

THE  
ROSE  
BOWL  
AWARDS  
FOR AMATEUR  
DRAMA & MUSIC

## MOTHER GOOSE

Hanham Folk Centre Players

*January 06.*

Even before this pantomime started there was a sense that something good was on offer. A near capacity hall full of families had a tangible air of anticipation. That the attention of so many small children was held throughout the performance was a credit to the performers, the majority of whom were young and clearly enthusiastic. To have so many young people in the cast was big plus for the show. 'Pantomimes with too many adults don't work' is clearly a principle upon which this company bases its production policy.

**Production.** The opening scene with its young energetic chorus all dressed in a rustic brown echoed by the very well dimensioned painted set gave us a positive start. The fresh faces were a joy to see, and no adult in sight. The yokel theme was maintained in *Idle Jack's* costume, but it was difficult to believe that he was Mother Goose's son. This was an initial drawback in the casting which contrasted with the two young principal boy and girl. This latter pair worked well and looked good from the start, being balanced in height. Both had limitations in their singing technique but more about that later. The important thing was that we could believe in their youth with ease, whereas *Idle Jack* looked just too old to be a son in this context. His character was better balanced however when *Kitty* appeared later in the show and the pairing seemed to help the credibility level. Her 'milk bottle bottom spectacles' was a splendid idea and hid age well. Perhaps Jack might have had a wig and 'specs' also?

*Mother Goose's* stage presence was always strong and costumes pleasingly outrageous. Many scenes relied on 'her' and the action on stage was always lifted by her strong leadership. The *Fairy Queen's* accent was effectively 'Midland' orientated to contrast with the essentially South Western accent adopted by most of the cast and her delivery nicely timed, and never rushed. This gave the *Fairy* strength and authority. The idea to have a 'baby apprentice' in '*Peaseblossom*' was inspired. The mobile phone was a neat touch also and the sound FX very well timed at every cue. I would argue that the Fairy's entrance might have been d/s left- or on the right of the audience, just as all the 'baddies' might have come from d/s right –or the left or 'sinister' side of the audience. Just an old-fashioned point but worth staying with I think, where possible.

Most of the cast, especially the less experienced, tried to deliver lines too fast, and this problem was exacerbated when many conversations were set in a long line in d/s front all too often. The grouping in many situations was poor and might have been better set overall. As an early example, the 'Auction scene' needed the squire to be behind the items for sale centre stage giving him more authority and better focus for a forward delivery. There seemed a reluctance to use backstage entrances for principals except for the 'haunted scenes' when the whole concept of this scene gave a better perspective for the action, and was most effective and cleverly worked with the lighting plot.

While on the 'evil aspect' of the show, I looked for 'more smoke' on the entrances of the *Demon King*, and the interpretation of the character might have had more nasal quality in the tone of voice to make him more menacing. His demise was a memorable 'still picture' with all facing his fall. This was one of the few well-set moments of the chorus.

The action was reasonably well-paced, but there were all too many slow entrances to maintain the momentum at times, and one ad lib which received a strongly effective prompt! The less experienced of the cast were just a little slow on cue, and certainly lacking in a little breathlessness and anxiety at times in the second Act. *Colin* was a little too 'cool' for some situations!

Audience participation – a must for a pantomime- was energetically led and encouraged from all whose job it was to do so, but many I'm sure would have appreciated the words to read in the 'Fly Goosey Fly' singalong. Perhaps just a little too fast a verse to learn in such a short time? Many in an audience of pantomimes try to do a good job when asked to contribute!

**Lighting:** There were just a few too many sources of overhead light visible even from the back of the hall- the 'pinks' and 'whites' especially. The quality of the spot d/ left – on the steps for the *Squire* and the *DK* in the UV scene was a little too 'watery'. Perhaps a green/red filter here might have helped? This being said, the mood of the lighting was always well designed for each scene. The daylight scenes were always effective. The mysterious ones were well-subdued, the mood of the 'pool of Eternal Youth' was especially well-captured, and conversely, the *DK's* Palace suitably 'hot'. Clearly a lot of thought had gone into the design of the more difficult 'atmospheric' of the scenes.

**Scenery and Stage management:** Apart from one hitch on the Saturday night all was very smoothly operated and the small stage was used to the full. The co-ordination of the show was well operated and the illusion of the plot faltered this but once. In each scene the set was commendable. Especially effective was the *DK's* palace, with its preponderance of reds, greys and blacks, and paintings of fire going into the distance in a splendidly represented cave. The claustrophobic and uncomfortably hot characteristics of the scene were very well captured. In comparison the beauty and peace of the 'Pool of Eternal Youth' scene were equally well found, with its 'pulsating' waterfall coming over some very realistic rocks in a rich green surround. The opening 'rustic' farmyard scene had lively colours and excellent perspective, and the 'indoors' sets were always apt. The 'spooky sets' were very effectively constructed and the secret door worked each time! Overall, the scenic design and its management were a commendable aspect of the production and a strong supportive reason for its success.

**Costumes:** Apart from the suitably outrageous and splendidly worked out costumes of *MG*, many of the others were equally effective. In particular, and worthy of mention were the matching red white and black colours of the Colin and Jill, the bright reds of the *DK*, and the especially effective chorus costumes in each of their scenes. The dancers were always well turned out and the quality of these was a huge asset to the show.

Conversely, I wasn't too sure of the two *bailiffs'* outfits, and the orange head gear of *Danny* in particular was a little o.t.t. perhaps? More formal wear would have presented more of a threat given so much colour from all other characters, and perhaps a cloak each? In addition, *Idle Jack* needed a little more age taken from his appearance. His smock made him more elderly than the plot suggested he should be. A wig at least and perhaps some spectacles as suggested earlier might have helped the illusion of him being *MG's* son. In this he would have been closer to a pairing with *Kitty's* outfit which was splendidly apt.

*Priscilla's* costume was expertly put together and the juxtaposition of bird and human in the same size gave us more sympathy for the plight of the goose throughout the plot. This was very well designed.

The costumes for the ghosts were very well presented and worked well in the UV scenes. Lady Mary's being difficult an illusion to create is worthy of special mention in these scenes.

**Choreography.** There is no doubt in my view that the overall success of the show was due to the extent of the reliance on youth. The *principal dancer*, Miss Taylor was just outstanding, and her two supporters always were always close behind her lead. The set dances, at the 'Pool of Youth' especially, with Debussy's music as the inspiration, were a delight. The setting of the 'Steam Heat' number amongst others showed the versatility of these youngsters, and at each appearance we were treated to well rehearsed and confident movement. The chorus was always equally full of vitality and energy from the first to the last and the youthful energy lifted the show in all scenes they featured. Just occasionally their full, enthusiastic, singing tone was affected by moves which took their heads away from facing front, or perhaps when they forgot to leave their 'heads out front' when moving?

The costumes of the dancers, (just to include this in choreography rather than in 'costumes' as above) were most apt. The white chickens dance was a neat way of introducing 'Priscilla' to the farm scene, and the bat costumes in the *DKs* palace were equally splendid. The junior dancers were as well rehearsed and as reliable as the seniors and this consistency was a real strength to the show. Many congratulations on this important and essential component of a successful pantomime.

**Sound System:** There were very effective microphones in front of stage, which gave a lot of help to the front of stage out put from the principals. As a result of the lack of radio mics, or so it seemed?, perhaps this limited the amount of backstage activity for the production, and created the necessity of having most of the action all 'bus-queue like' along the front? There was no doubting the directional effectiveness of the mics when in reach of the players but the lack of them for example when the *DK* and Squire were out front, and as I say when activity was not directed at them it created an inconsistency of sound support. This being said it would have been a disaster without them! All other sound FX were right on cue and very effective.

**Musical Direction:** With such a strong reliance on a piano to lead the trio supporting the show it was a pity that the company didn't provide the able director with an instrument that was well tuned. The middle keys around 'C' were distinctly out of tune and jarred regularly on the ear. This being said the actual musical content of the show was commendable. The numbers flowed well one after the other and their relation to the plot were always thought out, at times following the recommendation of the script, at times bettering it. All avoided the more usual trap in pantomime music planning of being overlong. There were few 'practical blemishes', and the concentration level throughout from all three players was very high. Occasionally an overbearing percussion was evident, but these moments were short-lived. A trio for which the company is I'm sure, justifiably grateful.

With regard to the singing qualities of each member of the cast, the men were very good and projected with confidence. The more experienced of the women were able to project well, especially *'Fanny'*, and in the case of *Kitty* able to cover some pitch limitations.

The drawback of casting youngsters in lead roles is the fact that the heavy registers of their voices don't often match the light. In the case of Colin, here was a pleasing voice all in light register, presumably not having been taught yet how to switch into 'heavy', and in Jill, the opposite was true where her light register was ill-matched with her strong heavy one which clearly she enjoyed using more. The only way around this is to transpose the songs which obviously is a time consuming unless an electronic keyboard is hired- not a bad idea perhaps, given this and the tuning problems of the instrument used?- or spend time training these promising young people to work on these technical difficulties. Having said all this as a limitation of these young singers, they certainly worked hard at their musical input to the show and their tuning was never in doubt.

The chorus of children always worked hard and gave us a consistently enthusiastic sound. At times though it bordered on coarseness, and perhaps a closer approach to encouraging singing with care in the heavy register and avoiding what was close to a shout once or twice might be found? It was pleasing to see two boys in the line up. Excellent!

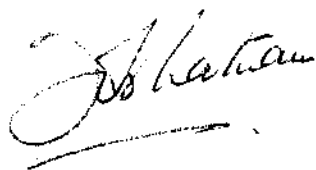
The accompaniment for the excellent dancers was always sensitive to the pace and volume required, as well as meeting several exposed challenges of the realisation with only three players of some difficult music.

**Conclusion.**

A production full of fun, with evidence of a huge amount of work brought to a climax at a time when all other folk are still amid winter holiday celebrations. This in itself shows a rare dedication to the cause. The company clearly has a mind to the future and the preponderance of youth in the line-up is exemplary if initially a little risky. This having been said the opportunity for the young people was grasped eagerly and the show had a fresh look about it as a result. The future looks bright.

With many thanks for the hospitality shown to my wife and me throughout our visit.

Bob Latham

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob Latham". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the printed name. A horizontal line is drawn underneath the signature.