



teur theatre

Society : Epsom Players
Production : Shrek The musical
Date : 10th March 2022
Venue : Epsom Playhouse
Report by : Phil Wilcox

Show Report

Meanwhile, two years on.... After what must have been the bitter disappointment, not to mention the horrendous financial consequences, of this production's enforced cancellation, you have come back stronger than ever.

Congratulations to director **Laura Falconer** and to the entire company for successfully weathering the storm. This show really had everything, from a huge, skilfully manipulated dragon (**Mark Davies, Peter Haysom**), vocalised by some easy-on-the-ear singing by **Helen Burgess-Bartlett**) to a life-like gingerbread man (well done to "handler" **Imogen Smart-Steel**) and a hilarious exploding bird.

Inevitably, given the lengthy hiatus, there had been some loss of cast members and a replacement musical director (the ever-professional **Steven Geraghty**) along the way, which was a little sad. However, the vital core quartet of performers (Shrek, Princess Fiona, Donkey and Lord Farquaad) remained as originally cast, I believe.

Ziggi Szafranski as Shrek, a terrific, clear-voiced actor with equally strong vocals, never faltered, and neither did his Scottish accent! Playing the Princess, the charismatic **Sarah Jane Pullen** proved her versatility by her true singing voice on every one of her varied numbers, as well as giving as feisty a performance as her past Margaret Thatcher – though this time with a well-sustained American emphasis.

Donkey (**Akhil Gowrinath**), again with a fine singing voice (good top note on *Don't Let Me Go*) was given a highly individual slant. As for **Damien de Roche** (Lord Farquaad), complete with vocal affectation, witty interpretation of songs and well-timed comedy, he virtually stole the show – all of this while spending the entire evening shuffling on his knees. Marvellous!

Special mention must be made of **Geoff Rose-Michael**, stepping in at very short notice to replace the unfortunate **Marcus Martinez** (stricken with that dreaded virus) as Pinocchio. His carefully-nurtured high-pitched voice was perfect, and his acting well put over. (Nice directorial touch, incidentally, to have the entire ensemble recoiling backwards in unison every time he told a lie).

Also truly memorable were the three harmonious (and glamorous) blind mice (**Melanie Dunne**, **Emily Pike** and **Victoria Swaine**), whose *Make A Move* routine was outstanding -- even down to their exit, holding onto each other's tails. Choreography throughout the production (**Lisa Rose-Michael**) was of a high standard, with the Duloc and Rat Tappers truly deserving a collective pat on the back.

The Guards and Burnt Knights, excellently led by John Cleese lookalike (at least from where I was sitting) **Jason Merchant**, performed their numbers slickly. Closing song in the First Act, *Who I'd Be*, was a beautifully executed, poignant trio by Shrek, Princess Fiona and Donkey.

A striking opening to the second half featured the talented **Darren Flick**, portraying one of his three roles (Pied Piper), Sarah Jane and five dancing rats, who started with a nod to the "feet and legs" in *42nd Street* which evolved into a polished tap routine in *Morning Person*.

The somewhat tricky patter song involving the Princess and Shrek (*I Think I Got You Beat*) was enjoyable. In another number, *When Words Fail*, Ziggi proved that he was every bit as good at portraying pathos as well as comedy. Praise too to the upcoming talents of **Artie Swaine** and **Scarlett Swaine** (Young Fiona and Teenage Fiona respectively) in the performance I watched, who both sang well.

There were a couple of inspired comedy moments involving Farquaad's horse – the "reversing" sound effect (sound designer and operator **Stuart Vaughan**, aided by **Jacky Cook**, **Joan Epps**, **Stu Epps** and **Philippa Stone**) and the pair of (large) riding boots left behind when the diminutive Lord dismounted. I also liked the local (Ewell Castle) and topical allusions (rubbing elbows, COVID style and "Take it off", "Take it off", straight from *The Masked Singer*).

The 11-strong band blended in well. Shrek prosthetics (**Rebecca Crawtha**) were striking and realistic, and stage manager **Sarah Wood**, deputy stage manager **Richard Pike** and capable crew successfully ensured there were no glitches. Essential lighting designer **Simon Banks** and operator **Dominic Lawrence** also deserve due praise. My apologies to anyone I have omitted, for reasons of space, but they all played a part in a truly outstanding team production.

My only reservation is that, in your customary colourful and well produced programme (design **Michael Leopold**), there was no mention of NODA in any form. This is a pity because, without, say, a logo, your programme will not be eligible to be entered for the annual NODA programme awards. Something perhaps to bear in mind.

The penultimate song, by your top-class ensemble, was a well-rehearsed routine, with even the dragon joining in, before the audience was sent home with that popular stalwart of the 1960s, *I'm A Believer*, ringing happily in their heads. Your show was well worth the long wait. Onward and upward from now on!

Phil Wilcox, NODA Regional Representative, District 5

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