

ROBIN HOOD AND THE BABES IN THE WOOD

Alan Frayn Script

MAD (Marlborough)

Village Hall – Jan 2025

Director – Jackie Plyer (Asst Jenny Wood)

Choreographer – Charlotte Hodgson and Jo Ellis

Vocal Coach – Gaby Kavanagh

I am a great fan of Frayn scripts. To my mind they are some of the best on the pantomime script market fulfilling all the needs of an amateur pantomime company but with a professional slant to them. There are enough roles to keep your main players happy, but not too many that talent becomes stretched, there are good opportunities for chorus and dancers, plenty of slots for music and also a good strong plot line (something that many pro pantomimes lack nowadays). They also introduce audience interaction at an early stage with shout outs and quick character introductions.

His scripts are always entertaining and I know that when a Frayn script is being used, the evening will be a good one.

However, as with all script writers, there is variety within the product, and so it is with this script. This one is very wordy and a lot of story introduction is required. As a result the usual pantomime necessities do not make an appearance until a bit later in the story. To my mind it is essential, within the first one or two scenes to introduce the regular shout out (usually from the main comic character), maybe have a session of sweet throwing encouraging lots of noise from the younger audience members, and also introduce something like a water spraying session (yes, old hat but it DOES get the audience going). All of these should be done early in the script – why? To pin the shows credentials up on the post that it is OK to shout out and be a loud audience and also to warm them up. All audiences need warming up and some are more difficult to warm up than others. There is a reason why live TV shows employ a warm up artist before the recording starts, and that same reason should be employed in a pantomime script.

This title can be problematic as in the past it has included the kidnapping of the babes, which nowadays can be a bit of an issue. This now amends that slightly and the babes are never really in danger but a threat is implied, thus making the script more palatable for a modern audience.

As this script is high on plot detailing in the first few scenes and light on the audience warm up it does take a while to get going and the audience are required to sit and listen. This therefore requires a good strong pantomime director to ensure that the show doesn't become slow and boring from the outset. Luckily Jackie is experienced and managed to make sure there was enough interest that this production got off to a good start. She was lucky to have a very good cast and ensemble who worked their socks off and once the usual pantomime aspects made themselves evident, the evening took off although most of that is in Act 2 with this script.

As well as a good line up of principals, the ensemble were very well drilled. Ages ranged from little tackers to more mature players but the energy displayed was impressive. They had been drilled superbly by the choreographers and none of them put a foot wrong. In fact the big production numbers were some of the high spots of the evening. There were no straying gazes or wrong steps, none of the younger players looked sideways for support or a clue to the moves, everyone was focussed on what they were doing. They were a joy to watch.

They were helped by very good choice of musical numbers which were always lively and upbeat. Once again backing tracks were in use here. I do miss the live musicians and 5 piece band that MAD used to use, but I do recognise that this was a significant expense that could no longer be withstood. The tracks were used well and there were no awkward pauses, but what it does mean is that there is no live percussionist to underpin the comic moves and jokes etc.

Vocals from all were impressive. Gaby had also trained them well and there was some great singing from the principals.

Robin Hood was played traditionally by a female and cut an impressive figure as the titular character. Her vocals were also very good and she was one of the choreographers also. Her merry band of men were very entertaining and their characters were nicely varied. I especially enjoyed Little John who displayed good comic timing, but Friar Tuck, Will Scarlett, Much the Millar and Alana Dale were all great in their roles and they all worked well as a team each contributing much to the comedy.

Each act is introduced by the Poet. Always a temptation, as this is a small role, to diminish it with a less experienced player, but this is to forget that this character introduces the proceedings and needs to start each act with a flourish. This established performer did just that and underpinned the shows professionalism right at the start.

Principal Girl Maid Marion was given a nice strong performance. This one has a bit of balls about her and was not sickly sweet. Once again vocals were excellent. The threat usually reserved for the babes is given to maid Marion in this script thus ensuring the child abduction aspect is dispensed with.

Comedy is in the capable hands of Nurse Nellie and Snivel and grovel. Comic timing was excellent from all three, and also all three were able to interact with the audience very well and ensure proceedings didn't get too bogged down in the script. The school room scene was one where these three come into their own. This needs to be played deftly with the jokes coming along in quick succession and this was managed well.

The babes of the title were not too young as to not understand what was required of the roles, so they were able to present nicely rounded characters and play the drama required at points very well. By that I mean drama as in pantomime drama !!!

King Richard is evident in the early and later scenes and this portrayal had the necessary regal qualities and he was able to commend the stage as a King should.

The production team for MAD ensured, as usual, that the show was visually excellent. Staging is always very good here. Scenic painting is excellent and there was a really great roll drop that came in and out seamlessly when required. Lighting was also of a high standard as was sound, so technically the show was in really good hands.

I believe costuming is also in house and I am always amazed at the result as you would not get better from hired costumes. The variety of colour added to the scenic elements to make for a colourful evening.

I always get a good welcome here and front of house the society is always very professional. The village hall is one of the larger village halls with some good facilities and the raked seating ensures all audience have a good view. Although smallish, the stage is one of the larger village hall stages, and MAD ensure that we feel we are sat in a theatre, rather than a village hall.

This show would have graced a theatre many times larger than this venue and MAD have a good pantomime reputation and this was firmly upheld with this production.