

Rose Bowl Adjudicator  
Vanessa Stevenson  
January 2004

**Hanham Folk Centre Players Presentation  
of  
Little Miss Muffet  
A Pantomime by Paul Reakes  
Producer Janet Cooper  
Directed by Charlotte Lawrence  
Musical Director Paul Lanfear  
Choreographer Margaret Shuse**

Christmas would not be the same without our community pantomimes and in many ways amateur productions are the guardian of this uniquely English form of entertainment. It is a tradition to be proud of with its roots in the history of European culture from ancient Greek theatre to Commedia dell' arte, from our Morality plays, where good triumphs over evil, to the northern European fairy tales from which come the strong story lines and titles. The Dame is a development from the time when men played women's parts, the theatre being considered an unsuitable place for females! The Principle Boy evolved from the "Breeches" parts made popular in the 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> century when women played mischievous or gallant young men.

This popular annual form of entertainment still demands well honed theatrical skills such as ability to communicate directly with the audience and pace and energy to support good comic timing. It must excite the eye and please the ear and bring a sense of spontaneous communication with the audience. It is many children's first encounter with theatre where, away from the flat screen, they can experience that thrill and magic of communicating across either side of the proscenium arch in both directions.

**Artistic Impression**

The back-cloths used throughout this production were delightful. They were painted with such panache and took one immediately into the venue. Everything to do with the settings was beautifully observed from the simple use of cut outs charmingly painted to the kitchen with its period utensils and warm colours. The deck of the Pretty Polly was excellent and provided different levels that gave interest to movement and grouping. I just longed to go down to that beach in Valador and wallow in that wonderful sea! The inside of Morac's Tower was very well managed and created a really grim atmosphere. It all ended with a wonderful shimmering finale. They were painted with great care and intelligence and with a lovely sense of

humour. (I loved the ship's cat and did I sense references to Matisse and the Fauves?!)

The lighting was very well designed and the cues flowed apparently effortlessly from scene to scene highlighting the action and creating atmosphere.

The stage crew should be congratulated on their efficiency as no sounds were heard in the auditorium during the scene changes spoiling the illusion created by the scenes taking place in front of the tabs.

With one slight reservation (the spider costume) the costumes were delightful. Dame Dolly's frocks lived up to expectation with the vibrant colours bold and garish prints, great wigs and accessories. The children's costumes were charming from the dresses with their bonnets the green suit and cap to the sailors outfits as well as all the dancers costumes All were appropriate to the action on stage. Every actor must have enjoyed their costume for they all symbolised and enhanced the character. They were very well chosen. My reservation re the spider costume was that didn't really help her become that creature. Some of the legs seem to get in her way.

The Musicians played with great sensitivity to the needs of the cast as accompanist to the singers and dancers. Their timing of the drum rolls was impeccable and the overall percussion enhanced and gave bite to the comedy on stage. The musical interpretation of the songs was delightful and played with toe tapping rhythm and feeling.

The make-up by the Students of Bristol College was most effective. There is always the temptation to show off. But here the make-up was appropriate to the size of the venue, lighting and the pantomime genre. The villages looked natural but healthy or appropriately aged. The Dame, Morac and dancers gave more scope for elaborate make-up and this was very well designed and executed.

### **Individual Performances**

#### **Little Miss Muffet (Molly)**

#### **Helen Potter**

The part of the juvenile lead in a pantomime can be rather passive and thankless in an age of feminism but here Molly was played with real sincerity and a sweetness in the best sense of the word. She was always 'in the moment,' which made her reactions spontaneous and genuine. She needs to develop the pantomime technique of 'playing out front' as she was inclined to upstage herself and so some of her reactions lost impact. She put her songs over with great charm.

#### **Grandfather Fuddlestick**

#### **Paul Taylor**

This was a delightfully eccentric characterisation full of impish wit. His movements and gestures were funny and inventive and, though lively, he managed to imbue them with the fragility of age. It was an excellent comic performance. The Lazy Bones number deserved an encore!

#### **Dame Dolly Drinkup**

#### **Dave Pascoe-Clark**

This Dame got better and better as the pantomime progressed. 'She' was warm-hearted and funny steering clear of the overtly camp interpretation. In the first half

the performance was rather rushed. I came on the first night and I sensed that it was an underlying anxiety that did not allow the audience/Dame relationship to develop and so the comic business though technically very good did not really take off. By the second half the enjoyment was there, so the trust between actor and the punters was built up and the performance blossomed. It was great fun to watch.

**Jasper Grasper**

He had a good stage presence and created an excellent rapport with the audience as the villain milking the boos and hisses. More could have been made of the old 'ham' actor theme, as described by the play-write, from the aspect of gesture. The arm movements were inclined to start from the elbow rather than from lifting the chest and allowing the movement to develop from the shoulders and upper arm. They would have been grander and more telling. Vocally it was a good performance and well projected.

**Captain Jack Dauntless**

An excellent Principle Boy in the classic tradition, Jack was played with energy and vitality. Within the convention of the genre he and Molly acted together with such sincerity and charm that one could believe in the 'happy ever after' scenario. There was the added bonus of this actor possessing a very good singing voice.

**The Spider (Princess Valtina)**

There is the dilemma in this part of not making this spider too frightening and putting her into the camp of the 'baddies.' The gentleness of the Princess character came through but not enough of the struggle against being viewed as horrible. She is a spider condemned to crawl and perhaps be crushed underfoot. Spiders when frightened retrench their legs and look like a ball. The movement was all rather upright. Pantomimes are morality plays and more emphasis could have been made of how the outward show can obscure the truth. May be that is why the author recommends a child to play the part whose agility could be translated more easily into spidery movement. My comments are not a criticism of the actor's capabilities but of the decision to use an adult in this character.

**Morac**

This was a nicely nasty witch and her wicked intent was seen to flow to the very end of her finger-tips. When speaking the verse she was very expressive but inclined to bring emphasis and vocal power to the beginning of the line allowing the energy to fade towards the end of the line which is really just a matter of breath control. She wore and managed her wonderful costume very well.

**The Good Fairy**

A funny and ingenuous performance making her L status charmingly authentic. There was an inclination to rush the dialogue but the dancing was delightful and fitted in with the pantomime mood.

**Jack Blackwood**

**Tracy Deaker**

**Louise Parfrey**

**Elizabeth Durnell**

**The Gorilla****Denis Priest**

A splendid gorilla that managed to look cuddly and his grunts conveyed his intentions just as well as words. I would have loved to have seen him do a 'soft shoe shuffle!

**Flip and Flop****Margaret Skuse****Lyn Keohane**

These double acts are very difficult to do and arise out of Music Hall comedy duos. These personality acts were then hired to do the panto season

To get that sense of a comedy routine Flip and Flop needed to play together more and build up their comic business on synchronised movements, metaphorically be joined at the hip. It is very difficult as the double act requires an intuitive communication between the participants and that is usually spontaneous or takes a great deal of work to develop.

The other members of the cast in their various roles were all suitably rustic, energetic or regally refined and really brought a sense of teamwork to this production.

**The Children**

**Robert Anstey, Jessica Brace, Jessica Harding, Shannon Hopton, Sidonie Monks, Megan Lawrence, Louis Chawick.**

This was a remarkably talented group of young people. I was very impressed with their professional sense of discipline. They timed all exits and entrances efficiently thus never allowing the pace to flag. Their stage craft was excellent and they were a joy to watch either participating as part of the crowd when they totally involved in the action or when dancing and singing their numbers. Live theatre has nothing to fear with young people like this coming through!

**The Production**

This well written pantomime was skilfully produced. The songs were well chosen and developed spontaneously from the action; they were funny, romantic or rousing whatever the occasion warranted. The choreography was particularly good. It was imaginatively conceived and was performed well at all the differing levels of competence. The moves were well plotted and the handling of groups visually interesting. On the whole the pace was sustained. There were a few sections that could have done with tighter playing such as the build up to the end of Act 1 when the Spider Princess was kidnapped and the sequence in Act 2 with Flip, Flop and the gorilla, which was too ponderous, but otherwise the production identified the climaxes and built to them well. The traditional "Oh no you don't!" and "It's behind you!" sequences were well managed and did not become laboured. The cast built up a good relationship with the audience adding local references and providing a common understanding of the jokes so that in the best Pantomime tradition it became a shared story and a real community experience.

Thank you for your kind welcome, it was a very enjoyable evening.