



Society : Cygnet Players
Production : Shrek the Musical
Date : Saturday February 22nd, 2020
Venue : London Oratory School
Report by : Des Wilby – Regional Representative (District 3)

Show Report

It was a pleasure to have visited Cygnet Players once again and on this occasion get my first experience of the highly regarded show - 'Shrek the Musical'. With a cast in excess of forty, this was another ambitious show for the society to undertake and one I greatly looked forward to attending. It is never easy to take on such a well-loved project but I must admit to feeling quietly optimistic that Cygnet Players would, once again, manage to 'pull this off'.

'Shrek the Musical' is based on the Oscar-winning DreamWorks animation film and was written by David Lindsay-Albaire with all new songs from Jeanine Tesori. Set in a mythical 'Once Upon A Time' sort of land, 'Shrek the Musical' is the story of a hulking green ogre who, after being mocked and feared his entire life, retreats to a lonely swamp to exist in happy isolation. When a gang of homeless fairy-tale characters suddenly invade his sanctuary Shrek agrees to do whatever it takes to get rid of his unexpected visitors. With the licence now available for amateur societies this musical will undoubtedly be hugely popular in bringing the beloved story and characters to life on stages across Britain.

Congratulations must go to Kelly-Kim Cranstoun who, as Director, was responsible for the overall production and its ultimate success. As have already mentioned, this was a hugely ambitious project and clearly demanded extensive time and effort to organise and manage. As such, it must have been pleasing to see all your hard work come together onstage here. Attention to detail was obvious which is only achieved through commitment and dedication. The entire show ran smoothly with no delays or interruptions to spoil the performance. Congratulations also to Sally Bourne and Lizzie Kempson who, as Producers, ensured this strong production team came together well.

Gareth Alber, Musical Director, and his 11-piece band were situated at the front of the stage and in a full orchestra 'pit'. Whilst the quality of music was of a good standard there simply were too many occasions where the underscore overshadowed both song lyrics and, indeed, actual dialogue. Whether it was a case of individual microphones not being properly adjusted, or the band simply playing too loudly, I would have expected this this fundamental issue to have been resolved well before the final performance.

Congratulations must be given to Ashlie Kenyon-Evason, Choreographer, who ensured this production delivered the visual spectacle needed. Given the cast size this can't have been an easy task to accommodate all ability levels. Overall, the pace was fast, the dance routines varied and those performing genuinely looked like they were having fun! A special note to Courtney-Violet Danks and Kathryn Sinclair who, as Dance Captains, ensured the directions from Ashlie were transferred to the stage successfully.

The four principals (Shrek, Donkey, Fiona and Lord Farquaad) had all been very well-cast with their individual characters being 'spot on'. Working well together their stage relationships blossomed and seemed both genuine and sincere. The quality of vocals and acting was of the high standard I've come to expect from Cygnet Players.

Joe McWilliam took on the role of Shrek, the loveable ogre whose lonely life is unexpectedly transformed by new friendships and true love. This was a huge challenge (no pun intended) and Joe certainly delivered in style and gave the audience what was expected. Joe also has a terrific singing voice which he demonstrated throughout his performance.

Gemma Louise Zirfas gave a lovely performance as the idealistic and feisty Princess Fiona. 'I Know it's Today' was a terrific number (special mention to both Young and Teenage Fionas here) that revealed her increasing frustration as the years of waiting for her 'true love' to rescue her passed. It was the contrast with her inner troubled self, when the sun set, that was most poignant.

Adam Walker-Galbraith brought the loveable Donkey to life whilst mixing plenty of nervous energy with moments of tenderness and feeling. This is a fabulous role and Adam certainly applied himself fully to the challenge. Another excellent example of character acting with strong vocals to match.

Jonathan Whittaker simply made me laugh as the pretentious, and 'vertically challenged', Lord Farquaad. With his real legs strapped up behind him, and gamely shuffling around on his knees, Jonathan gave this character the true absurdity required. 'The Ballad of Farquaad', with its high-kicking dance routine, was simply priceless.

Stephanie Parr, as Dragon Lady, gave a fabulous rendition of 'Forever'. Together with a 15-20ft dragon puppet, and the entire ensemble of fairy-tale characters, Stephanie ensured this was a truly memorable number. A special mention also to Andrew Thompson who gave a delightfully funny performance as Pinocchio.

I would very much have liked to have been able to single out more individual performances but with such a large cast, and so many of those onstage filling multiple roles, it was difficult to take everything on-board. The costumes, colour and overall spectacle created were simply fabulous. I was aware that everyone was fully engaged throughout the performance and greatly contributed to the overall success of the show. Congratulations then to the entire ensemble!

This upbeat family show ended in style with the infectious 'I'm a Believer' - the climactic song designed to send everyone out on a high.

Congratulations to Philip Ruby and Ben Waterhouse who, as Stage Managers, ensured that everybody, and everything, was in the right place at the right time. With so much scenery, props and cast movement the backstage area must have been an incredibly busy place. Well done to the entire Stage Crew - Dave Clements, Jack Harris, Adam Lockett, Rob Malone, Aimee Parnell, Will Prescott, Martin Putman, Laura Rogers and Steve Young. Also to Grant Amies and Mac who ran the 'flies' without a hitch.

Costumes formed a huge part of this show and it was simply amazing to see so many top-quality outfits on display. Congratulations to Dan Smith for managing everything here. With so many dancers, ensemble members and costumes to manage it can't have been a easy to keep everything moving along so smoothly.

Make Up and Prosthetics formed a huge part in this production and congratulations must be given to: Olivia Van Enk, Francesca Cavallaro, Ellis Roloff, Rosemary Williams, Shauna Rhodes and Vikie Elizabeth Miller for all their hard work.

Lighting Design was by Nathan Long and for the most part worked well. I do have another major gripe however. The decision to repeatedly 'flash' of the audience with lighting, throughout the show, was both distracting and to be honest annoying. It was not necessary and frankly added nothing to the production. On a more positive note, all other lighting was of a good standard with those onstage being clearly lit when required.

Sound design was by Dave Gates and Dickson Cossar. As have already mentioned, there were far too many instances of lyrics/dialogue being 'lost' when the band was playing. Whether this was a technical issue, or simply a case of the band being too loud, I would have expected this to have been picked-up, and corrected, long before the final performance. Having said that, when the band wasn't playing all dialogue was crisp and clearly audible.

Will Prescott is to be congratulated for delivering an excellent Programme that was not only extensive in size but also packed with information for the audience to enjoy reading. There were some great photographs of rehearsals together with cast and production team biographies. It was also pleasing to see the programme so well supported by advertisers and, of course, the prominent NODA reference.

Once again, congratulations to everyone involved in the production of 'Shrek the Musical' for what was another first-class production. It was simply a shame that the sound/lighting issues, mentioned above, detracted from what was an excellent overall performance.

Des Wilby
Regional Representative
NODA London District 3