

CHIPPERFIELD THEATRE GROUP - JACK & THE BEANSTALK

In these difficult times it is reassuring that some things can be relied upon to raise people's spirits - chief amongst them being Chipperfield Theatre Group's New Years panto. Fittingly, given the privation of its principle characters, Jack and the Beanstalk got the treatment this year. With a slight tweak of the plot to include Julia Saddler's devilishly good (or should that be bad!) witch and Rachael Guy's conversely sweet fairy (neither of whom I remember in my Ladybird version), we were away.

Chairman of the company, Rob Hine bagged himself the dame's role but all the players had to play second fiddle to his on-stage son, Jack - played by debutant Freya Saddler who was thigh-slappingly good. Evidently an accomplished dancer with a decent singing voice, these admirable qualities were surpassed by Freya's faultless acting performance which ranked as amongst the best I've ever seen. No wonder they threw her in at the deep end. Given the current economic hardship, it crossed my mind that Chipperfield could cash in on its very own diamond.

While Jack got on with the job in hand (you know, selling the cow for a handful of beans etc), laughs were provided by the village idiot - endearingly played by James East and Paul Instrall as the ruddy-faced bumbling King, with vacant glazed smile to match.

Sadly, with Health and Safety regulations being what they are, there were no Wee Jimmy Krankie beanstalk mishaps to report as our heroes went in search of the Giant whose tyranny could be best described as merging the styles of Robert Mugabe and Hannibal Lector. The giant's voice was projected Wizard of Oz style and although my Dad read the "Fe Fi Fo Fum" stuff far more menacingly to me as a kid, the end result was reasonably effective. Even so, the second half of the play belonged to Jane Bryson's eccentric Scottish housekeeper who had the thankless task of cooking infant flesh for her demanding master. Her introduction gave the play fresh impetus.

The Musical interludes were welcome. I think lessons have been learned from the overkill of previous shows and the songs were interspersed sparingly and, as such, more effectively. Britney, James Blunt and Queen having their songs mangled (some might say improved) for comic effect with a cast of children providing some colourful back up. It is somewhat miserly to complain things were too polished but if the show lacked anything it was a bit of old-fashioned spontaneity. The actors' ad-libbing skills were not tested enough for my liking but it is a testament to their other attributes that they weren't.

When you're looking at your household expenditure, it's a big ask to pay seven or eight quid for an amateur production but the packed houses this group play to affirm that it's worth it. So much so that anyone who witnessed this show might reasonably forgo a more expensive trip to the theatre in the future knowing they had comparable entertainment on their own doorstep. When it comes to the crunch, the group deserves enormous credit.

Jason Cox