

***Aladdin* at The Maltings Theatre – December 2010**

Genie grants Little Wolf's wish for the perfect panto

By Simon Duke at The Berwick Advertiser

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You may have seen some interesting costumes wandering around The Maltings over the past couple of weeks or heard choruses of boos and that's all because it's that thigh-slapping time of the year once again as we are right in the thick of panto season.

Newcomers to Berwick, the pressure was definitely on professional company Little Wolf Entertainment to come up with an early Christmas present for the town's theatre goers.

I went along last Tuesday night, with a crowd of other brave souls who donned their wellies and ventured out in sub-zero temperatures, but the cast and crew ensured that the chills were melted with some sparkling entertainment.

Rather than the action starting on stage, it began in the heart of the audience when resident baddie Abanazar made his introductions to everyone. Now as far as first impressions go he couldn't have made a worse one, definitely rubbing us all up the wrong way and being greeted with the essential boos and hisses.

The man responsible for the freezing cold welcome was Dan Smith, who you may have seen in 'Popstar to Operastar' singing alongside contestants such as Bernie Nolan and Darius Danesh and judges Katherine Jenkins and Rolando Villazon.

But Dan ensured that no flowers were heading his way last Tuesday night as his sinister promises to ruin the life of Aladdin and his family sent a shiver down the spine.

Now although Little Wolf aren't based in Berwick there was a real local feel to the show, mainly down to the fact that the bulk of the action took place in Peking-hupon-Tweed and a troupe of local youngsters formed the show's chorus. The youngsters were split into groups of two and when I went along I was treated to the Blue Team, comprising Patrick Davenport, Eve Dryden, Leanne Moffat, Mary Davenport, Xenia Garden and Sophie Eleanor Reilly.

And they certainly did the area proud with smiles that could melt even Ebenezer Scrooge's black heart and footwork that would have the judges on 'Strictly Come Dancing' reaching for their 10s. Their talent shone through in the show's first big number 'Colour My World' and most notably in 'Thriller' towards the end of the first act. Now the routine to the legendary Michael Jackson track is one that I've seen done badly in many a nightclub on Halloween but the young chorus definitely did the late King of Pop proud.

For both songs the children supported the panto's main character, Aladdin, so important that they named the whole thing after him! As we know there is often a lot of role reversal in pantoland and sticking with tradition, the principal male was played by a woman, namely Jamie Birkett.

Leading a show is never an easy task whether you're an amateur or professional, but Jamie showed exactly why she has been casted in many productions to date, including 'Fame' in Monte Carlo.

Her vocals, acting and timing were all top notch and on this evidence I'm baffled as to why Andrew Lloyd Webber didn't take her through to the live shows of 'I'd Do Anything'. Jamie made the top 14 girls vying for the role of Nancy in 'Oliver' and I don't foresee any trouble in her forging a career for herself in the West End in years to come.

The same can be said for Nicola Blake who played the panto's obligatory damsel in distress, Princess So-Shy and mightily impressed with her rendition of Christina Aguilera's 'Reflection'.

Now while there are bound to be plenty of girls out there envious of Kate Middleton, So-Shy wasn't too fond of the Princess tag and was desperate to escape the palace to live an ordinary life.

Despite Aladdin and the Princess's obvious love for each other, which was there for all to see in the duet 'Written in the Stars', So-Shy's father wasn't one of Aladdin's biggest fans.

Pulling on the cloak of the Emperor was a face known to many in the audience, Ross Graham. I'd last seen Ross as Tom Collins in 'Rent', but his latest role was altogether more glamorous and powerful and with clearly delivered lines and great stage presence he certainly didn't look out of place alongside his professional castmates.

Amongst the fine actors Ross shared the stage with were Morgan Brind and Alan Bowles, who played Aladdin's mother and brother Widow Twankey and Wishee Washee.

Every self-respecting pantomime needs a funnyman and delivering huge helping of laughs in 'Aladdin' was a duty bestowed on Alan. There were local gags aplenty, with references to Prior Park and Spittal in there and his endless enthusiasm and boundless energy made him a firm audience favourite.

Now having reviewed many pantos during my time with the paper, I'm no stranger to a dame or two and having had a sneak peak of the costume designs for Twankey a few weeks ago I was expecting great things in the costume department and Morgan certainly didn't disappoint. The stage was turned into a veritable catwalk as outfits inspired by the likes of Chinese takeaways, snowmen and kitchen appliances were all paraded.

And like his costumes, Morgan's performance brightened things up no end. Like Alan he had fantastic comic timing and wasn't afraid to wait for the audience to cotton onto various jokes!

He did however have a rival in the camp stakes. Once dumped into a cave by Abanazar, it looked like Aladdin was about to meet his maker but a rub of a dusty old lamp prompted a meeting with a much friendlier character. Now for me Robin William's Genie will always be the Genie of choice but Mark Jackson certainly gave him a run for his money.

Rather aptly given the time of year, his Genie was camp as Christmas and revelled in introducing himself to the audience with his calling card 'A Friend Like Me', which ensured that those of us old enough to indulge in some mulled wine at the interval were sipping it in anticipation of what was yet to come.

The second act saw all of the cast remain on the top of their theatrical game as Abanazar transported them and us to the frozen wastelands – not that we needed to be, Berwick town centre was cold enough!

The music remained top notch too with 'Start of Something' and 'Defying Gravity' getting an airing. The latter from hit musical 'Wicked' was also given the 'Glee' treatment as was one song that we all surely must know word for word by now, 'Don't Stop Believing'.

A quick thinking Aladdin tricked Abanazar into relinquishing his powers and after forcing him to marry Widow Twankey, and freeing the Genie, the path of true love could finally run smoothly and Aladdin and So-Shy could be wed.

We were promised a wedding 'fit for Wills and Kate' and some fantastic finale costumes and a reprise of 'Don't Stop Believing' ensured we got exactly that.

This may have been Little Wolf's first time in Berwick but they looked well at home on a stage that was graced with a superb set and a cracking cast.

'Aladdin' was everything a panto should be, colourful, camp and highly entertaining, and after all the snow outside had turned me a bit bah humbug, the show filled me to the brim with Christmas spirit.