager Nick Moorbath ensured the sound reproduction from the miked performances was clear and

well balanced and the special sound effects happened on cue. I really liked the attention to detail for example the sound of a sword fight really brought the fight to life albeit for a very brief time.

Hair and make-up lead Kim Heffernan and her team of Zanna Gaydon, Ella Kerby and Olivia Stevens had ensured that all the cast looked splendid in their various wigs and excellent make-up. All the cast looked very good and the attention to detail was well noted.

Sarah Bannerman's simple but clever set design ensured smooth and speedy scene changes. The design featured the ingenious use of various interchangeable hanging side legs and a clever central hinged structure which opened to reveal another location. So the scene was instantly transformed from the pub showing a cellar door to the palace interior. The clever use of space on this very small stage was most impressive. I also liked the changing back drop cleverly unfurled on a winding mechanism with a very striking sky cloth painted in vivid blues oranges and golds which were perfectly suited to both the outdoor scenes and the palace interior.

Stage manager Jacqui Lewis ensured the performance ran smoothly which from the audiences' perspective it certainly appeared to do.

The props team, Margo Mills, Donna Murphy, Jules Pottle and Trish Holden had done a wonderful job in making and assembling such a fine array of wonderful props all of which worked effectively and were used well by the cast.

The costumes designed by Avril Horn and Ally Baker looked fabulous and really made the production very special. Some great use of colour and clever colour co-ordination made for a striking visual effect. The hard work of the costume makers - Jo Chesson and Rosie Paterson - as well as the two designers really paid off. I was particularly impressed by the clever construction of the horses head. Made from a kind of mesh you could just see the actor in the costume but the overall 'horse' effect was wonderful. Congratulations to you all!

Becky Smart and Kim Heffernan's programme was full of interesting snippets about the production, the creators and of course the usual cast pictures with brief cast comments on their parts in the production.

Thank you for the warm welcome from the Front of House team. It was particularly welcome on bitterly cold December evening!

Finally a huge thank you to *everyone* associated with this polished and professional production. Sadly time and space prohibits mentioning everyone but rest assured the finished article was a credit to you all. I look forward to seeing you next year! Meanwhile a very Happy New Year and all the best for 2020!!

Best wishes,

Rob

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