

Snow White

B.A.T.S

Directed by Tom Hitchcock and Mark Hinson

Written by Lisa Butler

Front of House/Programme

This was my first visit to Brantham in over 50 years and my first visit to B.A.T.S. We were met at the door by a very friendly and efficient member of the team, given our programmes and shown to our seats. Good seats, a few rows from the front and on the aisle. Perfect. I asked how many of the cast were under 21 and within a few minutes, I was given a list of names. Some of the team were wearing polo shirts with a Snow White logo. Very professional looking. There was a good raffle and tickets were readily available but not overly pushed. A fanfare preceded the preshow announcement. A nice touch! As well as welcoming us to the show, and the usual reminders about turning phones off, emergency exits and a warning about flashing lights, we were encouraged to hiss, boo, cheer and enjoy the show. Refreshments at the interval included hot and cold drinks, with wine an option and a very tempting selection of chocolate bars. We gave in to temptation! The pre-show music was rather too loud, making it difficult to chat to people around you.

The programme was one of the best we've seen and at £2 was good value. Well printed and laid out and very informative. A brief outline of the plot, and information on all the people who got the show onto the stage – producer, writer, directors, choreographer and musical director. All with many years of varied experience behind them. Twenty-eight black and white rehearsal photos and six coloured ones. Two sketches of costume ideas and plans of how the set would be painted and constructed. Each cast member had their picture beside the notes about themselves and it's always good to see what they look like in real life! The next two productions are advertised on the back page. Very useful for anyone who might want to audition.

Costumes

Some lovely costumes. Snow White's outfit had a nod to the iconic Disney dress but was more edgy and suited to her character, with the skirt caught up at the front. Fairy Nuff looked adorable in her pale green dress, decorated with fabric leaves, and with huge, draped sleeves and wings. The Dame had a selection of brightly coloured dresses and a wonderful pair of boots with flashing lights. We loved the Brothers' outfits. Dungarees and t shirts, all in different colours, with patches and with their names on the bib. They all wore slouchy beanie hats. They looked so good together, bright and vibrant. The Queen looked resplendent in a black and white outfit, a contrast to her evil Mother, in lilac. Prince Charming was a traditional principal boy, in a green waistcoat, white shirt, with the obligatory fishnet tights and boots. Hansel and Gretel had typical villager style clothes, which set them apart from anyone else on stage. The Magic Mirror had a very effective silver Lycra body suit. Other cast members were dressed appropriately for their character. Visually, this was a treat for the eyes, so well done to everyone who helped with costuming the show, especially Tina Burns and Sianne Jackson.

Lighting/Sound

Very nice lighting effects. Green chasing laser lights always preceded the Fairy's entrances. Some scenes were enhanced by spinning lights. Spotlights were well used, and we learned that it wasn't always the same person on the follow spot, so well done to the Friday night operator. The stage was evenly lit and the thunder and lightning effects were impressive, especially as some of the time, they were "conjured up" by the evil Queen, brandishing her staff. We were impressed by the whistling wind in the woodland scenes. So often, a sound effect plays briefly and then is stopped, but this was there throughout the scene, adding to the atmosphere. Well done for keeping it going. The lighting during the Carwash song was particularly good. The red lighting when Snow White ate the apple was really atmospheric. (We told her not to eat it, but she didn't listen!)

Music

There wasn't a live band, though the joke was that they were stuck somewhere on the A12. The standard of the singing was high, and the songs were well chosen. A nice variety and they suited both the characters and the plot. It was refreshing to hear the ensemble singers come in on the first word and note of a song, it makes such a difference, and many groups could learn from this! The first song was You Can't Stop the Beat – a really high energy song, very fast and needing good breath control. Other songs had humour or passion, and Jar of Hearts was sung with such feeling and expression, and good harmonies in places. Sian Rees can be proud of all the cast and the hard work they must have put in.

Set

Stage left had a small thatched, brightly coloured cottage, with flowers outside. This remained throughout the show. Stage right initially had a table with a typewriter, and chairs, used for one scene and then removed. This was the office of H and G Detective Agency. Well painted sets included the village with The Kings Arms pub entrance at the centre, a woodland scene and the palace gardens, with grey brick walls, a fountain and bushes painted on. Scene changes were remarkably quick.

We liked the red apple placed in the centre of the stage and lit by a spotlight before the show. The poisoned apple is such a massive part of the Snow White story, so this was a nice touch.

Choreography

All the dancing was excellent and interesting to watch. Different styles used and everyone, from the principals to the chorus, was always in time. What I particularly liked was that the front row of dancers swapped places with those at the back so that all of them could at some point be front and centre. This was done seamlessly and the steps continued as people moved into new positions. The dancing and general movement of the Brothers was great. They were a pleasure to watch. Frankie Swan obviously brought all her experience into choreographing the routines and then helping the cast to showcase them. Well done.

Performances

Fairy Nuff. Katie Hinson

Katie was everything you would want to see in a good fairy. She was pretty, she was sweet, and she delivered her rhyming lines with just the right amount of wide-eyed expression. Her diction was clear and as she skipped up and down the aisle, she was always smiling. Katie deserves especial praise because she took on the role with a week's notice. Although she carried the script, I only once saw her glance at it while on stage. As Fairy Nuff is a sort of narrator, having the script could have looked just like a prop, so it didn't detract from her performance. Very well done, you were delightful.

Woodland creatures. Willow Adams, Jessica Earle, Leyla Ransom

A lovely trio of youngsters who enhanced the forest scenes. They knew where they should be and what they should be doing and were always involved with what was going on and reacting to it. We especially liked the rabbit.

Willy. Albert Roberts

A small role, Albert interacted well with the dame and gave an appealing and endearing performance. Plenty of energy and good movement. He had some awful puns, delivered well so they were funny.

Queen Charming. Arjan van Heuveln

Arjan was full of confidence and totally in control of the audience, in his asides and interaction with us. These didn't feel scripted, as is often the case, so they were funnier for seemingly impromptu comments, reacting to the audience responses. He was an amiable and likeable dame, who had a good rapport with the rest of the cast, especially with Willy. We liked These Boots are made for Walking, as he strode up and down the aisle, accosting handsome gentlemen! Again, it felt like he was reacting to whomever he could find and flirting in the way that only a dame can.

Old Mother Hubbard. Angie Heath

Angie was serious and a bit dour, creating a perfect example of a put upon typist, and a contrast to the quite excitable Hansel and Gretel. Good facial expression and her very dry delivery made her lines funny.

Lord Chamberlain. Richard Heath

This wasn't a big role but Richard was very funny. His scenes with the Queen might have seemed that his character was subservient, but his parting lines were anything but. Often, he would exit with a sarcastic or grumbling aside, rolling his eyes. Subtly done but it made us laugh every time. Slow delivery but it suited the character and he really brought out the humour in his lines. A lovely doddery performance.

Rose Red and Iris Blue. Elizabeth Diamond and Megan Palmer

These young ladies were a perfect double act, working effortlessly together, but creating very different characters. Rose was giggly and simpering, with a little girl voice, whereas Iris was more Essex girl and forceful. Elizabeth and Megan had a great rapport and made these two sisters totally believable as they either squabbled fiercely and often physically, or worked as one, if that benefited them more. Good body language and facial expressions, they acted spoilt brats perfectly.

Magic Mirror. Katie Hinson

This was the role that Katie was originally cast as, so she needed a quick change into her Mirror costume and back again! As the mirror, her voice was very different to the Fairy. Speaking her lines from behind a semi-transparent curtain, she revealed just an arm to accentuate her words, until she stepped out to join the Queen in her song. Lovely harmonies.

King. Mike Brown

As often happens in pantomime, the king is a slightly hen-pecked character, and Mike played his part well, gruff and pompous, though he did make good decisions in the end, asserting some authority.

Ingrid, the old Queen. David Chilton

David's first entrance was up the centre aisle and what an entrance! Hobbling along with the aid of a large, gnarled stick, hunched over, conveying an old, old woman, appearing shaky and doddering, we soon realised what an evil creature she is. A really strong characterisation, good voice, body language and expression. Good make up, and a rasping voice. Really quite scary, so a job well done.

Prince Charming. Faith Arnold

Faith's character was nailed from their first entrance. Speaking in a posh, plummy and pompous voice, they suggested that this particular prince may have been named Charming, but that possibly wasn't his true character! Lots of thigh slapping, as befits any actor in fishnets and boots. Faith subtly flirted with Gretel, so it was no surprise that the prince was quite happy not to have to marry Snow White. They were a strong and confident presence on stage and maintained their superior manner throughout.

Hansel. Ben Wilkinson

This was an accomplished performance. An easy rapport with Gretel. Ben's role was almost that of a straight man, in contrast to Gretel's lively personality and the antics of the Brothers, and that is a compliment. He was a steady, likeable presence when mayhem was going on around him. Clear diction, good body language.

Gretel. Natalie Dwan

Natalie made an impact the moment she stepped onto the stage. She had real stage presence and good body language. Gretel was a character with lots of appeal and she worked well with Hansel, their personalities very different but great as a team. Her dancing and singing were very good, her movements confident. Natalie's dewy-eyed scenes with Prince Charming were well played, her lovestruck girly flirting subtle but obvious, nicely judged. She started the singing in You Can't Stop the Beat, not as easy song to sing, and really got the audience smiling.

Ensemble. Marnie King, Willow Adams, Jessica Earl, Katie Hinson, Leyla Ransom

The ensemble all worked hard, singing, dancing, reacting to all that was going on around them. In the garden scene, they were all busy with shears, clipping hedges, then once the song started, they used those shears as pretend microphones, which was very funny. Having a good chorus enhances any production, and these young ladies did just that, so well done to all of you. Never feel you are just behind the principals, padding out a scene. You are just as important, and people will notice what you do, whether you are listening in and reacting, or taking no notice. Both options work in different situations. It matters and you all deserve to be proud of yourselves.

Snow White. Lauren Carrigan

This Snow White was not a sweet, simpering, Disney Princess. Lauren was a more edgy character, a bit down and sad when we first saw her, but she showed spirit and that she wasn't prepared to marry without love. She had a lovely rapport with the Brothers. Her solo song, Your Song, was sung beautifully.

Queen Villania. Kellie Morgan

Kellie was loud and fierce, dominating the stage from her first entrance and in every scene she was in. She established her character immediately with her excellent body language and evil laugh. She strutted back and forth across the stage, making her presence and her power very apparent, with great facial expressions and occasionally raising her voice to such a level, as to make the audience jump! Her eyes seemed to flash with fury and jealousy. Yet she understood perfectly the value of light and shade in her performance, being just as nasty and threatening when speaking in a gentle tone, therefore making her outbursts of rage more powerful. Kellie also demonstrated this in her song, Jar of Hearts, giving the words real meaning and emphasis by singing some of them softly, some with more volume. It's a beautiful song and she performed it so well that it was one of the many highlights of this panto. A wonderful villain and a great performance, so very well done.

Brother What. James Weatherall, Brother Who. Avery Howlett

Brother Why. Connie Lewis, Brother Where. Paul Morgan

Brother When. Toby Smith, Brother How. Amelia Ramsey

Brother Whatever. Laura Pitchell

The minute we saw the names in the programme we knew we were in for a treat of silliness and misunderstandings. However, jokes written on a page by a scriptwriter will only be funny if the actors' timing and delivery are spot on and these seven actors did just that and so much more. Seven people, and they all had well defined and individual characters, and yet they worked so well as a team. Seven people whose singing was good, and their dance routines performed well, keeping something of their character. Lines often had to be delivered in a totally deadpan way so that whoever that were talking to was confused and bewildered, yet to them, they were only pointing out the obvious. They must all have worked so hard to get to this performance level but what came across was fun, energy and laughter. They worked in small groups, that formed and reformed throughout the show, sometimes all seven in a scene together. When they crowded round Snow White's "dead" body, there was much over the top, weeping and wailing which was very funny. What was impressive was that each actor was doing something subtly different, with their body language or their way of crying. Not easy to do as humans subconsciously find themselves mirroring behaviour, so again, hard work and consciously thinking about how they would look as a group. Their song Hey Brother, had a real country/shanty feel and their singing and dancing was great. So joyous, it made us smile. Very impressed. This was ensemble playing of the highest quality in everything they did - a real tour de force.

Conclusion

How many superlatives can I pack into this adjudication? This was the fifth amateur pantomime that I've seen in 2024, and the standard you achieved was vastly superior to the other four.

Your script was funny, your actors talented. Costumes were colourful, songs well chosen. The singing and dancing were both of a high standard. Songs were performed with feeling. There was not one weak link in the show, and as my husband remarked as we left "There's nothing to criticize."

(Believe me, in the other four, there was!) Lisa Butler had cleverly written a script where every actor had good lines, no matter how small the role, which enabled them to create interesting characters. The opening scene was a delightful start, where characters criss crossed the stage or moved up and down the central aisle. It was bustling, it was busy, with lots to look at.

So many good songs. Dance with You Tonight was acted well, was funny , with contrasting characters and voices. Jar of Hearts was powerful and emotional. Your Song was beautifully sung – a gentle song, and it was further enhanced by two dancers, Toby Smith and Connie Lewis, in black, and the trees being lit by a subtle pink glow. A lovely and innovative part of the show. Both Toby and Connie were part of the wonderful seven Brothers so a quick change for them and a chance to show different skills.

There wasn't an audience participation song. That's often a tedious and drawn-out part of a pantomime so thank you for not including one.

(Audiences aren't that bothered, though I know it's sometimes there to cover costume changes.)

We thoroughly enjoyed the show. Steve got picked on by the dame and Evil Ingrid, ending up on the stage. He loved it.

Excellent acting, excellent singing, great lighting, great costumes, great script. We smiled throughout and left Brantham still smiling. Thank you for a lovely evening out.

Jane and Steve Fisher