

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

YAOS

Octagon Theatre, Yeovil

11th October 2019

Somerset Fellowship of Drama –David Beach Competition

First Impressions

Thank you for inviting me to adjudicate your production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. On a wet night, with the car parks choked, it was fantastic to see the Octagon Theatre streaming out light and already packed with some very excited people. Lovely, too, to receive a warm welcome from the front of house team – always fantastic at YAOS – and to meet your Chairman, Geoff. The interval brought further opportunities to chat with members of your team and to hear at first hand about some of the challenges associated with this show. Thank you for your hospitality. We recognise, of course that YAOS is one of the “big beasts” of amateur theatre in Somerset, with many spectacular shows under your belts, but this one was really going to the next level! Even the programme was impressive: the front cover (by Sheila Driver) styled as a Haynes manual, and with a wonderful double-page spread mock-up of a flying Chitty complete with the Potts family and Truly.

Choice of Show

The genesis of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* is well-known: original tale by Ian Fleming; screen play for the 1968 movie written by Roald Dahl, whose addition of the Childcatcher had time to traumatise thousands of children before the stage show was created in 2002. But what sort of stage show is it? Aimed firmly at family audiences, it adopted a similar technique to the family films coming out at around the same time (*Shrek* being an obvious example); a simple story-book yarn with humour which is generally innocent and age-appropriate, plus a spicing of double-entendres and nudges for the adults. It draws enormously on the pantomime tradition, with its broad-brush characters, its vaudeville double acts and its polarised good and evil characters, and, of course, places huge technical demands on the company. I took it as a given that YAOS would have spared no expense in producing a lavish set and a phantasmagorical flying car – the question in my mind as I took my seat was whether the acting performances would match the special effects and give us a human drama as well as a motoring marvel.

Set

The set, provided by Scenic Production, Great Yarmouth, had several distinct styles. I loved the proscenium arch and the flats in the early scenes, which were decorated with a design of cogs and wheels against boarding, neatly symbolising Caractacus’ inventor’s workshop without being overly representational. An interesting feature of the windmill scenes was the way the walls and windmill sails were cut away jaggedly, in comic-book style. Outdoor scenes in England were simply presented, with large props, like the wonderful vintage petrol

pumps, and small built structures against a sky cyclorama. In contrast, the Vulgaria scenes, as well as the Scrumptious sweet factory, were fully realised and presented in traditional style using a range of cloths. The Vulgarian street scene, with its strong perspective and half-timbered buildings, was particularly appealing. The Vulgarian environment was further enhanced by a range of structures – the Toymaker’s shop, for example – and large mobile props like the Childcatcher’s wagon. These contrasting set styles emphasised the fantasy nature of the Vulgaria scenes.

Stage management and props

I wonder whether there can be a harder show to stage manage than this? If it’s not number one, it’s certainly up there with the most challenging. I struggle to imagine what the backstage areas must have been like, with not only Chitty herself (both as a wreck and restored), but a huge number of large set items – wagons, a motorbike and other vehicles, the hair cutting machine, the breakfast dispenser, Grandpa’s outhouse and many more – needing to be stowed and assembled at the right time.

Nigel Bussell and the whole (very large!) team did a magnificent job in ensuring that everything appeared at the right time and in good shape. Many big changes had to be accomplished silently while a scene was being played in front of a cloth, and this was achieved really well. Their hearts must have been in their mouths many a time – in the performance I saw there was a manoeuvring incident which nearly resulted in Chitty nearly bringing down one of the flats – but all was well on that occasion and I hope it continued to be so. A production such as this brings many health and safety issues into play, as well as the main task of ensuring the audience sees a great show, and so the team has a huge responsibility to the cast and to each other.

The flying car itself was a triumph – gorgeous to look at, with her bonnet so shiny that it looked as if she had always been handled with kid gloves, and wonderful rich wood trim and brass lamps. I am sure the flying scene caused a few headaches before getting to the impressive sight we experienced from the auditorium – but get there it did!

Let’s not forget the people side of stage management – ensuring that everyone arrives at the right side of the stage at the right time and in the right costume is no easy task when you have such a large cast, including children and their chaperones, and Flora’s doggy needs must not be ignored! YAOS are fortunate in having a team of people who have worked together on many occasions, and as far as this audience member could tell, everything went like clockwork - and if there was any panic or chaos backstage, well, none of the cast and crew will be telling tales!

There was a host of props, both large and small; some no doubt constructed in-house, others hired in. All were appropriate, in good nick, and managed well by Sharon Hansford, Pauline Warren and their team. Personal props were used particularly well to enliven crowd scenes by adding detail and in some cases height, like the traditional flower arches carried by the

Vulgarian village maidens, though in the fairground scene a different solution from the very modern-looking metallic helium balloons would have been more authentic.

Lighting and effects

The lighting design, by Danny Norris and realised by the team at the Octagon, gave us a range of atmospheric moods which were thoroughly effective, whether the bright candy colours of the Scrumptious Sweet Factory, the evening light on the crowds waving goodbye to Chitty, or the sultry red bathing the dancers in the Bombie Samba scene. This is just what you want in a classic show like this: everything worked, everything was appropriate without particularly drawing attention to itself with fancy but unnecessary lighting tricks – there was enough to be wowed by in the special effects! One lighting sequence which, for me, didn't work quite so well as the rest was at the very beginning, where attention turns to the Baron and Baroness stage left making a phone call to the two spies stage right. Pools of light duly appeared to highlight this new plot strand, but the main stage was merely dimmed rather than blacked out – for me this was the wrong choice, but that is just my opinion, of course. The spies weren't generally very well served by the lighting plot – their auditorium entry for Act Two wasn't effectively lit at all, so that I would bet that a fair proportion of the audience didn't realise what was going on.

Effects are crucial in *Chitty!* There was a well-managed sudden storm leading to the family's realisation that they were stranded, and there were some great engine effects with noise and smoke at various points. What about Chitty's magical powers, though? Did they convince? Well, yes and no. It's a Yes from me to the flying sequence: Chitty and her passengers rose up against a star cloth, while the people down below were effectively lit in a warm twilight which concealed the mechanics of the illusion. Given the high specification (and budget) of the stage car, one could have imagined something even more spectacular, but this did the job, aided by the excellent physical acting of the passengers, and certainly delighted the audience. The floating sequence, however, couldn't be said to convince – a couple of floats popping out and the scenery hedges disappearing, leaving an open cyclorama, didn't really cut it. It's only a short warm-up to the main act of flying, of course, but it seemed rather a shame not to do something more theatrical with it.

Sound

The sound was professionally and effectively managed. At the start of the show, I recognised a feature which I have often noticed at the Octagon Theatre – a tendency for the sound to be homogeneous and emerge like a mono soundtrack, so that it is difficult to tell where individual voices (for example, a chorus member with one line to sing) are coming from. However, either this improved, or I adapted to it, and I felt that the sound balance overall was admirable. It is no mean feat to balance, for example, four singers, two of them children, with a twelve-piece band and a full range of engine noises, and this was done very effectively. The volume was appropriate throughout, giving us a clear, crisp, “easy listening” experience – a thoroughly good job.

Costume

The range of costumes in this show ensured that the stage was always filled with colour and interest. The number of complete changes was testament to the high production values which YAOS always insist on. I know the costumes were hired, but they still have to be selected with an eye to the overall impact of the production, and this was done very well, with colour and style signalling the various narrative strands very effectively. Firstly, we had the everyday folk, clad mostly in neutral browns and greys, with just a few touches of a dull red. The Potts family, as well as Truly when we first saw her in her motorcycle gear, belonged to this colour palette. Truly, though, was soon transformed from her feisty jodhpurs and boots to the more familiar frothy lace with picture hat, by way of a striking purple velvet outfit for the factory which made her look like a Quality Street lady (for anyone as old as me, who remembers the old branding on the tins!). The operatives at the sweet factory provided a visual feast in their candy stripes of mint, peach and raspberry, (accessorised with black pussycat bows and neat little aprons), with their gents in toning shirts and waistcoats. Then there was the explosion of colour at the fairground, with the attractive ballet girl and Arabian costumes as well as the Morris men in their white suits and multicoloured waistcoats (though the red bowler hats with a row of daisies was a strange choice – straw hats or black toppers, please!)

Vulgaria (and how well-named it was) provided endless opportunities for costume fantasy. The Baron and Baroness, together with their military, were consistently in dramatic red and black – with enough furs, feathers, peplums and braid to sink a battleship. Their costumes for “Chu-chi Face” pushed the burlesque vibe as far as it could go for a family audience – the baron in particular being quite saucy – and they certainly had fun in that number, as the whole ensemble did with the Bombie Samba, again in vibrant red and black. In contrast, the sinister Childcatcher and the noble Toymaker were rigged out, like the Ruritanian style townsfolk, as if they had stepped out of the pages of Grimms’ Fairy Tales. The group of children too were appropriately dressed in ragged misery. It just remains to mention the Spies – their range of comedy costumes separating them from all other characters in a range of amusing outfits from deerstalkers and caped overcoats to one-piece swimming costumes.

All in all, the costumes certainly lived up to their importance as a lead item in the visual impact of the show, and it was clear that Di Jamieson and her team of costumiers and dressers were doing a wonderful job of keeping them in good repair and clean – quite a challenge in a two-week run.

Hair and Makeup

The makeup team gave us bright faces with features clearly distinguishable from well back in the auditorium, and I must comment on the well-designed makeup look for the Baroness – sultry and dramatic. Equally dramatic in a very different way was the creepy pale makeup and prosthetic nose for the Child Catcher. I hope there were not too many bad dreams among the children in the audience that night!

Hair and wig styling for the ladies was good, with appropriate and secure styles throughout, despite the range of hats and headdresses which were worn. The wigs provided for the male characters were, I have to say, more problematic. Of course, in many cases they were being worn for comedic impact, but the fact that they were clearly styled to be worn by women gave them a jarring effect so that they became distracting. The Vulgarian inventors were given wigs which were more “old lady perm” than “mad scientist”, which was a shame when they had their great number *The Roses of Success* to perform. The wig I found most distracting was poor Boris’s – again, it was clearly styled for a woman, and I found myself wondering every time he appeared whether it was supposed to be bad hair, or a bad wig which Boris himself had chosen as a disguise – as I say, a distraction from his performance.

One last item to mention – one which must have been jointly the responsibility of the hair and makeup team and the sound engineers – many of the head mics were clumsily placed and very visible – we know they are there, and don’t mind catching a glimpse, but they really shouldn’t be quite so obtrusive. Possibly I had just caught a poor night for this element and time backstage had been so pressured that some people weren’t able to fix them correctly; hopefully they were better hidden for other performances.

Musical Direction

An accomplished band, an accomplished professional MD – isn’t that always a recipe for complete musical success? Well, it’s not guaranteed. Your MD needs a rapport with the amateur cast and an ability to support, train, encourage and get the best from them, and this is what Kathryn Stevens evidently had in bucketloads. Vocal performances were confident, tuneful and, even more importantly, communicated well. In the big ensemble numbers the singing was never overpowered by the demands of the choreography, and this was a musical performance which was thoroughly enjoyable. It’s not my favourite score by a long chalk, but my goodness, those numbers are catchy! The band, though the Shermans and their orchestrators gave them few opportunities to show off as an individual feature of the show, played beautifully throughout, and I would really have enjoyed the overture without the addition of the audience clap-along (not that this was within your control!).

Choreography

Doing double duty as director and choreographer, Jeremy Tustin was able to give us a show where movement and drama were very well integrated. His way with a large crowd is admirable, so that movement around the stage was natural and gave us a good narrative and always plenty of detail to watch, as in the fairground scene. The big dance numbers were lively and entertaining; in terms of pure dance challenge for the chorus there was nothing to take one’s breath away, though I’m sure it didn’t feel like that during the rehearsal period, but that meant that the performers were well able to perform their choreography without a hitch. *Me Old Bamboo* was danced lustily and with precision, the stick work never going adrift through all the tapping and throwing. On a stage with no built upper level, the choreographer and dancers had to work hard to add height into the routines. This was well done in *Toot Sweets*, for me the best routine in the show, (as well as including the best line: “No longer need candy be mute”!) where after a dance break in lines of performers which filled the stage

with colour and movement, we moved into waltz time and a sequence of alternating lifts. *The Bombie Samba*, too, filled the stage in a different style and gave us a very dramatic routine, just slightly diluted by the presence of some dancers in their folk costumes rather than the red and black flamenco dresses (not that these ladies danced any less well, it's just the visual impact of their costumes) - I guess this was a trade-off for having the stage packed with people. The routine itself, again not technically too difficult, was made special by excellent body positioning and precise and stylish hand movement and poses. Individual dance and movement performances are commented on in the sections below.

Principals

Caractacus Potts: Nick Harris

Nick, I have seen you in other productions and know what an adaptable actor you are, but this is one time when it is fair to say, "You were made for this role!" This was a delightful performance. Your fatherly relationship with Jeremy and Jemima was warm and convincing, and in the final verse of *Hushaby Mountain* you managed to convey, without a single line scripted for you, your pain at the loss of your wife who used to sing the lullaby to the children. The wistfulness of this scene was balanced by the energy of the rest of your performance: your singing was spot-on throughout, and never better than in *Teamwork*. You expressed the "daffy" side of the character in the early scenes with some head-scratching and physical clowning, but your movement generally was neat and precise, and your dancing was impressive – strong, athletic and right on the beat.

Truly Scrumptious: Jennifer Holland-Brewer

Yours was a highly accomplished performance as Truly. As created in the 1968 film, she's a typical '60s heroine – half-way between liberated and girly. To be perfectly honest, despite her name, she is not the most sympathetic of characters at the start of the show – somewhat domineering, yet not terribly competent, as demonstrated by her possession of a motorbike yet her inability to steer it or understand its workings. Her first interaction with the Potts family – challenging the children's absence from school and failing to understand their family bereavement – is unpromising. This hard edge to her personality came across convincingly, aided by a cut-glass posh accent. Truly has to develop a warmer side without a great deal of help from the scriptwriters, until she gets the chance to deliver her personal meditation *Lovely Lonely Man*, and the audience starts to understand her inner thoughts. This you did absolutely beautifully. Your developing relationship with the children was charming and your singing throughout the show was gorgeous -what a voice! I have never seen *Doll on a Music Box* performed better – a performance worthy of a professional ballet dancer in its absolute precision.

Grandpa Potts: Steve Williams

You relished your role as Grandpa and gave a heart-warming performance throughout. Your early number *Them Three* was gruffly touching, and gruffness concealing a heart of gold was a keynote of your character. You had the dubious privilege of delivering that rather tedious song *POSH*, but you got us through it unscathed through force of personality, though the

words were less than clear at times. In compensation you had a great number *The Roses of Success* with the inventors. Your acting with Jeremy and Jemima was lovely and the audience really warmed to you.

Jeremy: Ewan Cassell, and Jemima: Olivia-Rose Wiehahn

In some shows, children's roles are hardly more than walking, talking scenery – they are there just to provide the occasional moment of cuteness. This is definitely not the case in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!* Jeremy and Jemima are key characters who drive the story forward from the beginning (no pun intended) – they have to have the confidence and personality to make the audience love them and want them to get their heart's desire. Ewan and Olivia-Rose, you definitely did this. Your acting was excellent, whether you were drawing close to Truly, terrified by the Child Catcher, or having a jolly time at the seaside. One of the signs of a good actor is to be able to occupy themselves in a natural way while other performers have the limelight, and you did this beautifully when playing with the mannequins in the Toymaker's workshop. Your words were crystal clear, whether spoken or sung; you both have lovely voices and delivered your songs very well – and those songs may be well known, but they are far from easy to sing, especially when you are up in the air in a flying car! It must be said that I have heard great reports of your colleagues **Benjamin and Fenella** from the Potts team, too. How lucky YAOS are to have such good juniors to perform in their shows, and I am sure you will all have many happy years of singing, dancing and acting ahead of you.

Baron Bomburst: Steve Harland-Brassington

The ultimate man-child, Baron Bomburst is a most peculiar role, and you engaged with it with full-on bravura. You managed to appeal both to the children in the audience and, with knowing leers and innuendo, to the adults too. There is no holding back in this role and you certainly didn't – your tantrums were superb. Your chemistry with your Baroness came across splendidly, and it certainly works well to have a young Baron, against the norm of casting.

Baroness Bomburst: Kirstine Champion

A cracking performance, in which you were clearly relishing every minute on stage and every detail of dialogue and movement. You combined true dance talent with physical comedy in a way which is quite rare – that splits sequence was hilarious! The Baroness's cruelty is a mask for her frustration, and this was evident from your performance – you brought out your exit line about pickled onions and ice cream in a way which made it quite clear there was going to be a big change in the near future!

The Child Catcher: Zack Welfare

There can be few small roles which are more crucial to a production, and you made the most of every minute on stage, relishing your spoken dialogue so much that you were almost singing it – this was effectively creepy. Your movement, channelling the great Robert Helpmann, was smooth and sinister, so that you became almost supernatural, rather than a guy doing an unpleasant job, and this had a great impact.

The Toymaker: Stevie P

Another key role which appears late in the show's sequence, but without the other-worldly potential of the Child Catcher. This makes the Toymaker a difficult character to portray – it's down to the scriptwriting; he's one of the few characters without any humour, and this is much harder to work with. You did a good job in presenting his essential goodness and his heroic role in protecting as many children as possible, and sang and danced well in *Teamwork*.

Boris: Luke Whitchurch; Goran: Nick Toop

Two very strong individual performances – but what do they say about *Teamwork*? It's in the essence of the Spies' performances that they are virtually joined at the hip: the ultimate vaudeville double act, and as such you had the audience rooting for you from your very first telephonic conversation. Your partnership worked superbly both verbally (great cod-Eastern-European accents) and physically – some absolutely inspired clowning from Nick in particular. The big number *Act English* was a tour-de-force; I wished I could have pressed the replay button, but not because I needed it to catch the words, as they were crystal-clear the first time around. How much practice must that have taken! This crazy partnership was one of the highlights of the show for me.

Other Roles and Ensemble

YAOS always has a very strong ensemble, and this show was no exception. That makes it sound as if it happens automatically – not so! Many hours of work from the director and his team, as well as by the performers themselves, go into creating a disciplined band of performers, confident in every lyric, line of dialogue, step, gesture and position on stage. There was a real sense of every performer collaborating to tell the story and create the right mood, and this is really to be commended, especially when they are changing role and costume on a regular basis – I didn't count the number of costume changes for the ensemble, but I'm sure they did!

From the ensemble a number of lovely little performances emerged in the minor roles: I enjoyed Duncan Wright's Brummie Mr Coggins and Mark Rudd's doubling of Lord Scrumptious and the Junkman (though I'm really not sure why the doubling was needed or what it added). I certainly mustn't forget the impeccably behaved Flora as Edison!

Direction

Since I've just mentioned a doubled role, I'll start with an early directorial decision – the libretto, and professional stage practice, suggests a number of possible doublings between roles in England and in Vulgaria – for example, doubling the Junkman and the Childcatcher. This automatically, but with a light touch, suggests that the whole flying car/Vulgaria scenario could be emerging from the children's imagination, based on the world around them. Jeremy Tostin decided not to go down this route – a legitimate decision, of course, but one which places the whole story in the real world and means that the audience must wholeheartedly believe in it.

I think this was achieved, and in convincing fashion. My comments above show how much colour and action you gave to the big production numbers. It's not a wonderful script, though, and the plot isn't the easiest to follow, especially for the target audience of children. The structure of the show, panto-based as it is, creates some moments where it is difficult to keep the pace cracking along, and there were some moments when it flagged, particularly in *Vulgaria*, despite some great comic invention, like the spies appearing from behind the screens. The big choreographed scenes, though, saved your bacon, and you always managed to inject fresh energy as the band struck up.

All in all, you created a show which was full of zest and entertainment, with some great individual performances, marvellous stage management and one which sent everyone home happy and with a head full of tunes which they will be whistling for weeks to come, just as I am!

Thank you for inviting me.

Linda Mumford, Somerset Fellowship of Drama
Date 22nd October 2019