



Society : Bishopshalt ODS  
Production : Disney's Beauty and the Beast  
Date : 2nd December, 2017  
Venue : Bishopshalt School  
Report by : Tony Austin

## Show Report

What a great start to my Christmas season! Disney's superb musical version of a real fairy tale often used in Pantomimes, but without the insertion of a Dame or irrelevant comedians (of which I shall see a lot when over Christmas I work Front of House for professional performances of a panto version of the same story and review *Dick Whittington*, *Mother Goose* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* for amateur societies). And a good reminder of the Disney style before in January I see *Aladdin* at the Prince Edward Theatre in London (also without Dames or comedians, I think) – under the G.I.L.T. (Get Into London Theatre) scheme which allows access in the first six weeks of each new year to shows at reduced prices, with free postage for tickets and no mark-up by the ticket agents operating the system.

The first demonstration of that style was in the overture, rhapsodically played by the largest "Band" (per the programme, which I think should really have said "Orchestra") of fourteen players under the baton of MD **Stuart King**, producing a truly orchestral sound with the addition of a string section almost exclusively from school pupils, with **Adam Lynch** on Cello, and **Bethany Bray**, **Rosa Beishon** and **Magda Mazur** on violins, as well as **Daniel Hill** (trumpet) and **Max Hardie** (Percussion) joining on equal terms (except for the pay) the professional musicians who themselves included two ex-pupils. Bravo to the school music department even before we had heard a spoken word, and continuing bravos to the players for the accompaniment of the songs in their different styles and the extraordinary amount of theme music (as used in the film?) and atmospheric underscoring we heard throughout the evening.

And then, in case we didn't know it was theirs, Disney had provided further credits to be seen on the cyclorama at the back of the stage, where we soon realised all the major scenic backgrounds would be projected, with a whole range of scary forest views, rustic scenes, castle exteriors and a huge variety of grand rooms often with spectacular staircases shown to us, all of which could be switched in an instant, so the action could continue without breaks for scene changes with the tension maintained throughout. Congratulations to Director **Nicole Burman**, whose concept it was and to **Terry Sharp** for the design (assisted by **Chloe Thompson** and **Rawan Alishwiki**) and its realisation, with the sourcing and processing of the views including the grand castles inside and out (probably without the privilege of Disney employees to go round the world to find them) and the construction of the extra pieces needed to complete a number of scenes, and for lighting the whole show (with good use of follow spots operated by **Tom Rees** and **Henry Lambert**, nice to learn his surname after he saved last year's show). Congratulations also to SM **Kim Coles** and ASM **Katherine Gammond** plus their sprinting Stage Crew of **Abdullah Alshibahie** (also responsible for the great cast photos), **Aleksandra Opacic**, **Nish Dogra**, **Evie Costick**, **Reana Isaacs**, **Harrison Tuck**, **Max Monaghan** and **Alex Hicks**, with only the castle tower (necessarily too high to be used as an observation point or for the fight except in front of the proscenium) taking more than seconds to align. A further benefit of the design was the availability of unencumbered space for display of the huge cast (40 in total) so well used by choreographer **Jane Gooch** and her two loyal assistants **Rachel Briggs** and **Laura Arnold** in their spectacular numbers for the ensemble with innovative use of diagonals for them and in the routines for the specialist dancers.

The show started with what had happened ten years previously, beautifully clearly narrated by **Jasmin Bhad** over the loudspeakers telling us of the Prince's heartless behaviour to a poor old beggar woman who turned herself into a beautiful young enchantress and him into the Beast (not yet seen but apparently hideous) which he would remain for ever unless he loved and won the love of someone before a preserved rose lost its petals, action well shown in dumbshow outside the castle where we learned that "as the years passed he fell into despair, for who could ever learn to love a beast?"

Hardly time to take a breath and we were in Belle's village where in the number *Belle* we were introduced to the **Ensemble**, absolutely confident in their words and actions as busy villagers and the complicated patterns in their dance, as well as the many full or partial freezes, between which they were properly animated. Emerging briefly from among them at this stage and in later scenes were a series of minor characters including **Katie Harris** as the Bookseller (later as the Corkscrew), **Ciara Conway** as the Baker, **Emily Palin**, **Freya Kennedy** and **Olivia Brennan**, silly enough to be stuck on Gaston, **Julia Meanda**, **Rodrique Burnett** and **Stephanie Samoila** as the Cronies who had celebrated rather too much, **Megan McMorrison** as Pepper and **Chloe Thompson** as The Cheese Grater, who all contributed to our enjoyment before returning to their ensemble roles. The next big chorus entrance was the Tavern Scene with the riotous extended number *Gaston*, where they backed the principals and performed a sensational routine clinking tankards with each other through legs and around arms with a section where the girls lay down and still continued clinking with the men standing up, and after a pause for applause reprised the clinking with extra tankards at double speed; brilliantly conceived, brilliantly rehearsed and brilliantly performed! After a major change for everyone they danced even longer and in completely different style in the castle for *Be Our Guest* as they welcomed Belle to her meal, starting (as one should) with knives, forks and spoons dancing in lines, joined by the Cheese Grater and the Corkscrew before the plates arrived, dancing beautifully in their tights and interweaving with a fresh line of girls (though I couldn't work out what they represented) with ever increasing complexities, a proper cabaret line of kicking girls, and a well co-ordinated pull-up leading to a finale danced at ever increasing speed and sung with no apparent lack of breath to hold the high notes with Belle joining in, and rapturous applause from the audience. Act 2 started with the Wolves in the Forest chasing Belle (as they had pursued Maurice earlier) with scary, wolf-like dance movements, obviously specialist dancers but unrecognisable in their costumes, so I list all the dancers shown in the programme with congratulations on their skill in this and other specialised areas of dance as well as the extra class they brought to the general ensemble dancing: **Jess Barkshire**, **Charlotte Austin**, **Yasmin Bhad**, **Stephanie Greenwood**, **Keiran Holbrook**, **Gabby Littman**, **Hannah Merion**, **Lauren Richards**, **Eloise Schlachter** and **Chloe Whiting**. And I should also mention the others shown as "Cast" in the programme for their contribution to the entertainment: **Carla el Faghli**, **Leah West**, **Elisabetta Carpagnano**, **Georgia Deeks**, **Kimberley Freshwater**, **Ella Jones-Leonard**, **Elln Lynott** and **Pirette Okon**. Continuing with Act 2, I've noted some fine offstage singing, some more good crowd work and a really aggressive *Kill the Beast* as they went off to the castle, plus the joyous final reprise of *Beauty and the Beast*, as it all ended happily as (at least at Christmas) fairy tales should do.

Back to the opening scene for our introduction to the vast ego of Gaston, played by **Jonathan Gilbey**, revelling in the admiration of others but convinced it was his god-given right to be Belle's beau, as he explained in the beautifully sung *Me*, even translating her positive refusals as "maybes" in his delusion. I'm not sure the real nastiness of the character came easily to him, but his physical violence to **Kyle Prince** as Lefou, his sidekick, looked real enough and amazingly only seemed to provoke Lefou to more admiration, with his singing about the merits of *Gaston* followed by their leading the glorious dance, the comedy highlight of Act 1. No comedy for them in Act 2, but equal clarity in speech and

song combined with **Grace Edu** as Monsieur D'Arque the scheming proprietor of the *Maison des Lunes* where they wanted to have Belle's father locked away (blackmail seems an odd way to persuade anyone to marry you) and later when Gaston led the mob on a mission to *Kill The Beast*, so very nearly achieved at the top of the tower before he himself fell to his death – and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

**Thomas Bennett** as Belle's father Maurice, really eccentric but able to persuade her she wasn't in his well put over *No Matter What*, then went off with his even more eccentric machine before getting lost in the forest and ending up in the castle. Despite that incompetence I found it difficult to believe Belle searching alone for him in the forest or taking his place in captivity when he was so obviously young, and felt a grey beard and aging make-up would have helped both his interpretation and the story itself.

At the Castle, the servants locked in strange bodies all looked as if they were accustomed to the restrictions of their fantasy costumes: **Elizabeth Bajebo** as Lumiere put over her dialogue charmingly with just the right amount of accent and, with **Aaliyah Thomas** as Cogsworth, had most of the dialogue while both sang well, although the bulky costumes they and others had rather limited the involvement they could have in *Be Our Guest*; **Kayleigh Boswell** as Babette the Feather Duster, whose elegant French maid's uniform had no such limitations, must have felt underused there and elsewhere, though her flirtatious character and crush on Lumiere were put over with great panache; **Daniella Gabriel** did well in her wardrobe costume, although only a huge, elderly opera singer could give full meaning to the satire of her character being named as Madame de la Grande Bouche; **Danielle Young** made a wonderfully welcoming Mrs Potts with fine dialogue and a lovely heartfelt rendition of the Title Song clearly enunciated, managing both her own costume and the trolley from which protruded the disembodied head of young Chip (**Caitlin Burrows**) constantly expressing interest with her eyes and the very limited turn of the head possible, but unlucky that for her big solo singing line going across stage we could only appreciate those expressions as her amplification appeared to have failed.

How clever to preserve the mystery of The Beast for as long as possible by only showing the cloak being thrown over his head before the prologue lights faded and later on stage lighting him so that just a dark threatening silhouette was revealed. But when we saw **Karim Dennis**'s face and remembered that the story was an old-fashioned children's morality tale more recently adopted by Disney, his fine performance made the behaviour of a spoilt child (which, of course, the character had been before his transformation) seem understandable and, with the help of his servants and some deep breathing, his efforts to overcome it touchingly realistic, while he expressed the inner struggle in his fine arias. After his attempt to save Belle from the wolves had resulted in her saving him, the scenes of her reading to him and his delight in the story of King Arthur might be cloying to adults, but they were handled effectively and well received. And when he changed, allowing her to go home, and although wounded he survived his struggle with Gaston and eventually won, we knew that old fashioned morality was still with us and that after his re-transformation to a handsome prince they would live happily ever after.

And what a show for Belle, with **Lily Wood** as a bookish young lady giving reassurance to her eccentric father, surviving being chased by Gaston (and later the wolves), giving herself up to obtain her father's release, mistreated in the Castle but giving a very feisty response, beautifully singing the many musical numbers in a variety of styles and ranges, handling huge amounts of dialogue expressing a whole gamut of differing emotions as well as a lot of joyful whimsy with the servants as they welcomed her to the castle and to *Be Our Guest*. First seeing the Beast's vulnerability in the forest and gradually through sharing her love of books coming to love him before the last petal fell from the magic rose. A star performance of a fantastic role, making us believe that fairy tales do come true.

A fine first BODS production by new member of staff **Nicole Burman** with great contributions as usual from **Jane Gooch** and her assistants, thanked on stage at this final performance by (and with) MD **Stuart King**, as the Cast of Actors turned into ordinary schoolchildren again as if by magic, squatted down on stage and we saw clips of their pre-recorded tributes to them and other adults involved in what was quite evidently a wonderfully happy co-operative experience for all. And may I add my own tribute to the (comparatively) unsung hero **Kerry Magee**, who on this occasion added running the Box Office to her normal functions as Production Manager and organising Costumes (superb ones from The Costume Workshop on the Isle of Wight which really made it look like a professional production) and being backstage to supervise them during the show, as well as keeping visiting critics and their partners informed and entertained during the interval. Many thanks, Kerry!