

CAODS Beauty and the Beast

Performed at Civic Theatre Chelmsford September 21, 2010.

Director – Ray Jeffery, Musical Director – Patrick Tucker

CAODS have taken the celebrations for their 90th Anniversary seriously – very seriously indeed. Not only have they raised the bar for all future productions but they have given Chelmsford a taste of the West End, albeit at Essex prices. With quality like this, following on from their superb production of Chess, CAODS should carry more weight than any other user at the Civic Theatre. With full houses, an ecstatic reception and a busy bar what more could any theatre manager want? This was a professional show in all but name – sets, costumes, music and performers – simply stunning. Good touring companies would struggle to match what CAODS produced this week.

Disney's Beauty and the Beast is a variation of an original French fairy tale and the stage version does seem to be true to the 1991 animation, with consequently lavish costumes, seemingly endless numbers of back cloths, set variations and technical effects, all of which worked well. The cast of principals was excellent. The young heroine, Belle, played by Sarah Barton, was true to her stage name in both looks and singing, delivering a wonderful performance. She worked very well with her eccentric and hirsute father, Maurice, played by Trevor Lowman. Sarah's off-stage partner, Gareth Barton, as the Beast, managed to convey humour and pathos with a very physical performance. Singing and acting through a huge headdress and the physical limitations of a mouthpiece cannot be easy to cope with and yet the result was excellent. What a find was Richard Harrison as Gaston! Surely he was made for this part, which required not only a great singing voice but the masculine presence and intelligence to portray a muscle-bound narcissist with his tongue firmly in his cheek. He was ably supported by Jimmy Hooper as the frantic and acrobatic Lefou.

The Castle staff was as fine a supporting cast as I can remember on the Civic stage. Kevin Abrey's masterful Cogsworth contrasted with the flamboyance of Ben Martins' Lumiere. Solid and reliable and with the best song in the show was Diana Baker's Mrs Potts, while Noah Miller melted more than few hearts a Chip. Elle Moreton's operatic Madame de la Grande Bouche and Rachael Brown's Babette were both exquisitely cast. The aptly named Three Silly Girls and Monsieur D'Arque completed this great line up, contributing comic timing and malevolence respectively. The singing and choreography was exceptional throughout but particularly in the big production numbers such as Be Our Guest, while the standout scene for novelty, entertainment and energy was surely the clanking beer mug scene in The Tavern.

This may be a show that is too cheesy for some but for my taste it was spot on and directed with fine attention to detail. Congratulations to every single participant front and back of stage. This was an anniversary celebration to be proud of and which blurred the distinction between amateur and professional so much that I can't wait for Hello Dolly.

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

NODA East, District 8 (Chelmsford and environs)