

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

CAODS at the Civic Theatre

21.09.10

It's a while since Barrowman was the Beast, and now this lavish Disney spin-off is available for the more ambitious amateur groups.

In a fitting finale to CAODS' 90th anniversary year, Ray Jeffery's done a class job on this marathon musical, with its tricky transformations, its smoke and mirrors and its spectacular production numbers. Be Our Guest, of course, a culinary cabaret with Lumiere as Emcee [the excellent Ben Martins with a fruity French accent], but also Human Again, again started off by the candlestick. Sarah Barton gave a pleasingly old-fashioned musical comedy performance as the bookworm Belle, battling with the primeval Gaston [Richard Harrison] as well as the Beast – a touching performance from Gareth Barton, finding emotional depths from within the latex – a better Beast than a beau for Belle, perhaps. Another nuanced character from Trevor Lowman as Belle's father, mad inventor and victim of fate; Jimmy Hooper was a larger-than-life New Yorker LeFou. The Silly Girls were effective too, somewhere between Three Little Maids and the Ugly Sisters. The dancing was superb, from the camp cutlery to the athletic Wolves.

Among the castle staff trapped in household objects I enjoyed the Salt and Pepper, the Rug, Kevin Abrey's conceited Cogsworth, Rachael Brown's bubbly Babette, and especially Diana Baker's Teapot, spout steaming, with her boy Chip in the cup, played with huge confidence on opening night by Noah Miller, with Charlie Hughes confined to the cupboard for some other performances. Ray Jeffery was assisted by Claire Carr, and the Dance Captain was Sue Buxton.

Patrick Tucker's pit musicians were on splendid form, especially noticeable in Belle's big number, with its Andrew Lloyd Webber aspirations, Is This Home?. The sets looked impressive, especially the moving castle, though they were clearly a challenge to change. Maybe costume, or at least proper blacks [with gloves!], for the hard-pressed crew. The costumes were colourful, clever and just cartoony enough ...