

Ilminster Entertainments Society and Ilminster Youth Theatre

The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe

by C. S. Lewis

Adapted for the stage and directed by Malcolm Young

March 12th 2016.

I was looking forward very much to coming to Ilminster, firstly because in my humble opinion it takes courage to write an adaptation of a very famous and well loved story, and stage it primarily with a gifted youth group helped by a few adult performers and present it to a paying audience! And secondly because a few years ago, to celebrate the 50 years of the Minehead Music Festival, my friend Lynne Wooldridge and I directed the same play but we used the Adrian Mitchell dramatisation which had first been performed by the RSC and had beautiful music and songs written by the Irish composer Shaun Davey. There were of course similarities in the story and also the staging and I was so keen to see how you would overcome the difficulties that we encountered on our very large and wide stage with its rake that sends furniture sailing down into the auditorium.

The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe tells the story of four children evacuated from London during the Blitz. While exploring the Professor's house Lucy stumbles across a large wardrobe, a gateway into another world and the adventure begins. Rowan Williams, the onetime Archbishop of Canterbury writes in his book 'The Lion's World', that 'Narnia is the community where transforming relation with Aslan becomes fully possible.' He says that 'Narnia is inhabited with talking animals, who are clearly shown as companions, in some sense equal in the service of Aslan.' C.S. Lewis' book of the Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe carefully prepares the way for Aslan's appearance. It is exciting and indeed we do not meet him until the second act so the anticipation of meeting him is nail biting. Aslan is the 'King of the wood'. 'Aslan is a Lion - he is the King of beasts - the great Lion.' The children have no idea who he is, but 'some enormous meaning is called up by the Beavers,' They say Aslan is on the move ' - and with these few words mysterious promises give shape to otherwise chaotic events which might happen in Narnia'

The C.S Lewis Company obviously accepted your play and I know that you have to have their seal of approval prior to performance. So Malcolm, in your adaptation did you give us the story? Your adaptation certainly did - it was easily understood by your captive audience who gave it such a great reception on the final night and I am sure that you had that response on each of the nights. Don't worry I put our production right out of my head as I write this - because it was in a totally different style, performed in front of a very different audience and with mostly adults in the cast.

#### **Presentation.**

I shall never forget the impact I felt for the wonderful transition from the Professor's house to the magical world of Narnia. It almost took my breath away. The set for the house had been simple and clean cut, but we knew where we were and the script sped along through the opening scenes, with the children establishing their identity to the Professor and Mrs McCready. We were in for a wonderful surprise when the fabulous silent swinging flats opened up to create the winter wood of Narnia. Dave Goodall you are brilliant! I loved it! And those beautiful delicate trees from Carl Lant!

They enhanced the delightful painting of the flats done by Lynne Davis and Leah Kent, to set the winter scene. WOW! I understand from asking in the interval just who had designed the set - that Malcolm and Dave had worked it out together but congratulations also to Peter Schofield, and Brian Perkins. You all must have spent hours of trial and error to get it running so smoothly and I still do not know how you did it! I guess you have a flat stage as opposed to a raked stage so that helps! I also had to feel with my hand the white flooring which was special! Someone in the audience told me you had used a roller with white paint but however you created it, it allowed the lighting technicians the opportunity to create perfect visual scenes as we travelled through the Narnia scenes. I was in awe and wonder - when I think back to our own production where we had no choice but to stage the play on a black shiny floor of the Regal Theatre. The little set pieces for Mr Tumnus' cave, the Beavers dam and the Pavilion were enchanting - I loved the sewing machine ! And of course the White Witches sleigh was inspirational and looked to be easy to manage and push and pull even when Edmund was inside too!

With Dave and Maggy Goodall as the stage management team things could not go wrong and every set change happened quickly and silently. I thought at times that I would have loved to hear a few bars of the delightful incidental music you had chosen for the opening sequence of the play, just to tide over the silences of scene change, but that is a personal choice on my part. Lighting technician Brian Perkins was spot on with all the lighting changes, and I loved the colours used to create the woodland clearing for the Stone Table and the house of the White Witch. Blackouts were also very effective and all those in the cast who needed to leave the stage in blackout did so easily. The cracking of the Stone Table also worked well and Aslan moved off swiftly in the darkness. Imaginative and realistic sound effects were on cue, thank you to Jim Hawkrige - as I have said I loved the slightly jagged and rhythmical music used to open the show - I did not know what it was but I would have loved to hear more of it! The voice overs worked well, diction superb and we heard every word and the sound effects during the flying scene were a delight.

I also did just wonder if you had considered Aslan having a body microphone to enable us to hear a magnificent voice and roar, so this 'King of the Wood', this 'King of Beasts', and the most important character in the play, was something out of the ordinary. For me, the lovely Lion mask also masked Philip's voice although the second roar was effective! Of course maybe you had considered this option and decided against it.

The costume team had worked incredibly hard to make all those little members of the cast into goblins, dwarf and wolves, leopards and the dear little owl and etc etc. all the appendages and the feathers must have taken hours of work. I loved the Beaver's costumes, the White Witch with her flowing cloak, Maugrim, the satyrs, all creatures great and small, and of course unmistakably Father Christmas.

I really appreciated the footwear of the whole cast. I have this 'thing' about soft shoes on stage as I cannot bear to hear clumping or clicking when characters are moving around, unless of course it is scripted. You passed every test! Fabulous. My other gripe is wedding rings - only to be worn when that character is certainly married - a bit of plaster over the ring suffices - I do not take my wedding ring off but I never go on stage with it showing. Rings on other fingers and diamonds and necklaces are all part and parcel but wedding rings - as I say unless that character is obviously married in the play - please avoid.

I have nothing but total admiration for all the cast who wore masks and furry costumes and who must have been so hot under the lights - the masks were gruesome but I loved the face painting especially of the Mr and Mrs Beavers - their lovely faces were transformed into lifelike woodland creatures. Congratulations to Lucy Driver, Helen Wild, Kate white, Sara Hawkrige, Louise Campbell - White, Catherine Grice and Rebecca Bristow. Props were convincing - not sure if the masks were under props or costumes but which ever - well done. The White Witch's crown was superb, and the thrones wonderful .The children's tools for battle were great as they appeared from Father Christmas' sack.

For the audience, which included lots of children, this was an exciting production to watch - it was full of action, visual delights, colourful and created a magical mystery in this world which' has a time all of its own' - another world. Well done!

### **Production.**

The play plus interval was just under 2 hours in length - perfect timing I would think for the youngsters in the cast and also for the young people in the audience. Malcolm had condensed the story to ensure that all the vital parts were alive , the story intact , and the pace was relentless. You must have spent a long time ensuring that the exits and entrances were as smooth as possible. I think I know the Warehouse stage and I do not think that you have much room behind the set so well done for keeping the story moving along so well. I would have loved to see the young characters in the ensemble scenes moving around the stage more as woodland animals, imitating the character that they were. Owls and eagles fly, Squirrels hop, wolves are low to the ground and they lollop (is that a word?). Mr Tumnus had it right he seemed to be on tip toes so that we could interpret his stance with having little hooves, and Mr and Mrs Beavers - they shuffled speedily ,but then these are adult players! Maybe the little ones forgot in the heat of the moment! There was the tendency to rush lines from some of the young people and I know this is so hard to combat! It is just that as one in the audience you only have one chance to hear the words and if they are not heard then all that learning of the script has been in vain. This I know will only come from experience, and it is wonderful that your young people are given such a unique chance to take part in something so special. They will never forget it.

The scene prior to Aslan's death at the stone table was full of energy and this worked very well, as did the battle scenes with well choreographed fighting and the finale scene at Cair Paravel conveyed the feeling of relief that all was well in Narnia. I cannot tell how long you have the stage at the Warehouse to use for rehearsals and can only guess that, because I know your theatre is very busy, you probably have limited time on stage. This would make it so difficult for you when setting groupings for the crowd scenes, consequently there were a few 'lines' of characters but I can totally empathise with that because even working with a whole group of adults in crowd scenes they can easily slip into the dreaded LINE!

Now this is going to sound awful and I am sorry, because Malcolm you wrote the adaptation and you envisaged and directed Aslan's arrival in front of the crowd but the first entrance of Aslan was for me somewhat subdued - we were eagerly awaiting the arrival of the wonderful Lion, and he just - appeared from the pavilion. I felt there might have been a build up of something - or did I miss the trumpets and the horns! In my interpretation of the C.S. Lewis story Aslan's bearing is majestic, his presence formidable, the whole company are in awe of him! The costume was perfect and the mask

beautifully sculpted - not sure who did this but THANK YOU. However as mentioned it did mask Philip's voice. I felt it was coming from the depths! I totally appreciate that maybe your idea was not to scare off the young people in the audience who may have found a louder Lion pretty frightening.

So I do understand the reasoning and please come back to me if you are hurt or upset about this observation.

The transition of the young people to the adult Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy was LOVELY and I totally appreciated the way in which this was done. The play ended in calm and with the reassurance from the professor that the children were not making it all up - 'once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia' - 'you will go back again someday' - 'but do not talk about it to anyone else unless they find that they've had adventures of the same sort themselves'. There is a strong message there and it will happen when we are not looking for it.

### **Performances**

Apologies to the children who were not playing the roles on the Saturday evening.

#### **Professor** - Peter Schofield

This was a gentle portrayal of the kind hearted, wise and respected owner of the house and the Wardrobe. You brought a true sense of godliness, of calm understanding, and of course a rock to the children who were in your care at a time when their lives must have been in torment.

Well done and thank you. ALSO FOR THE SET!

**Mrs Macready, Ivy Betty and Margaret** - Leonie Yeadon, Merryn Brown, Charlotte Bristow, Annie Ashdown.

You introduced us to the house and ensured that the children had rooms and were accepted maybe a little unwillingly as part of the family. 'Didn't think of the extra work for me' - oh dear Mrs Macready! You four opened the dialogue and set the scene for us - well done, and you looked to a manner born!

#### **Peter** - Xavier Driver

I felt Peter that you grew beautifully into your part - a little hesitant at first but you certainly grew and made Peter into the strong young man in Narnia. You moved with conviction, spoke with authority and forgiving to Edmund in the end. Your strength enabled you, by the spirit of Aslan, to conquer evil. A delightful performance, well done Xavier.

#### **Edmund** - Joshua Wiehahn (Saturday night)

Again Edmund you grew into your part - again a little hesitant at first, but you became churlish and critical, and altogether someone not very nice! Your face portrayed it all. Edmund is perhaps the most difficult role of all the four children as you betray your friends, lead them into danger purely through not thinking but looking out for number one, and then - the ultimate - you see a perfectly innocent creature put to death, even though you are the 'traitor'. So this is not a nice role and it requires a building of the part very carefully! You did well. But - you see the errors of your way, I can

see your little face as I write this - you smile at last, and you are immediately forgiven which makes us all feel very happy. You probably will not forget playing this role.

**Susan** - Iona Davis (Saturday evening)

What a delight you are to watch Iona. You played Susan with confidence and with a great understanding of the role. Your diction was perfect and line load secure. The big sister to Lucy and the voice of reason with the boys. I loved watching you - you lifted the scene when you arrived on stage. You used lovely facial expressions and moved beautifully. I shall so look forward to seeing you again in future productions and wish you well in your future, which has to be bright!

**Lucy** - Emily Dixon (Saturday evening)

Lucy you captured our hearts from the moment you arrived on stage. This was a blissfully confident and charismatic performance from a young lady who I know will go far. You made such wonderful relationships with all you met in Narnia. I loved your dialogues and interaction with Mr Tumnus, the Beavers, and of course with Aslan. You listened intently to what the characters had to say, you responded in a natural conversational tone and I heard every word. Your diction was great and YES - you were lovely. This role was a great credit to you Emily and you deserve every word of praise which I know must have come your way.

**Mr Tumnus** - Christopher Williamson

OH Mr Perfect Tumnus. How I love watching Chris - I have had the pleasure of watching him in other productions and he is just a Kenneth Branagh in the making as far as I am concerned ! His vitality, facial expressions, the rise and fall of his voice, all conveyed this delightful characterisation of the well loved faun. It is a not a big role with perhaps only four pages of dialogues but to watch you and Lucy together was a real treat - you telling stories and her listening intently. Magic Chris! Well done! Are you moving to Minehead?

**The White Witch** - Felicity Forrester

Well you certainly had us in fear and trembling as you swept around the stage in your glorious costume - I loved the flowing cloak which you handled so well. You moved swiftly and purposefully, suffered no fools and you were evil personified. Your words were spat out, your face portrayed evil and you commanded the stage in every way. This was a strong portrayal, and I have to say I really enjoyed watching you, I loved the planning and the plotting - but I also I knew the end of the story! Well done - you gave a great encouragement to all the young people, never upstaging them and allowing them your indulgence at all times, and that I thoroughly appreciate.

**Mr and Mrs Beaver** - Mick and Irene Glynn

How absolutely lovely! What a perfect pair you were - such fun and you gave us all something to smile about. I loved your performances. I loved the way you looked, that face make up was terrific, the way you moved, your voices, and the pace of the action. You made the children so welcome and treated us to a vision of Aslan as we should expect to find him. Two thoroughly enjoyable and energetic lovely beavers. Thank you.

**Father Christmas** - Michael Wiehahn

There was a gasp of joy when you arrived on stage as if at last someone had arrived who the audience recognised as being part of THEIR world! You 'Ho Ho'd - you brought presents and you 'Ho Ho'd again and the audience loved you. Thank you.

**Aslan** - Philip Hunt.

Philip - Malcolm had created you in his way, in his own adaptation and you were given the opportunity to interpret the part. This was not easy and you will know that I can only say what I saw and how it came over to me. Being bodily costumed with a full head mask meant that you had to throw your voice out, to create the important characterisation of perhaps the most important character in the story - Aslan. You did so well - it must have been so hot in there! You were intensely kind to the children, you challenged, you negotiated with the White Witch you took your beating with courage, and of course you rose again - victorious.

I have nothing but praise for playing your difficult role with such grace. Thank you.

**Adult Peter, Susan, Lucy and Edmund**

I loved the transition and you all looked very grand. There are no small roles - just ones with not too many lines!

**Maugrim, Dwarf, Goblins, Mr and Mrs Squirrel, Fox, Satyrs, Wolf, Eagle, Centaur, Leopard, and Owl**

You played such important roles in the play - you were the angry crowd, the happy crowd, the mean and 'evil intent' individuals, and the delightful woodland characters who were so afraid of the White Witch. You made the crowd scenes come to life and I loved watching you.

Well done all of you - and Maugrim's mask and costume was amazing!

What a reception you all had from the Saturday night audience! Malcolm and Sonya - THANK YOU! I have total admiration for you in all the work you do for the young people and at the end of the day they will always have fond memories of this production.

Thank you for inviting us.

Hilary May 15/3/16.