



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: **Taunton Thespians**

Name of Production: **Here Be Dragons**

Venue: **The Grange, Street**

Date: **Wednesday 24th July 2024**

Adjudicator: **Tash Moore**

It was a pleasure to watch an original piece of theatre, written and directed by Lorna Evans whose love for Somerset myths and legends inspired this production. The society has mounted an annual outdoor touring production since 2001 and whereas a Shakespeare play or a period piece is synonymous with this form of theatre, it was refreshing to see the range of theatrical styles explored by the society over the years. And this piece certainly is unique, prudently appealing to local sensibilities to attract audiences across the county, transporting them to a variety of worlds on a whistle-stop tour of different stories delivered across 19 scenes. It was wonderful to read in the programme about Lorna's journey who shared her passion for local '*mystical history*' in her play through a host of colourful characters, woven together using the Green Man figure as a narrator and bookending the episodic scenes with stories about dragons. From reading the script, it's clear that she dedicated much time and care to finding suitable musical tracks and songs to accompany or feature within the scenes, too

Being part of an amateur theatrical production is a huge commitment. It's hard enough dedicating one's time to a production being staged at the local theatre, let alone being out on the road. I fully appreciate how much of a team effort this must have been, from creating and sourcing an incredible number of costumes and props to mucking in together for the get in and get outs. This is the first time I have been fortunate enough to watch an amateur society stage a production out of doors, and am so very impressed by the dedication of this group and the abundance of creativity evidenced in doing so.

I shall only mention this once, because no one needs to dwell on the British weather longer than necessary; the weather was not kind the evening I watched this production. In turn, the company rose to this unfortunate challenge and delivered a performance that defied the elements, making suitable adaptations where possible to mitigate against the dreary circumstances. This demonstrated their admirable tenacity and further exemplified their resolute commitment to the production. I know that the society had to cancel one performance which must have been such a disappointment for everyone, but I was so pleased that they persevered with the Wednesday performance because the audience had a great time. They all came prepared with waterproofs and

umbrellas and no doubt left feeling a sense of achievement having withstood the wet conditions along with the company, technical and front of house teams.

Finally, just a small note about the programme. I loved that it featured biographies and head shots of the whole team, as should be the case. It was wonderful to be introduced to both *The Mysterious* and *The Mortals*, and to read a brief insight into their experiences on this production.

SET AND STAGING

I had the pleasure of watching this production at The Grange, with the playing space set up against a wall of the house, which was later utilised during the fairy lightshow. The house, an adjoining wall and some trees sat behind and overhanging the makeshift auditorium formed an enclosure of sorts, which helped a great deal with acoustics. The setting felt spacious but held the audience in close proximity to maintain engagement as so much of the action was played directly to them. The auditorium hosted some resident bench seating and the company also set out some hay bales. The audience set themselves up with chairs, blankets, coats and umbrellas ahead of the evening's entertainment.

Three adjoining gazebos marked the back of the playing space and provided the wing space. It must have been a terrific challenge having to house props (not to mention, two dragons) and so many costumes along with 15 cast members and a backstage team here! The stage left and right gazebo walls were dressed with greenery and the central tent accommodated an enchanting image of a silhouetted tree and two gravestones against a purple and pink sky, with a rising sun set in the bottom right-hand corner for Act I, changing to a moon set amongst the tree branches in the top left-hand corner for Act II. At times, this tree was referenced by various characters. A small bench was set stage left and five small cubed staging blocks (I believe originally intended to be hay bales, but perhaps changed in light of the wet conditions) sat stage right. Four blocks were set on the ground, with the fifth providing an elevated position, here establishing the best position for lighting as the evening progressed. As the puppeteers had to lie on the floor for some time in the opening scenes, a green cloth placed downstage of the stage left gazebo.

This was an episodic piece that told a vast collection of tales, and with the exception of the Green Man each player took on several roles. Storytelling was the priority here, with little time afforded for detailed characterisations as appearances were mostly brief. This was an ambitious piece, with quite a heavy volume of myths and legends explored. The blocking was clear, often with a bias towards symmetrical or centralised pictures. Act II favoured downstage positioning so as to keep the performers well-lit, and throughout the piece there were no issues with sight-lines.

The play opened with impact, as the two dragons entered from different sides of the stage, circling the space slowly so that the audience could take in their impressive forms before coming to a head. Here, the Dragon Tamer intervened, standing central with the two dragons either side, and this created a striking image. The Tamer established a light and humorous tone for the piece, directly speaking to the audience who enjoyed jokes such as *'your safety cannot be guaranteed'*. The Green Man was introduced who served as the narrator of the piece, providing links between the stories, sometimes interacting with the various characters and often staying on stage to observe the scenes as they unfolded.

Eight company members then broke onto the stage to create the first of several village scenes, and these group scenes brought much energy to the piece with the company working collaboratively to liven these busier scenes. Four villagers sat on or behind the bench stage left, whilst the other four gathered around the staging blocks as they all heartily sang together. This scene established a strong sense of community and identified a clear leader who stood on the blocks, (*'who be with me'*)

rallying the group to find the dragon. Three characters walked back and forth across the stage with a double-sided sign to reveal 'Day 1' and then 'Day 2' to show the passing of time, which the audience enjoyed.

The Pixies featured at various points during the play, encouraging laughs from the audience with each frivolous appearance as they scooted on and off, often interacting with the Green Man. These three actors built a delightful relationship, sometimes acting as a group (e.g., when they stood in an upstage line whilst observing the Traveller) and other times breaking apart to establish their individual characters with varying responses to scenarios. The Withypool story was a highlight, with the Pixies giggling mischievously whilst creating their makeshift naked costume before running across to the clothes left by the Farmer's Wife, wreaking havoc as they whizzed past the Green Man. They put these clothes on with sheer joy, contrary to how the story should have played out and much to the Green Man's despair.

These silly moments contrasted nicely with the darker scenes that featured less cheerful stories, because after all what is a myth or legend without a sinister character, a decent battle or a gory death? The villagers banded together to intimidate the Witch with various chants of '*murder*' and '*witch*' as they circled around her whilst pointing. The more ominous stories such as those featuring the Hunky Punks, the Ghosts and the devil in various guises were saved for Act II, landing with greater impact as night fell around the captivated audience.

The full company assembled for the Wassail scene, with the music and dancing here lifting everyone's spirits ahead of the end of the first act. The King and Queen commanded over their subjects from an elevated position on the blocks, leading the singing with vigour as the villagers performed a lively routine. Grammer held the audience's attention as she told the tale of The Apple Tree Man, encouraged by the responses from the three ladies sat on the bench who were invested in this story. This concluded with the Queen performing a neatly executed ritual as she jubilantly called out '*wassail/waes hael*' whilst laying the bread. Next came the Mummer's play, with each character confidently holding centre stage for their respective introductions. The slapstick duel landed well with the audience and the Turkish Knight's reaction was suitably silly, at first bringing his face close to the King's, then seeking the assistance of two villagers to support his melodramatic fall to the ground.

In the Tarr Steps scene, the clapper bridge was formed with squares of felt, hereby illuminating Designer Dona's point in the programme that less certainly is more. The Hooded Figure bravely lay on the soaked ground for this scene, sitting up to talk at intervals before lying back again. The scene that followed featured a super sequence from the technical teams in which three large stones were brought on as the Hooded Figure turned the wedding party into stones. These flats were superbly constructed (boasting an impressive amount of work considering their brief appearance) with attention paid to the detailed paintwork including intricate shading and moss details.

The Open Field System scene was one of my personal highlights. The Representative stood on top of the blocks, framed by two villagers who stood on the floor holding the bags. Meanwhile, Thomas sat to the side completely disengaged throughout the scene until he bid '*ten*' during the final moments of the candle auction. William's '*fix*' was accompanied by a throw of the hands into the air, with various emphatic objections following thereafter. The characters worked cohesively to rally their short rebuttals, carrying the humour with momentum.

The penultimate Fairy scene was perfectly placed to take the audience on a totally different journey following a handful of darker scenes. With no dialogue, the music and multicoloured lights built throughout this sequence, starting with string lights and lanterns held upstage by three members of

the cast. Two further performers stood to the sides of the stage holding glow-in-the-dark images of fairies, with a final central performer who opened and closed illuminated butterfly wings. The sequence culminated with two members of the production sat in the auditorium using hand-held disco ball lights to project onto the white house in the background. The atmospheric music and the lights in the setting created a lovely reflective moment that held its own.

In the final scene, The Dragon of Kingston St Mary finally had the chance to tell their story in another lively re-enactment of events with Alys being snatched away before being heroically rescued by Owen. The evening ended with a cheerful curtain call using dancing and colourful lights to bring the play to a close.

PROPS

The villagers' tankards were used in various scenes and on a couple of occasions were also used as percussive accompaniment. Pieces of hand-held percussion were used for the Wassail Song and those dancing used sticks as part of their routine here. The sign used to indicate the passing of time (Day 1/ Day 2) was double-sided, not only to be efficient but also as a humorous device. Similarly, the ladle of buns in the Alfred scene was double-sided, with the burnt facet revealed later in the scene. The Pixie's scooters were livened by hanging bells and flowers from their handles and these characters also rode into one scene on hobby horses.

Most stories made reference to items that were key to the action, such as Will's axe, the bucket filled with glittery water, the bags of apples and Joseph's staff, along with The Holy Grail. In the Wassail scene, the cup was again a feature, a red bag of gold coins was discovered under the tree and toasted bread was placed on the floor. Several weapons featured with long swords used by Arthur, Mordred, Morgan, the Turkish Knight and St George, whereas Merlin's instrument of choice was a long dagger. The Royalists threatened their prisoners with a musket and a thick noose.

Lorna and Dona both took on so many roles on this production, and yet they still had time to pay careful attention to detail such as finding a period medical bag for Dr Quack and adding props to enhance characterisations such as Sir John's bible, the Traveller's bag on a stick and a pipe for Thomas.

COSTUMES

With over 100 characters to accommodate, how on earth costuming them all was managed with a £100 budget must surely be some sort of record! Here, Dona Bullion used what was already in the society's costume store but also took care to create bespoke items such as the outfits worn by the two stone characters by draping painted fabric over cardboard structures. Many of the garments were embellished such as adding foliage dressing onto the Green Man's coat and ribbon details onto his purple gown. His floral headdress also featured small antlers, adding intrigue to the appearance of this pivotal character. The King of Wassail wore red and gold robes with a fur coat and flame-like fabric embellishments, and the Queen's purple gown featured ribbons to match those on the Green Man's costume, which was a really nice touch of thematic detail.

The villager characters wore 'generic' costumes in simple colours and fabrics, all looking vaguely of the time (spanning the 14-16th centuries) and presented a nice variety of gentle tones in beige, green, red and blue with white shirts and the women wearing mop hats. Period was aptly represented in items such as The Blue Lady's Victorian attire, Monmouth's long curled wig, the Royalists' feathered hats and John Popham's ruff. As the Dragon Tamer was of his own time, he was styled differently in black tailcoats with gold details, a multicoloured waistcoat and a grey top hat with a ribbon to match his red velvet bowtie.

Many of the characters were of high status with costumes to match, such as Guinevere who wore an attractive green wide-sleeved dress with a lighter green scarf and cloak. Morgan appeared in a stunning long red velvet dress with gold details that matched her belt and headband, along with a blue cloak with red lining. Merlin's robes contrasted in gold and green, worn with a fawn overcoat and a red hat to tie in with Morgan's costume. Alfred's outfit and matching cape were in an attractive royal blue, as were the men in Monmouth's army.

Other notable looks included Joseph who appeared in lively multicoloured robes with an orange scarf that featured a pocket in which to set the Holy Grail. The Mummers characters were bold and bright with the Jester's red and yellow motley contrasting the Turkish Knight in navy velvet and gold, and the doctor's squashed hat added to his vivacious character.

The Hunky Punk's grey net tunics were lifted beautifully by the lighting and really added to the ethereal, eerie atmos. The masks were absolutely fantastic, with an interesting feature on the making of these in the programme. The construction, finish and fit were all most impressive.

MUSIC & MOVEMENT

Atmospheric fantasy music opened the show to create excitement and intrigue, firmly setting the tone for the show that was to follow. Several live musical interludes were included, starting with the villager's first entrance when they sang a traditional folk song in unison at first, then in canon. The Wassail song accompanied a stick dance with the dancers often arranged into lines or using circular formations. The vocals were joyfully performed and exuberantly accompanied using basic pieces of percussion. Another traditional dance featured at the wedding in Stanton Drew, with lively accompaniment provided by the Piper whose adept performance added to the humour of the moment that followed shortly thereafter when the Hooded Man miming playing along to a pre-recorded track.

The Hunky Punks delivered a highly stylised performance from the moment they crept onto the stage from the 'wings' and continued to move throughout their scene as if skulking in the shadows. Their angular movements were articulated using different arm positions and extended fingers, keeping their knees bent to maintain a low position. At the end of each unison chanted line, they froze and looked sharply out front, which looked suitably creepy and very effective and enhanced by their masks. Atmospheric 'spooky' music underscored the Ghost scene, accentuated by their slow movement behind each featured character, suggesting that they were all trapped in their own respective netherworlds.

SOUND

As previously mentioned, this location was understandably chosen in part for the advantageous acoustics (alongside venue set-up logistics etc.) However, it does sit within Clarks Village and this did prove to be mildly problematic when a noisy group was heard leaving the shopping centre. The cast handled this with aplomb and carried on, seemingly unruffled by the distraction. Aside from this and occasional rumblings from traffic passing on the road behind the audience there were no sound issues. The volume and pace of dialogue didn't inhibit comprehension anywhere, nor did any of the accents used by the actors who articulated the dialogue with energy. There were evidently a few members of the company that were able to project more confidently than others, at times adopting a heightened or indeed melodramatic playing style that served this production well.

Two speakers on stands sat either side of the downstage corners of the playing space. Musical tracks filled the space and sound effects were suitably balanced in line with context and meaning. The dragons made frequent appearances throughout and were accompanied by a musical track that incorporated a strange shapeless mixture of electronic sounds that were mysterious and foreboding.

Sound effects included thunder to mark the Witch's entrance, barking dogs at the top of Act II (that certainly sounded convincing to a dog in the audience!), the sound of soldier's marching feet and a musket firing.

LIGHTING

Two pairs of LED Par Bars (4 lights on each) were set downstage left and right with the stands set at varying heights. Four uplighters sat on the floor, evenly spaced out across the front of the playing space. The coverage from this simple set-up was ample and as previously mentioned, the fading light was mitigated using downstage positioning, placing the actors as close to the uplighters as possible. There was also a favourable hotspot that was utilised when players sat on top of the two stacked staging blocks, with this position having greater impact as the evening progressed. The first of such instances was during Grammer's Apple Tree story.

Design when performing outdoors is extraordinarily limiting as so much is out of control, but the main priority is intensity which is why investing in LEDs is such a useful move. However, colour was also used with impact, starting with the dragons' various entrances which were accompanied by a snap to red and then fading back and forth between orange. Flashes of lightning were used for the Witch scene and when the wedding party were turned to stone. The cold pale blue state for the Hunky Punks created a sinister mood, with all of the creative components coming together beautifully to create this fantastic scene. The green on the Ghosts swiftly established this otherworldly scene which then contrasted the Fairy scene. Multicoloured flashing lights carried the performance into a celebratory finale and curtain call.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

The touring team did an incredible job, setting up in nine locations across a wide geographical area with varying set up and access provisions. The dedication and hard work required to mount an outdoor touring production should never be underestimated, particularly when battling the elements and having to make last-minute adjustments to accommodate your changing environment. From setting up the staging area, the lights, the sound, the front of house and 'auditorium' areas to liaising with the venue for access requirements, this team certainly had their work cut out for them. Add to this list a very small backstage area and a relatively large cast playing over 100 characters, numerous props and large moving pieces of set (the stones) and you have what most would declare is an impossible challenge. But not for this team who did an outstanding job in delivering a complex production from rehearsals through to get-outs in the pouring rain. This was a labour of love and an incredible achievement from a small team.

PUPPETS

It only seemed fitting to mention these in their own section, as it's not often you see a production with puppets crafted by the society, again by the brilliant Dona Bullion. Gurt Vurm, as in keeping with their story, had a painted tree effect across their body, with amber eyes and five attractive golden horns that glistened in the lighting. This larger puppet was operated by three people, whereas the smaller Dragon of Kingston St Mary was smaller and operated by two people. This dragon had a red body with painted scale details and green illuminated eyes which looked even more fantastic when the evening turned dark.

The operation of these two puppets was managed by six of the actors who wore blacks. The narrative was frequent interrupted by the dragons, mostly the back half of Gurt Vurm, therefore only requiring one person to operate in these moments. The puppeteers coordinated their rising and falling movements to give the body a sense of undulating movement and travelled together carefully when their creature was on the move. When Gurt Vurm was chasing Will they looked sharply from side-to-side, demonstrating the prowess and danger posed by this creature. However, they were

thwarted by Will who cut the dragon in half using an axe, at which point the puppet separated into two pieces, which were previously held together by Velcro. The head of the dragon was used to indicate who the character was engaging with (including the audience) as well as to convey emotional responses. In the opening scene the front puppeteer of the Dragon of Kingston St Mary stamped their foot in irritation and later this dragon used some lovely head movements as they recoiled back from the light blows delivered by Alys' stick.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Hearty congratulations to all involved and if time were to allow notes on each and every character, they would have indeed been mentioned here! Herewith some thoughts on returning characters or those central to the various stories.

The Green Man served as a narrator, mostly engaging directly with the audience either to introduce or link the stories together. As an observer of the various stories his responses often made comment that would prompt or provoke the audience. At certain moments he lightly engaged with the characters such as when he took the staff from Joseph or desperately tried to dissuade the Pixies from their disruptive behaviour. His frustration came to a head when they put their clothes on, losing his cool here on *'I'll leave that for another night'*.

The Pixies had cute squeaky voices, all pitched at a similar tone. They delighted in waving and beaming at the audience on their initial entrance, firmly establishing themselves as characters we were always pleased to see return. As a group, they built a strong relationship through various scenes as they poked fun at one another, frequently falling out before swiftly reconciling and moving on to make mischief elsewhere. The falling out over the mended spade involved a lot of pointing and getting upset that was silly and amusing. The cider joke was played by Claire Haworth rolling her eyes drunkenly and later when she returned to the stage, exhausted having chased the dragon was comically delivered.

Will Tottle pronounced his audacity with a clear, booming voice that carried with ease. Although over-confident, this with a jovial and likeable character. The swift bartering with the Man was delivered with zeal and the encounter with the dragon and its eventual defeat tonally resonated with the rest of the lightness of this scene.

The Witch portrayed the 'feeble old crone' with scowling expressions and a hunched posture uncurling into her full height later in the scene. The actor used a sing-song vocal affect and pushed the higher notes with an exceptionally clear vocal delivery of this formidable character. Her scene partner, Father Bernard appeared pleading in earnest with the audience (*'It's lies, all lies'*) before asserting control and acting revenge on the Witch.

The Monk in the brief exchange with the Milkmaid was played with a comfortable level of smug sarcasm as he engaged in light upmanship, which in turn heightened the comedy in this scene. By contrast, Joseph was played with a heavy sense of weariness, but carried reverence and passion for his beloved son. The performance of *Jerusalem* was confidently and sincerely delivered acapella, with the casting of this role no doubt shrewdly utilising the vocal talents of this actor.

Morgan carried obvious power as she held her poise in the scene with Merlin whose gravitas and wisdom was subtly played. Morgan's disdain for Guinevere and Arthur's court was obvious, prompting Merlin's vehement defence and voicing his disappointment in Morgan's behaviour. This scene left us wanting to know more as they left the stage on a cliff-hanger moment.

Alfred was clearly a regal figure who readily charmed the family, using his wits to persuade them to share the little that they had. The family in this scene elevated the status of the king as they marvelled at his eloquent use of language. The Mother's distress at the sight of the burnt buns garnered sympathy from the audience.

The Mummers Players were all super to watch, opening with the jolly Jester whose obvious jokes were oversold with energy, prompting groan-laugh from the audience. Molly was saccharine sweet using a silly high-pitched voice. The Turkish Knight revelled in his villainy and St George ravished as the protector and defender. Dr Quack's stylistic delivery was punctuated with a comedic 'bit' as he feigned something in his bag attacking his hand.

The absurdity of the stone's costumes adequately set them up for their scene. With their bodies concealed, The Wimblesone had his head poking out of the top whereas the po-faced Water Stone's face was framed in a hole within his costume. The Wimblesone was a jovial character who performed a brief skittish dance and clearly enjoyed the sound of his own voice. By contrast, the Water Stone droned in dull tones without any vocal or physical expression, exasperated by his companion's constant chatter. These two characters played off one another nicely, making for an amusing scene.

I may have mentioned once or twice how much I enjoyed the Hunky Punks scene, but wanted to reiterate again here that, thanks to the commitment of these five performers, this scene really was a production highlight.

The Ghost scene introduced another host of intriguing characters, including Mother Leakey who was a sweet old lady, whistling on her entrance with a clear voice that carried nicely in the space. It was interesting to read in the programme that this was Irene Bradley's first appearance on stage; the first of many, I hope. Clare Howarth delivered another well considered performance at The Green Ghost, with agitated movements, flitting 'in and out' with great focus throughout the entirety of this scene, including when moving in the background. This disjointed energy jarred with the almost sung dialogue thereby emphasising the threat posed by this ominous and unstable character. Lord George Jeffries carried his seniority with pomp. His pitiful excuses for his behaviour were played authentically, steadfastly asserting his righteousness rather playing for a specific audience response. Rebecca's sad story was simply told, and the frank delivery heightened the tragedy of her tale.

In the final scene, Alys was a sweet unassuming bride-to-be. Fiona was suitably distressed when her daughter was snatched by the dragon and warmly comforted by Erin and Maeve thereafter. Owen assumed the role of dashing hero who confidently took command of the situation and assuredly ran off to battle the dragon. Aldwin followed in slapstick fashion, smacking his bottom in a misguided attempt to goad the dragon. Alys tenderly helped the dragon up, and timidly responded to the Wassail King as he chastised her at the end of this scene. Again, these characters were part of another short episode in this collection of interesting myths and legends and although they appeared but for a brief moment, they each left their mark on the audience.

Congratulations to the cast and crew on staging this original piece of outdoor theatre, which was crafted with love by a relatively small team, many of whom undertook several roles both on and off stage. Thanks to all of your hard work you brought this unique offering to venues across the county which in itself is a phenomenal achievement. It was wonderful to meet some of the society and I look forward to seeing your touring production next summer!

Tash Moore

28th July 2024