

NODA review of Barton Players production of Dick Whittington on Friday 11th Dec 2020
Review by Richard Fitt

Well, what a treat we have just had! Real live theatre alive and kicking in Barton-le-Clay and oh boy, have we missed it. Whilst the entire am dram world has basically gone into hibernation since March, Barton Players were having none of it and against all the odds have come up with an absolute delight of a home written panto from the pen of their resident tour-de-force, Keith Badham. Totally Covid secure with social distancing fully observed, "crossing every t and dotting every i" in a complicated and forever changing rule book, of which personally I long since gave up trying to comprehend, I have nothing but a five-star review for their dedication and attention to detail for even daring to take the risk. Rehearsed a lot of the time over Zoom and actors in various bubbles both on and off stage, words really fail me in trying to describe the monumental achievement of actually bringing it to the stage. And, despite the enforced, greatly reduced audience numbers they confidently expect the show to at least break even. Partly because they even setup a video stream of the show into people's homes, who were then invited to make a donation. Brilliant in the extreme! The ultimate example of where there is a will there is a way!

The staging was necessarily kept simple, partly for practical reasons in the current restrictions and partly because the usual theatrical hire companies that supply props and backcloths etc are currently mothballed in some form or another and thus unavailable for hire. Such is the devastation currently heaped upon the entertainment industry. That said and not to be put off, that other Keith and backstage driving force of The Players, Technical Manager Keith Bowie decided it would be a good excuse to build a fly tower, which dropped various directional notices and a wonderful cut-out of the Isle of Wight. And in need of some stage extension, with their usual supplier currently not trading they even managed to buy what they required from another society. This group just view insurmountable problems as a minor glitch to be overcome. You really have to take your hat off to them.

Backstage was completed with Chloe Badham stepping in to take over lighting Keith Bowie moving on to sounds as unfortunately Adam Bowie was a last minute absentee. Needless to say, both were on cue and with perfect clarity of sound.

Now talking of sound, one of the more, shall we say 'interesting' restrictions imposed was a ban on booing and hissing, so we all stamped our feet on the entrance of the baddie and waved our arms whenever we saw our hero. It sort of worked and the audience certainly threw their all into the stamping. Perhaps it will stick once we return to more normal times? We'll see..??

Now to the goodies and baddies. Our hero, Dick Whittington was played with thigh-slapping aplomb and some bemusement by the very experienced Rachael Bowie. At times I think she was the only sane person on the stage! Her sidekick, Tiddles The Cat played by John Murphy was a real Jack-the-lad character complete with cockney style and guile. Very entertaining and a joy to watch. Noting the cast supplied their own costumes I would love to know where that cat suit came from?

Mick George, whom I have seen a few times on stage but I never imaged him as playing our dame, Sarah the Cook, he was really excellent with all the attributes necessary to pull it off, milking everything he could from the audience restricted to stamping and clapping. Nice job!

Gill George was our Good Spirt dressed in the most fantastic, again self-sourced silver ball gown armed with wand and a will to beat the evil King Rat. Good traditional stuff!

Steph Bowie was the put-upon Idle Jack, our forlorn love interest and much assaulted servant in the Alderman's shop. Regularly bashed over the head by just about everybody it provided us with slapstick on a fairly grand scale. Loved it and particularly his sad expressions! No, sadder than that! In fact so sad he didn't get the girl but he did end up in New York (don't ask!), with a fantastic rendition of New York, New York! Pure delight of a voice!

Harold Liberty was alderman Fitzwarren and Rebecca-Louise Smith his daughter Alice who spurns the poorly done by Jack in favour of Dick himself.

A special mention of Linda Forster, listed in the cast as 'Passer-By,' in reality she played more bit parts than I can remember with a wonderful collection of facial expressions to match that just made you giggle every time she appeared. Her often totally out of place parts just brought a different dimension to the comedy.

And now the baddies!

Unfortunately, the original cast members, Brian and Clare Coffey were unable to participate so Keith Badham with the use of a cloak, script in hand and a change of footwear, well, bare-feet actually, doubled up as King Rat in addition to his part as Captain Swashbuckle and Clare's part of Gripe was amalgamated into King Rat as well. His sidekick Grumble played by Judy Barclay. Again, a wonderful example of nothing is going to stop this lot.

King Rat was of course suitably slimy and evil, we loved stamping our feet at him and his sidekick Grumble who was dressed in bow tie and tails (self-sourced of course!). They managed to get the small audience to not so much raise the roof but certainly shake the floor.

And then we found ourselves on the ship 'The Passage to India' under the command of Captain Swashbuckle and his two wonderfully named deck-hands Scurvy (Hayley Bloodworth) and Poopdeck (Jade Franks) who between them managed to inveigle yours truly onto the stage for a grilling! Thanks guys!! Mind you I wasn't the only one, Dame Sarah had fun coercing the Vicar up on stage as well, obviously deliberately targeted!!

I'm not sure I fully followed Keith Badham's plot but as he said to me afterwards, 'Plot, what plot?' And who cares, it was just such a pleasure to get out of the house and visit a real-life theatre production with the added bonus of being one of Barton Players high quality, zany, homegrown pantos. Thank you Barton Players and all involved for a splendid evening, the backstage tour and your usual hospitality. I'm still smiling at the sheer joy of it all in these strangely dark times.