

A Personal History of Pantomime in Shipton by John Drew

So it's nearly panto time; oh yes it is, oh no it isn't, etc. etc. and the important news is this year's extravaganza at the New Beaconsfield Hall is 'Dick Whittington and his Puss in Boots'. It's written by me and directed by Dudley Thompson whose vast experience in the theatre includes many pantomimes and he promises to supply all the traditional pantomime features. This new look at an old story runs from Thursday 13 December to Saturday 15 December with evening performances at 7.30pm and a special matinee on Saturday at 3pm.

Ticket prices have been held down to the same as last year with reserved and numbered seats available at £6 and £4 for the evenings and matinee seats at the special price of £3 for both adults and children. As usual, tickets can be booked with Gill Drew (4 Willis Court - 830398) and as the numbered seats are allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis early booking is recommended to avoid disappointment.

That's the commercial out of the way. However, it does remind me of my personal involvement in the Shipton pantomime scene and as we are lucky enough to have our own local magazine I can perhaps indulge myself with some memories of past pantos.

It was in 1994, one year after moving here, that I first learned of the Shipton panto. Our neighbour, Pat Bannister, suggested me when Daphne Waugh, writer and producer, said she needed a man to play the Captain in 'Sinbad'. I saw the script, was impressed with its professional look, attended the rehearsal and got the part (there was no-one else competing of course! And this audition was nothing like the ones on television's Pop Idol).

Thus begun one of the most enjoyable and certainly most fulfilling times of my life. I well remember the rehearsals in the Hartley's barn when the chilling temperature was transformed by the warmth of a group working together to put on a show. In those days, of course, performances were at the Old Hall where the men's dressing-room was even colder than the barn. Costume changes took place while shivering on a freezing concrete floor. The ladies' accommodation was slightly better situated in a small upstairs room but this had the disadvantage of an exposed walk outside the hall alongside the parked cars in order to reach the stage.

The stage was barely adequate in size and the permanent installation of an intrusive store cupboard on one side of it hardly improved its capability. However, Daphne and Duncan Waugh were untiring experts in the setting-up of an apron stage complete with a complex arrangement of black curtaining. It all seemed fun at the time and there was always a great atmosphere during performances. There was also an atmosphere the rest of the time as well, however, and this was the pervading damp smell which hit you on entering. This was due to the decaying structure despite the unceasing efforts of Don and Rosemary Salter to keep the Hall intact, often working themselves on the plumbing and other problems.

I wrote two pantomimes at the Old Hall, one produced by Sian O'Neill and one by Daphne Waugh. Trudy Yates also wrote two; one was before my time but her second one, Rumpelstilzchen, was produced by Sian and featured a memorable tower ably constructed by David Yates and the late and much-missed Peter Jessey.

So fond memories of the old Hall but don't let nostalgia blind us to its defects and let's be eternally grateful for the splendours of the New Beaconsfield Hall. Our thanks to Daphne, in particular, and the rest of the New Hall Committee who agreed to the installation of a proper stage and many other technical facilities.

Daphne astutely realised, before the Hall was even completed, that it was important to have a society that could make use of the Hall's stage. She was instrumental in the formation of the Wychwood Players by gathering together a group of us keen to see drama flourish in the Wychwoods area. The first production in the new Hall by the Wychwood Players was Shaw's 'The Devil's Disciple', an ambitious choice but most effectively directed by Tony Butterfield. I was lucky enough to write the first pantomime staged in the new Hall in 1998, 'The Family Robinson Cruise, Oh!' which was again directed by Daphne. I tried to combine aspects of Swiss Family Robinson and Robinson Crusoe with a little bit of 'Titanic'. In 1999 Sian O'Neill and Andrew Pitman made a bold effort to bring the pantomime up to date with 'Jack and the Millennium Beanstalk' and then in December 2000 Daphne presented a revised version of 'Aladdin'.

The original pantomimes were products of the Shipton Womens Institute and I sometimes have a suspicion that there is a wish to revert to the simpler formats of those Old Hall shows. However, the Wychwood Players is an ambitious drama group and I like to think our productions have constantly improved and have stretched all participants. 'The Real Inspector Hound', 'Hobson's Choice', 'Outside Edge', 'It Could be Anyone of Us', 'The Winslow Boy' and 'California Suite' have all been both artistic and financial successes. I made my directorial debut with 'It Could be Anyone of Us' so won't comment on that but the directors of the other productions, Dudley Thompson, Alice Burns, Trudy Yates and Phillip Croxson, all surmounted various difficulties to end with triumphs.

All the productions have entailed dedication by everyone, both on stage and off stage, in our striving for excellence. The actors spend many evenings learning lines and rehearsing in the Willson's barn while the backstage crew led by Pat Bannister and Les Knightson (with help from Frank O'Neill, Sheila Lambert, David Beaumont etc.) also spend hours making, painting and moving scenery, costuming and setting up lighting and effects. A good production needs commitment from everyone involved to justify asking the audience to buy tickets. We're all amateurs but we do try to be as professional as possible. But as we are amateurs we should have fun doing it; if there's no fun in doing it then the whole exercise becomes pointless.

I know that some people regard the Shipton pantomime as part of the preparations towards Christmas (along with the school carol concerts and the singing around the village green Christmas tree) but I sometimes feel that the Wychwood Players should alternate the pantomime with another sort of musical production such as 'A Christmas Carol' or 'Wind in the Willows' for example. I stress that I am speaking for myself now rather than as the Treasurer of the Wychwood Players and I realise that some may not like a break with tradition. That discussion is perhaps for another time; what matters now is that you make a note of the dates and book your tickets for 'Dick Whittington and his Puss in Boots'. Then come along and enjoy the show.