

Prince Caspian

Ilminster Youth theatre and Ilminster Entertainment Society

Friday 17th March 2017

The Play

What a remarkable achievement! When I read the script I did not know that Zuleika Driver was only thirteen. To take CS Lewis's book and translate it into a play-script was no small undertaking. But Zuleika has successfully and faithfully put both action and dialogue together so that the story can be told on a stage. This was not an easy task, since, by its very nature, this involves a considerable amount of descriptive prose, much of which is needed to remind or inform the audience about the original story of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and to explain how time in Narnia has moved on. I was concerned that this would become monotonous but there was enough to engage interest, in terms of scenery, costume and direction to save us from that. The story provides scope for a large number of younger and older actors to work together and so was a wonderful way of bring the two societies together. I did not see your production of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* but my husband did and tells that quite a lot of the young cast were in that and he was delighted to see them a year on, showing signs of growing maturity.

You are blessed with the talented and committed support of an adult team who have helped to ensure that the presentational elements needed to bring the play to the stage could be put in place using a considerable pool of experience. You also had the blessing of mature actors who enjoyed performing with young people. Ilminster is very lucky that they have adult theatre enthusiasts willing and indeed determined to pass their enthusiasm, knowledge and skills on to the young. It bodes well for the future of amateur theatre in Somerset, and for that we all thank you.

All of the Narnia stories are tales of magical imagination, with the wonderful whimsy of an era now sadly long gone. I was so pleased that Zuleika had understood the importance of the Pevensie children using idioms from the 1940s which certainly delighted the adult audience, reminding some no doubt of their Enid Blyton upbringing. One of the joys of the books is the fact that the author made children the heroes and heroines, able to conduct themselves with the authority usually accorded to adults and shown respect and deference by characters who are more mature than they are. To watch a play like this is to enter a child's world and to respect the heroism, courage and justice that is inherent in so called child's play and often so lacking in the adult world. This play was going to succeed if the audience allowed themselves to remember the idealism of childhood and to respect the purity and enthusiasm of youth.

The Presentation

The settings created for this production were effective. Malcolm Young and Xavier Driver are credited for these but the programme did not indicate whether the tabs were hired, acquired or created by the society. They were lovely and by being painted in tones of white and grey on a black background, the trees could be transformed by different lighting to look either sinister or alive and benevolent; so much a part of Lewis's writing. They were also able to be drawn and parted to create different scenes and aid with additional entrances and exits. The ruins of Cair Paravel were nicely suggested by some effective pieces of additional scenery draped with artificial ivy. The use of the gauze to take us from the station to Narnia and back again was most effective and helped to remind us that to travel to Narnia is to be taken into another kind of existence. It also doubled as a quick backdrop for the scenes in Castle Miraz. A tree trunk and

some beanbag-type cushions created an effective space for the children to sit and listen, as we went back in time to hear the story of Prince Caspian. The branches of a tree with some very large and effective apples hanging suggested a productive and splendid orchard unseen in the wings.

The end of the first act was a highlight for me. In the script the children are reminiscing about their voyages on their great ship the *Splendour Hyaline* and suddenly we had a lovely back projection of waves breaking on a shore line. Then members of the cast came in with lengths of material to represent rolling waves and the members of the cast traversed the stage, each moving in their own idiosyncratic way. With lovely lighting effects and beautiful music this was a real magical moment and brought the first act to a climactic end. You were very lucky to have Tarquin Shaw-Young to produce the stunning film sequence.

The quality of lighting brought a lot of magic and atmosphere to the performance. It helped to give drama to the battle scenes, realism to night scenes and a warmth and brightness to other scenes. It also effectively isolated action when characters were frozen on another part of the stage. Brian Perkins had used colour extremely effectively to evoke atmosphere, with reds, greens and blues completely altering the feel of the forest. The use of blackouts to indicate time passing was effective and at one point actually entertaining. This was creative lighting plot which really helped to bring the action alive. Sound, supplied by Jim Hawkridge again helped to create the atmosphere required by the script, especially the selection of evocative music. I also liked the birdsong which was very subtle.

There were a lot of important props to be acquired by Sarah and Harry for this play and all were very good. The wooden bows and arrows and the play swords were very much in keeping with the child's eye view of Narnia. A really good horn had been sourced. The suitcases at the railway station were right for the era and I really liked the cloth sled which was used to make them disappear. The pouches used by the tutor and Lucy looked good along with the tutor's leather notebook. The mouse puppets were lovely.

The costume team, along with hair and make-up, had done a sterling job. The children's clothes looked right for the era and the opulent gowns they then wore over them were practical and effective. Their crowns were beautifully made and robust. The other crowns and headdresses made for King Miraz and Prince Caspian and the other Telmarines were also very good. I very much liked Glozelle and Sopespian's black cloaks and dresses. I thought King Miraz' trousers should have been a bit more opulent. Trumpkin's dwarf costume looked good and his hat in particular with attached white hair was characterful. The nurses's medieval costume looked right. Doctor Cornelius's robe and flat hat suited the character very well. The two Caspians' matching tunics worked well in their transition scene. Tufflehunter's badger costume and make up were very good. Nikabrik's dwarf costume and make-up also worked well. I loved Bulgy Bear's fat tummy. The squirrel was beautifully realised with ears and tail. The centaurs' armour looked very good and their tails were excellent. I also liked Camillo's headdress. If these were all made by the society they were highly creditable. There were other numerous Narnians, all beautifully costumed and very colourful including a naiad (I think that is right) with the lovely wings. The werewolf costume was good though it was a pity in many ways that we could not see Joseph's face. Aslan's full lion costume had a good head, though the body was not substantial enough to suggest the strength and presence of this very important character. It was very difficult for Philip to find his way around the stage, making his movements hesitant and therefore not quite giving Aslan the gravitas he needed.

Stage management for this play was fairly demanding and Paul Smethurst and his team ensured that curtains and ruins were set and removed as required and ensured that arrows, including the one through the apple arrived as they should. I assume that flying arrows and large numbers of young cast entering and

exiting also gave them plenty of safety management to think about. This backstage role can so easily be overlooked but is incredibly important and needs to be done by people with a cool head who take their responsibility for the cast seriously. Thanks also need to go to your chaperones and first aiders who are essential to ensure that all the young actors are safe and well cared for. The other unsung hero is often the producer who has to be very well organised to bring all these practical elements together and with a large cast of children has a huge responsibility to ensure that safeguarding is done well. Sonya Shaw took on this role and this must have been a big relief for the director.

Production

Malcolm Young had taken on the task of bringing Zuleika's script to the stage. There is a lot of descriptive dialogue in the play and so the first challenge was to ensure that it was not static and that it engaged the audience. I felt that the movement of the four children around the stage in the first few scenes was natural and helped us to imagine the landscape we could not see. There was also the problem of lots of locations in quick succession and these were managed smoothly. The device of static listening whilst the story unfolds was well used and in the one case when we simply had to imagine what had been said, entertaining. There is quite a lot of humour in the dialogue and this was well pointed and always appreciated by the audience.

The relationship and dynamic between younger and older members of the cast was a strength of this production. The energy and enthusiasm of the young cast was infectious and there were some very strong performances from some very young actors. I felt that the direction was marked by a clear understanding of the style and meaning behind CS Lewis's story. I imagine that the excellent end to Act 1 was a directional idea because there was no evidence of it in the script. One of the challenges of staging any of the Narnia stories is the issue of dealing with the fight scenes, especially when using a large number of young people. It is important that there is no danger of a child getting hurt, but the sheer volume of young people in these scenes made the idea of choreographing the battles very daunting. I think these scenes had a lot of conviction in them because the youngsters were committing themselves to the action but they were quite overcrowded and somewhat chaotic. The narrow nature of the exits and entrances would have made orderly movement very difficult.

The play did not suffer from what I think of as death by a thousand small scenes. I think this was because the transition between scenes was managed swiftly and the space was used well to isolate those in one scene from another. Pace and tempo were generally kept up. Grouping and movement was good in the scenes with fewer characters but a bit more inconsistent when the stage was crowded. I saw some very good examples of teamwork. We also had some good moments of climax.

One of the difficulties of directing a large number of young people is that they have to learn to speak on the stage in a manner that is totally different to their ordinary speaking voice in terms of volume, speed and diction. Some of your cast had already cultivated this skill and could be heard beautifully. Others still have to develop this ability. I am sure you tried to slow down the gabblers but with the nerves of performance on the night some youngsters forget all the new self-discipline you have tried to encourage. Hopefully these young people will continue to be part of the Youth Theatre for a few more years and gradually develop, as so many of their peers already have.

For me, the main weakness of this presentation was the fact that Aslan was simply not magical enough or majestic enough. This was largely due to the problem of how you costume a large lion and make it convincing. Also how do you cast this role so that the character has huge stage presence? Perhaps you

have to find a tall adult to play the role and tower over everyone else. The other answer is to use puppetry as you did with Reepicheep and construct a large lion head that could be held above an actor to give the true king of Narnia the prominence he needs.

Acting

There were an awful lot of characters in this play and I will do my best to mention them all but forgive me if I have confused or missed somebody's contribution.

Xavier Driver as Peter

Xavier looked right for the part and had a presence on the stage. I was just disappointed that his speed of delivery of lines and tendency to swallow the last word in a sentence made it very difficult to catch what he was saying. When you have such a large part and when you have spent so long rehearsing, it is a shame if the audience cannot hear the lines you have spent time learning. It also means that you are not generally putting the expression into the words that helps to tell the story.

Zuleika Driver as Lucy

Zukeila is not only a talented script writer she is also an excellent young actress. Every one of her lines was as clear as a bell. She also brought a lot of energy and passion to the part. Her sense of positioning and use of gesture showed us that she knew how to present her character in a way that would engage audience attention and interest.

Emily Dugdale as Susan

Emily was suited to this character and played the role competently. She was every bit as gentle and wise as this part called for.

Daniel Baker as Edmund

Daniel gave us quite a spirited performance and there were good references back to the weakness of character displayed in Edmund in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Mick Glynn As Trumpkin

This was a lovely performance. Mike had a great dynamic with the younger members of the cast and delivered his many funny lines perfectly.

Emily Lancaster and Leonie Yeadon as Glozelle and Sopespian

These two young actresses grew in confidence as the performance proceeded and were convincing as misguided Telmarines. Their lines were clear and they managed to convince us that they had no love for the Narnians.

George Montague as King Miraz

George's towering presence on the stage gave impact to his performance and he did impassionate self-interest well.

Alex Dixon and Max Thompson as young and older Prince Caspian

These two young actors had a very convincing physical similarity. They both spoke clearly and gave confident performances.

Lucy Driver as Nurse

This was a small part, but Lucy was convincingly attached and caring towards the young prince.

Michael Lanigan as Dr Cornelius

Michael looked right for and had the voice to play this role. He struggled a bit with remembering lines but covered this well with a sort of bumbling narration which just made you think of a rather ancient, old time school master.

Irene Glynn as Trufflehunter

Irene was strong as the loyal badger with a plain no-nonsense contribution to be made to the deliberations of the defenders of true Narnia.

Rhianna Wilkinson as Nikabrick

Rhianna played this grumpy and somewhat treacherous dwarf with great scowls and aggressive posture. Sometimes lines were not as clear but this was made up for by her characterisation which gave us the sense of what she was saying.

Annie Ashdown as Bulgy Bear

Annie got all the humour into this role and made sure that her character was very endearing.

Gabrielle Lucas as Patterwig

Gabrielle played this lead squirrel with clear delivery of lines.

Clare Ripley as Reepicheep

Clare did a lovely job as puppeteer for this lovable character and her delivery of lines was clear.

Olivia Holloway and Freya Kent as Glenstorm and the other centaur

Olivia had good stage presence and a clear speaking voice and she was ably supported by Freya.

Polly Hawkey as Camillo, Jack Lewis and Finn Moran as other Narnians, Sophie Dugdale as a faun, Kai Nakayama as Silenus, Demetrius Driver as Bacchus and Peepiceek, Charlotte Wild as a dryad, Matthew Davies as one of the soldiers.

All these young people took part in the performance with enthusiasm and delivered some lines as well. I do hope they all go on to get bigger speaking roles in the future.

Richard Godden as Wimbleweather

I hope I am right in identifying Richard as the giant. He was a real asset.

Phillip Hunt as Aslan

Phillip was hampered by Aslan's costume, as I have already mentioned. He had to have a radio mic to be heard under all that fur. His voice was quite good but needed some reverb on the mic or something to give him volume of lion-like proportions.

Maddie Lowe as The Hag

Maddie played this old woman with conviction, good characterisation and a clear speaking voice

Joseph as the Werewolf

Joseph was again hampered by his costume which made it hard for him to move anything like a wolf and the mask made it hard for him to be heard or for him to use facial expressions which might have made him menacing.

Overall this was a brave production and I do hope that Ilminster Youth Theatre goes from strength to strength and that the members of Ilminster Entertainment Society continue to support and encourage these lovely young people.

If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution or got any details wrong please let me know.

Lynne Wooldridge