

# Great start to the Christmas season

## Richmond Drama Awards

Mark Aspen

CHRISTMAS is coming and a hearty helping of seasonal fare is being offered by Teddington Theatre Club: a traditional panto, **Puss in Boots**, by Norman Robbins.

The pantomime, despite its erstwhile European origins, is a peculiarly English tradition at which we, audience and performers alike, are obliged to do a very un-English thing and let our hair down. Our packed early performance on Sunday evening at the Hampton Hill Playhouse, included a large number of children, who enthusiastically helped release inhibitions both sides of the footlights.

Although at first the cast seemed a little daunted by the lively audience, they soon warmed to the occasion, pulling out the stops to give all the energy, pace and party atmosphere that panto demands.

Audience participation was guaranteed right from the start with boos and hisses for the villain, the aptly named Gruesome, played with great gusto by Barry Hill. A vast fairground sign above the proscenium arch picked out in lights the "ss" and the "boo" from "Puss in Boots", while this hunchbacked henchman of Crunchbones, the children-devouring monster, had the younger members of the audience clinging to their parents. Crunchbones remained as a disembodied voice (Barry Rocard) from high in the flies, adding to the scariness of the baddies side. The remaining baddies were Casper and the not-so-bright Hector, who were cheating their brother Peter, the story's hero, from their late father's inheritance. Niall Trimble and Dave Dadswell played these two with a huge sense of fun, imbuing them with the air and appearance of two mischievous leprechauns.

As principal boy, Linda Sirker gave the part of Peter a charming robustness. Peter's bewilderment at being manipulated by his own magic cat and elevated to become the Marquis of Carrabosse, was well depicted, as was his inevitable falling in love with Princess Miranda. Pretty and petite, Sarah McGeary was a spirited Princess, but was a little weak on projection

Catherine Early as the eponymous Puss in Boots exuded feline sensuality: a real cool cat. Awakening from Mother Goose's spell, Puss delighted the audience with a sort of posh rap. Unfortunately, however, this idea of the streetwise cat was not followed through. Carol Fuller's gorgeous Mother Goose, all dazzling fluffy feathers, was both maternal and magical.

Marc Batten, as the dame's page, Freckles, brought a cheeky sparkle to his malapropism-laden role.

Queen of the show, in more senses than one, was Chris Hurler, who played Fanny the Fifth, Queen of Arcadia, and "Arcadia's finest pin-up". Although this is only Chris's second dame (and having seen his earlier dame I can say that this one is even better), he is clearly a natural in these roles. Chris used his ability to think on his feet to enhance the dame's traditional camp, earthy humour.

Fanny was decked in an outrageous collection of frocks (I counted ten). Congratulations go to Joolz Connery, costume designer, and her wardrobe team for the fantastic fifty plus costumes that brought much colour and atmosphere to the show.

The chorus of Arcadians was versatile, their dancing was well executed, and the minuet that opened the second half can only be described as visceral !!

The company coped well with a small number of hiccups including tangled bunting that prevented a curtain close: oh the joys of live theatre!

Skilful lighting, designed by Gary Stevenson, used a balanced variety of effects to bring out the magic of panto, without ever taking the show over. The silhouette effects for the romantic scene in the palace gardens worked particularly well. Luminous puppets of fishes (by Francis Kenny) added an enchanting twist to the standard panto black-light trick.

Much of the music was written by Will Williams, the Musical Director. His band of four accomplished musicians gave such a zestful performance that it was a pity that they remained invisible to the audience for the whole show.

Congratulations must go to director Ken Mason, his large cast and even larger crew, for a lively, entertaining and thoroughly enjoyable start to the Christmas season.

PUSS IN  
BOOTS  
2003