

Beauty and the Beast

IES Ilminster 13 December 2019

The Play

Based on the original story, this version, written by Lucy Kirkwood for the National Theatre Christmas production in 2010, is a fairy-tale with a difference. The C18th French classic was a fairly long, convoluted story. This play pares down the original to its essential elements, using the device of a pair of mischievous fairies (one of whom is most definitely French) who act as narrators, with the assistance of a helpful Rabbit, magical devices and shadow play. The script has elements of the wild and wacky, with a certain amount of quirkiness and witty dialogue. There should be plenty of scope for set design and costumes with the palace, lavish/muddy outfits for Beauty, and, of course the Beast who transforms into Prince George. Props will also have fun, with the Thoughtsnatcher machine, the projector, a food-laden table, mysterious mirror and magic tricks. Lighting and sound will be similarly occupied, and timing of effects will be crucial. Direction will need to make seamless the transitions between the narrator fairies' banter, the shadow play and the palace scenes in the telling of this enchanting tale. The audience may be adult, child or a mixture – it should appeal to all. The actors will need plenty of energy, particularly Pink and Cecile, whose antics verge on the slapstick. They need to establish a good rapport with the audience, be capable of plenty of physicality and add vocal colour to the narrative bits. Beauty, more than her name suggests, is a feisty young heroine, who is not in the least afraid of the Beast. The Beast will have the challenge of playing monstrous on the outside, yet human inside, gradually becoming less bestial and finally morphing into the Prince.

Presentation

The play opened with curtains being drawn back to reveal a narrow strip of playing space for the fairy compères in front of a second set of curtains where the main action of the story takes place. The fairies needed little to set their playing area apart from a few props and the shadow play screen, which descended above the playing area downstage right in a suitably rickety way when summonsed. Opposite, and above downstage left was a mirroring screen, which had the function of placing each scene. 'The projector' occupied a

space below the stage away to the right, which was where the operators of 'the shadows' lurked. The Beast's palace was more imposing, dingy castle than enchanted palace, with painted grey stone walls adorned with a pair of crossed pikes stage right and swords similarly placed to stage left, a large mysterious mirror upstage right, a couple of display cabinets/bookshelves with a scattering of books, clocks, candles, goblets, etc. upstage left, and large panel housing the dumb waiter. Stage centre, and dominating the Beast scenes, was a large table, with accompanying chairs. The overall impression was that of a somewhat sinister abode, which could perhaps have been more menacing had the table been less plain and modern looking – darker and a bit more ornate maybe – ditto the bookshelves, which again, could have appeared more spookily ornate, with a few more heavy dusty-looking tomes. The second set, that of the family's cottage, worked well, with brighter lighting, simple cream walls with the impression of wooden beams, a plain table with three simple wooden chairs and pretty lacy table cloth – a neat home with few trimmings, but kept clean and tidy by Beauty. I wonder if it could have appeared a bit less neat later on when Lettice is left in charge?

There was plenty of work for the props department, the Thoughtsnatcher and projection machine featuring heavily throughout the play, not to mention a good deal of ingenuity required to produce the magic. We were treated to a 'live' goldfish metaphor, shifting hats, and several magic tricks – simple but not overwhelmingly impressive, which was probably the intention for fairies past their prime. The balloon/bottle was a good opener, the handkerchief/rose slightly less so. In the Beast's palace, the food and goblet magically appearing on the table before our very eyes worked well, with various items arriving less strikingly via the dumb waiter, although the delay here may have been as a result of a technical glitch at one point. I wonder if the food could have been a little more abundant and lavish, although the pile of eclairs was certainly plentiful, and the giant strawberry deliciously huge. The insect orchestra box could perhaps have been a little bigger, and used to better effect (more of that later). Going back to the Thoughtsnatcher, it looked more like some sort of blunderbuss which one might have expected to shoot balls or slugs at its victims, rather than an ear trumpet for the brain to transmit a character's private innermost thoughts.

The lighting of the three playing areas, while deceptively simple, was skilfully done and enhanced the fairy-tale atmosphere. The area in front of the deep red travellers was warm and theatrical, augmented by the old-style footlights, the acting area behind being much cooler and suitably gloomy and shadowy for the Beast's castle, but lighter and brighter for the cottage. The low level of lighting around the 'projector' was effective, so that our eye was momentarily drawn there, but then led to the playscreen and acting area. The stars and planets were impressive, producing a gasp of appreciation from the audience. The accuracy in avoiding any spill from the downstage area into the prolonged freeze for Beauty when she was sitting in the inset looking at her hand mirror in her own subdued light while the fairies continued their performance fully lit in front of her was also impressive. The transformation scene was effectively and swiftly achieved.

Sound cues were plentiful, and mostly well-timed. The music for the insect orchestra could have been a little more imaginative perhaps, but involved some accurate timing, particularly of the escaped clarinet player. The music accompanying the shadow plays was well chosen, but perhaps a fraction too loud. It might have been a tad softer, so as not to interfere with the narration. The menacing clock sound helped to create the spooky atmosphere of the palace scenes, and the harpsichord table music was nicely conceived. The use of echo for the voiced thoughts produced by the Thoughtsnatcher was well intentioned, but the voices were rather indistinct and not loud enough, so that some of the effect was lost.

Costumes were generally impressive. Pink's black pinstripe suit with shiny pink lapels and sleeves was probably more suitable for a slightly ageing male fairy than full on pink would have been. His shiny black patent leather shoes with bright pink laces and pink-ribboned top hat were a nice touch. The script mentions a spinning bow tie, but his sparkly tie which lit up was a fine substitute. Cecile's splendid full purple skirt and fitted white tail-jacket with lots of buttons, neat boots - with pink laces of course - and purple silky scarf appeared very French and chic. Poor Rabbit the worker/general dogsbody was suitably clad in boiler suit with wonderful rabbit ears and make-up. Beauty's simple blue dress and pinafore were appropriate for her humble home situation, and a nice contrast to her transformation into glamorous coral ballgown and shimmering purple dress later on. I wonder if she could have appeared a bit bedraggled, perhaps in a duplicate muddied ballgown, when she has been tramping in the woods – she looked rather too immaculate here. The breeches under the

skirt gave her more of a tomboy feel, and helped vitalize her performance, although they were perhaps a little too tight and modern looking. Perhaps some looser-fitting, darker breeches would have been better. Lettice's simple grey peasant dress and pinafore were in keeping with her situation, which doesn't change, no matter how much she would like it to. Father's simple brown waistcoat and breeches with white shirt were suitable for his character and position. The Beast's elegant maroon frock-coat, frilled white shirt and cravat denoted his noble position, with hair and fur appearing to burst through the sleeves and breeches, and a shaggy mane of bedraggled Hagrid-like hair. Make-up was good, and appropriate to each character, the Beast's horns and face appearing suitably bestial and in contrast to the clean-shaven Prince George. Rabbit's make-up was perfectly rabbit, the fairies' upper cheekbones applied with just the right amount of bright glitter to make them look otherworldly, without going over the top, and the coloured streaks (not too many) in Cecile's hair adding to her general French chic.

Production

A lot of thought had obviously gone into how to portray the different playing areas, and there was generally a good use of space, the fairy compères' main playing area being a narrow strip of stage in front of the main sets of cottage and palace. They worked the space well, occasionally stepping into the main scenes where needed to operate the Thoughtsnatcher. The use of elevated screens either side of the stage worked well to aid narration and denote the passing of time. However, the shadow play was not as effective as it might have been. Firstly the projector didn't really appear to be 'operated' by the fairies. Perhaps there could have been an initial light on them each time they started to operate it, or maybe the impression of settling down to watch from the corner was intended as being banished "to the shadows" literally and metaphorically. The narration of each shadow play came across more as a factual account rather than the revealing of an enchanting story with pictures – it didn't captivate your audience. The narrators could have made the story come alive by looking across at the screen more often, by watching and referring to each shadow play as it unfolded, rather than simply reciting the tale out front. Also the shadow figures were not really in keeping with the fairy-tale element, appearing rather blobby and non-descript. Without the figures becoming too Disney, I wonder if you could have chosen something more classically fairy. The timing of the shadow plays and narration did not

always tally – for instance the heads on the rusty poles, and there were several occasions where the screen was blank. The bits of magic in the acted scenes worked well for the most part, particularly the balloon/bottle, the appearance of the food and goblet of wine, and the firework, which were nicely on cue and evoked a gasp from the audience. There was some nicely choreographed business, for instance the goldfish metaphor and the hat swapping. The insect orchestra box was a little understated. Perhaps the different musical sounds could have been a bit louder and more obvious in differentiating one insect from another. This could have been helped by the fairies reacting more to each sound. That said, the escaped insect business worked well. The appearance of the Thoughtsnatcher is not specified in the script, other than being “an impressive and complicated machine” to be applied to the head “like an ear trumpet for the brain”. The blunderbuss type instrument aimed towards the head was an interesting idea, but didn’t quite work, partly because the disembodied thoughts emanating from each character were rather indistinct soundwise and didn’t really come across. This could have been improved upon by the voices being louder, and also by the characters using more obvious facial expressions/mime to emphasise their thoughts.

In terms of the acted scenes, the cottage scenes, I felt, worked better than the more complicated palace scenes. They were nicely depicted, the pace was good, and there was plenty of energy, particularly from the petulant Lettice. The palace/castle scenes were a little static at times. The Beast looked great, his natural height used to good effect, with his shaggy hair and fur sprouting from the costume. However, the animal roars could have been more “gut-ripping”, and his continual swaying movement became repetitive rather than menacing. He was also positioned in profile too much, so we rarely had the chance to see his face full on and be treated to the full glory of the make-up. There were one or two technical glitches, which probably didn’t occur in other performances, but which also interrupted the flow of the palace scenes. There was a long empty pause during Beauty’s wishes scene before Dinner Number 1, and, whilst the magic mirror generally worked well, there appeared to be a technical problem at one point. There was another glitch later on, when the curtains opened too early on the Cottage at Christmas - a bit of an eggy moment, but soon forgiven and forgotten by your audience, who were undoubtedly on your side. The transformation from Beast to Prince George was nicely achieved technically, although the

actor playing the Prince was so unlike the Beast that it was almost too great a stretch of the imagination! I wonder if, rather than having a different actor, you could have got away with, say, a replica of the original furry costume, head, horns, etc. draped across the table in shadow (or covered in snow as suggested in the script) as if dead, with the 'real'/original actor appearing beside Beauty at full height in his princely clothes. Just a thought.

The Actors

Patrick Knox as The Man in Pink

Not the nicest of characters, Pink is smart, authoritative, bossy, conceited and just a bit sinister. You were all of these, and cruel to your fellow fairies, but somehow managed to have a hold over them and inspire the affection of Cecile in spite of everything. As master of ceremonies, you didn't quite achieve the rapport with your audience that you might have done. Perhaps you could have been a bit 'bigger' in delivery, taking more time to speak to them. Pink is both creating magic and revealing a magical tale to his listeners. Sometimes it seemed more like an account of a story which he had delivered hundreds of times (or was that the intention?) There were instances from which I feel you could have drawn more humour. For example, the insect orchestra box would have been that much more amusing if you had looked into the box and obviously listened to each tune. Likewise when narrating the shadow plays, they would have been more graphic had you looked at each little scene and described what you were seeing, colouring it with your words. That said, there were some good bits of business with Cecile and Rabbit, Pink's irritation coming across in a nicely humorous way, and magic tricks were deftly performed. Overall an efficient performance.

Jo Neagle as Cecile

You looked wonderfully chic as a jaded ageing French fairy, with overtones of Gallic shrug. There was nice chemistry between you and Pink, as your roles gradually reverse and you take control. There were some lovely moments between the two of you, verging on slapstick – the slapping scenes and swallowing of the telegram in particular. You occasionally gave us a glimmer of mischief, but overall I wondered if you were just a fraction too surly and, while you had deliberately cultivated an expressionless face, at times it appeared a little too bland. I think you could have given us a bit more in the way of facial

expression without losing the humour of the character, for instance in the song, which, while being in character, was a little too understated and thrown away. Also you need to take care not to speak over laugh lines. A very watchable performance which kept the audience on your side.

Maddie Lowe as Rabbit

A non-speaking part, but my goodness you brought every ounce of humour to it. Lovely facial expressions and mime. A cameo role, you were in the moment throughout, and the audience loved poor downtrodden Rabbit. Your best moment had, of course, to be your rendering of 'Silent Night' at the opening to Act Two. It is not easy to sing badly convincingly, but you nailed it – a memorable comic moment!

Megan Arlidge as Lettice

Good facial expressions, a strong voice and stage presence as Beauty's petulant younger sister. You had some lovely comic lines, and delivered them well with a good sense of comic timing. While Lettice is obviously used to being spoilt and indulged, we could not help but warm to her, for all her selfishness and stupidity, and feel sorry for her when left to take on the role of house-keeper and principle carer to an ageing father, when all she really wants is a gorgeous new dress like her sister. A strong performance and very enjoyable to watch.

George Montague as Beast

You looked great as the Beast – convincingly tall and scary, with hair sprouting through the suit, shaggy head and horns. It is not easy to portray both beast and man simultaneously, but you made a good job of it, giving us a sensitive performance, if a little too ponderous, especially in the First Act. You may have chosen to make your movements and voice slow on account of the Beast's size, but cues still needed to be picked up. Not doing so gave a feeling of hesitancy, although I am sure you had no problem remembering lines. Movement also was a little hesitant, with a lot of swaying in profile, which became a bit monotonous, and we rarely got to see the wonderful face. Your performance became more lively during the second half of the play, when Beauty also injected more life into her performance, the pace lifted and the play marched on to the transformation scene. The harpsichord drumming on the table was a lovely moment.

Charlotte Foster as Beauty

You certainly looked the part, and gave a confident performance. As a general note, I think you need to listen and 'see' more. You obviously knew your words perfectly, but to be more convincing as an actor you need to listen and respond to whoever you are conversing with on stage. You also need to visualise what you are talking about. In this instance, the appearance of the stars and constellations was a lovely moment, but I did not feel you were really seeing them as you were pointing them out. Likewise, when you came rushing in all excited about exploring the woods and the lake, we didn't really see it – you just need to take a bit more time to visualise what you are describing. There were some lovely moments in your performance, which became more vital as you cast aside the confines of the frothy dress and took to the breeches. I loved the roar – you not only surprised the Beast, you certainly surprised the audience!

Ken Steed as Father

You gave us a nicely conceived portrayal of a weak, slightly doddering man who adores his daughters, particularly Beauty, and is used to being pandered to and looked after, to the point of being almost child-like in the home setting. We could see where Lettice got her petulance from. Your facial expressions were particularly good, especially during the palace scenes and Dinner for Three, when you showed a good sense of comic timing. Your voice was suitably quavery to suit the character, but carried well. Let's hope Father found lasting happiness in the end with his fisherwoman!

And finally... Prince George

You did not appear in the programme as one of the actual cast, because naturally you were inside the Beast. However, you gave a convincing performance of the prince who was freed, so different from the Beast that one could almost have believed you were two different actors!

Summary

On a general note, this was not an easy choice of play. The script suggests a rather wacky reworking of an old classic – appealing for its quirkiness alone. That said, it is difficult to

know who the performance was aimed at, grown-ups or children, or a mixture. The Friday evening was predominantly adult, with a sprinkling of youngsters. While the children were initially intrigued, I am not convinced that their attention was held throughout. There were moments of magic and comedy, but much of it went over their heads, which need not have been the case had there been better pacing and more rapport of the actors with the audience. This stage adaptation was not pretending to be any sort of pantomime, but I feel that some of the general wackiness was lost, partly in performances, and partly in the overall presentation. That said, it was an enjoyable evening – well done to everyone involved.

Thank you for inviting me to come along and watch your performance, and apologies if I have missed anything or failed to credit anyone.

Liz Holliss