

The Wicked Witches of Oz

DATE	16th December 2022
SOCIETY	Bispham Castaways
VENUE	Holy Family Church Hall, North Shore
TYPE OF PRODUCTION	Pantomime
DIRECTOR	Harry Chambers and Susan Hope
WRITTEN BY	Peter Nuttall

Report

Author: Clare Higgins

Many thanks to the Bispham Castaways for inviting me along to their Christmas pantomime of The Wicked Witches of Oz, a parody of L. Frank Baum's original story of The Wizard of Oz. Many of the original well loved characters make an appearance and the overarching story line was the familiar tale of how Dorothy and her dog Toto, complete with their house, are lifted by a violent storm and come to rest in the strange land of Oz. As Dorothy attempts to find her way back home to Aunty Em, she encounters Munchy, the Aussie King of the Munchkins, who explains that Dorothy must find the Wizard of Oz who may be able to help her get back home. Dorothy is also warned of the danger posed by the Wicked Witch of the West and is advised to follow the yellow brick road, along which she meets the familiar Scarecrow, Lion and Tin Man as well as Momby, the Wicked Witch's sister (and pantomime dame).

I must first congratulate the whole cast who worked really hard throughout, performing to a very small audience with only a handful of children present which, by the nature of pantomime's expected audience participation, was not an easy task at all – bravo! As pointed out in the programme, every cast member had sourced all their own costumes and props at their own cost and what a great job they did; all looked fantastic. (Momby's Ozda shopping bag really tickled me!)

I enjoyed Harry Chambers' direction of this pantomime. With a small performance space, performances can sometimes become a little static but this was not the case here and I really appreciated the constant flow of action which kept things interesting and maintained the show's energy. Towards the end it felt like there were a couple of scenes/songs added just for the sake of it as the story was complete but this didn't take anything away from the show as a whole. Good use was made of front of curtain action and incorporation of the audience seating area, not simply to cover scene changes but to convey moving from one location to another; Lesley Amos on curtains got an arm workout! Considering the small budget available for this show, and the venue's lack of equipment, the technical aspects were super – well done to Technical Director Ian Fleetwood, ably assisted by Janette Worker (sound) and Alan Westhead (lights). Lighting was effectively used throughout to convey mood and the character of various locations and the use of floor level lighting from the bottom of the stage steps to continue the yellow brick road up the centre aisle was a very nice touch indeed. Sound effects and song backings were very well balanced for the size of venue with good timing. Set and scenery were somewhat limited due to stage size and wing space, but the painting of the set pieces was top notch - the trees with the owl and squirrel were particularly impressive - thanks to the talents of Gary Tunnicliffe.

The whole cast of 10 were very committed to their characterisations throughout and they worked very well as a team to support each other with great timing and covering for the odd late line. Well done Martin Thompson as The Wizard of Oz for going with the flow and having fun with making a feature of the only mistimed sound effect, the audience appreciated it! You created a believably authoritative figure. I enjoyed Ian Dodd's more subtle pantomime dame portrayal as Auntie Em/Momby the witch – I felt it was just the right balance to fit this particular show between the typical over the top comedic dame and playing an authentic character in drag. He created a real warmth and likeability to Momby so the audience were drawn to her, nicely done. Nicky Alladice as Dorothy did a good job of portraying the innocence and child-like qualities of a much younger character and was very believable in

this role. Her interactions with Toto depicted a really genuine friendship. I felt the trio of Sarah Sharkey (Scarecrow), Linda McKenzie (Lion) and Martine Bell (Tin Man) worked very well with each other and maintained their individual character's voice and movement characteristics throughout. Helen Bailey created a lovely bumbling, downtrodden character as Drip the Manservant which played well with the Wizard's opposing characteristics. I'm sure Andrew Marsh will agree that he doesn't have the most authentic sounding Australian accent, but this didn't stop him from really having fun with the stereotypical 'Aussie from the outback' character of Munchy, Head Munchkin! I loved his full commitment to the character and that he wasn't afraid to have people laugh at his attempts with the lingo; it made his character all the more endearing.

For me, there were two outstanding performances – Hayley Price as Toto and Susan Hope as Dorothy's next door neighbour Edna/Wicked Witch of the West. These two ladies worked their socks off all night to really create that pantomime atmosphere, effortlessly switching between on stage action and breaking the 4th wall to interact with the audience. Hayley's dog-like actions and "woofs" interspersed within her dialogue were very humorous and so convincing that it really didn't take long at all to fully accept we were watching Toto the dog in action! Hayley was also a real natural at the audience participation aspects of the pantomime. Some of Hayley's best work was when she wasn't directly involved in the scene but continued to channel her very enthusiastic inner dog, reacting to the action going on; she certainly elicited the most laughter from me! Susan's portrayal of the Wicked Witch we love to hate was simply fantastic – everything from the fabulous look she had put together to her subtle movements, voice and cadence of line delivery combined to create a very nuanced performance. There wasn't a second that Susan was on stage when she didn't fully embody this pantomime villain and she was indeed very convincing in this role, thoroughly earning every single boo and hiss along the way! You should both be very proud of your performances.

My guest and I really enjoyed our evening with Bispham Castaways and I look forward to more of your performances in the future. Well done all.