

CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG

M.A.D. Kids – Marlborough – Marlborough Village Hall

Dir: Claire Tapper

Chor: Jo Kelly

Vocal Coach: Gaby Kavanagh

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It is a few years now since I have had the pleasure of seeing a MAD Kids show. Formed 20 years ago as a youth offshoot of the adult MAD Group, they have steadily grown to what they are today, presenting an annual week long full musical to a standard that rivals a lot of adult groups. During much of that journey their director and artistic brain has been Claire Tapper.

To celebrate this milestone, they decided on the challenge of Chitty, a show that stretches many an adult group to it's limits, never mind a youth group in the middle of the rural South Hams. This show is the stage version of the musical film released in 1968 and based in part on the children's novel "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang The Magical Car" published in 1964. The film, and now the stage show, have endured over the years despite the story now fast approaching 60 years old. The story's pre-occupation with sweets, toys and weird machinery have ensured it is a favourite with young audiences even today.

Of course, the obvious part of the challenge is the Chitty car. Here, Men in Sheds came to the rescue and built a magnificent smaller size car, which suited the job perfectly on this stage. It looked the part, and even had fold out wings. While it could be moved around, sadly it couldn't fly, but with the aid of lighting effects, those scenes looked fine. On top of this was a magnificent music doll box and other lovely scenic effects constructed by the backstage team. All amateur groups based in this venue have beautifully designed staging and so it was here.

I was glad that it was the full adult version of the show that was being presented. So many youth versions of shows are really hatchet jobs, especially Matilda and Shrek, where the youth versions lose much of the shows meaning and appeal. These kids were certainly up for the challenge and the group fielded a mammoth cast.

As with many groups at present, youth or adult, there is a shortage of male talent, therefore quite a few roles were cross cast, but this mattered not and in today's more relaxed gender fluid society why should it matter?

Caractacus Potts was played by a young man who has proven to be a talented performer as he has grown older. He was certainly the centre of the show, acting, singing and dancing to great effect, and with a winning smile. Truly Scrumptious was lovely with just the right amount of feistiness, but maintaining that sweet persona to contrast. Jeremy and Jemima were suitably bright eyed and bushy tailed and both gave lively performances. Grandpa was delightfully nimble for an older character and he gave good rendition of his musical numbers.

The relatively normal characters of the family and children are wonderfully balanced by the rather crack pot characters we find in Vulgaria. The Baron and Baroness are very pantomimic and are central to ensuring that this musical is really a pantomime for the rest of the year. They were amusingly over the top and managed to portray the complete dottiness of this couple very well. Their two spies Boris and Goran, sent to England to try and steal the Chitty Car, are also another comic device to ensure this show doesn't take itself too seriously and were also able to portray their idiotic characters to great effect.

All children's stories need a bogeyman, something to balance all the comedy and fun, and this story has the iconic character of the child catcher. For such a well known character, it is surprising that the child catchers appearances are few. This performer ensured that her impact was central to the show, despite us having to wait a long time to meet her.

There are also a whole host of other characters we meet along the journey including Lord Scrumptious, The Toymaker, the junkman, and Coggins, and all were portrayed with relish. There was a lot of talent on display in this show.

Claire's direction ensured a tight, fast paced production. Choreography by Jo was well rehearsed and the entire cast captured the nature of this show beautifully. The routines were neat and polished, which was no mean feat on this relatively small stage with such a huge cast.

There was no live orchestra and backing tracks were used, but this worked beautifully. There is a great deal of under scoring and I gather it was no mean feat for the kids to work out exactly when to sing, but they managed it beautifully, with the guiding hand of Gaby.

As always, technically, the production was excellent. Lighting and sound are something that people tend to comment on only if something is wrong. Nothing was wrong here and each helped give this production a professional polish.

This production had full houses, which it so richly deserved, thus ensuring that MAD Kids are well set for the next 20 years.