

KNORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2025-26

Witham Operatic Workshop

Beauty & the Beast directed by Nikki Mundell – Poole assisted by Charlotte Watling

Adjudicated by Andrew Hodgson & Cally Kline

INTRODUCTION

Based on the 1991 animated film, “Beauty & the Beast” is surely the first and best of the Disney screen to stage musicals. It sticks closely the original classic fairy tale and features a lovely, tune filled score by Alan Menken. It has had very long runs on Broadway and in the West End, and is constantly revived by professionals and amateurs alike. It is easy to see why! The show offers a myriad of visual delights and a range of wonderful characters to play. We were intrigued to see how this very talented young company would handle the demands of the material and needless to say, we were not disappointed!

FRONT OF HOUSE

As always at WOW, we received a very warm, helpful and friendly welcome with great seats and the interval drinks including coffee, were much appreciated! There was a full house who were “buzzing” with anticipation before the show began. The very glossy and informative programme was excellent, with some wonderful colourful photographs featured in it. Whilst we understand the need for the amiably conducted interval raffle, we both felt it went on for too long, and was in danger of inhibiting the magic of the show.

SETTING

With a large cast to be accommodated on a relatively small stage, the modern set design embraced technology to present each backdrop as if in a fairy tale storybook, with projections on a screen at the back of the stage. The pages of the book literally turned to reveal each enchanting scene. These were enhanced by castle walls acting a permanent backdrop. The garden looked lovely. The all - important rose, encased in a glass cabinet front stage left, looked beautiful and its dropping leaves were very cleverly achieved, much to the delight of the girls sitting behind us.

Furniture and props were all in-keeping and well chosen, complimenting the different scenes and action. The stage management team, combined with the cast, performed their scene changing tasks very efficiently and smoothly.

Well done!

LIGHTING/SOUND/EFFECTS

The lighting design was superb, extremely atmospheric and complimentary to the scenery and costumes to create a riot of colour but also mystery. Cues were seamless and haze used to enhance the atmosphere where necessary. The “mirror” effect was excellent as were the transformations of the Prince to Beast and back again. We also admired the “flickering” candles.

We were both struck by the clarity of the sound, and the balance between the orchestra and performers was well achieved. You could understand every word being said and sung! Effects were all good, as were all the cues. Well done!

COSTUMES

A stunning range of costumes, which were a cascade of colours and very faithful to the characters as shown in the original film. Some of them must have been quite difficult to wear but the cast coped brilliantly, including one young lady who fell over and struggled to get to her feet in her huge costume, but this was very well managed by the crew and the actress herself. The richness and detail of the beautifully made costumes was evident throughout. The costumes were enhanced by a myriad of 18th century wigs and good, if slightly old-fashioned, make-up. The Beast's head was impressive, and we loved the frightening wolves with their lit-up eyes. Well done!

MUSIC AND CHOREOGRAPHY

The musical accompaniment, by the talented musicians under the leadership of Emma Nash, was outstanding. It was very supportive of the singers and always a joy to listen to. The quality of the singing, from the whole cast, was an outstanding feature of this production. We were amazed by the confident and mature vocals of the principals in addition to the range of harmonies and lyrical understanding of the ensemble.

Director Nikki's imaginative choreography was excellent, attuned to the talents of her cast who moved with precision, energy and confidence. However, she also stretched them to great effect. An absolute highlight of the production was the staging of the very popular number "Be Our Guest", which the audience loved, particularly as the performers were brought down into the auditorium so everyone watching felt part of it! Very well done!

PRODUCTION

The expert directorial hand of Nikki Mundell-Poole was evident throughout the show. Having seen most of WOW's shows over the last decade or so, this production had to be one of their very best among a plethora of high quality productions. There was so much to enjoy visually, but the quality of performance was amazingly vibrant throughout. The whole cast worked well together; Nikki had engendered a real company feel with the acting, singing and dancing all combining to tell the classic story beautifully. The pace of the production was very good and although there were occasions when the actors were positioned in straight lines to deliver their dialogue, the stage never looked over-crowded, despite having so many performers involved. Well done!

PERFORMANCES

BELLE: Georgina Warren was outstanding as Belle, the central character of the show. She was vibrant and intelligent, making her the true individual who wants more than "her little town" in her future. Georgina looked lovely, possessing a strong singing voice and graceful movement. Her pairing with the Beast/Prince worked beautifully and Georgina exuded confidence and warmth. Very well done!

THE BEAST: We were stunned by Frank Thornton's mature and powerful baritone singing voice. His acting showed depth and understanding and we clearly saw the vulnerable man under the Beast's gruff and often scary exterior. Frank's singing of "If I Can't Love Her" brought Act 1 to a moving climax, and his transformation back to the handsome Prince at the end was superb. Very well done!

GASTON: Sam Howard had a maturity in his acting and excellent singing that belied his 15 years! He played the egotistical lothario Gaston, perfectly capturing, and contrasting, his posing, comedic side with the increasingly unpleasant and nasty leader of the villagers that he believed himself to be. Sam had a great stage presence and confidence, exhibited most commandingly in his "Gaston" number! Very well done!

LE FEU: Max Midgely shone as Gaston's bumbling sidekick! They were a hilarious double act, with Max showing a lot of comedic energy and great timing in everything he did. He also possessed a powerful singing voice, which also came to the fore in the show stopping "Gaston" number. This was perfect casting! Very well done!

LUMIERE: As the Maitre d' of the castle turned into a candelabra, Luc Roberts was suave and debonair, leading the outstanding "Be My Guest" number with flair and vocal confidence. He really connected with the audience, and his fellow performers, leading the household servants with theatrical panache. Well done!

MRS POTTS: Following in the shoes of Angela Lansbury is a hard act to follow, particularly with the singing of the iconic title song, but Madison O'Grady brought her own spin to this kind-hearted and motherly character, and won the hearts of the audience with a delightful performance. She was a strong singer and delivered her lines with empathy and understanding. She also looked just right! Well done!

CHIP: As the son of Mrs. Potts who had been turned into a tea cup, Lucy Goodman was charming. She spoke very clearly and coped with the fact that most of the time, she was sitting and moved around in the cup with only her face showing. Fortunately, her facial expressions were a delight and we really loved her! Good work!

COGSWORTH: Harry Courtney was another of the Beast's household: the Major Domo who had been turned into a clock! He showed all the attributes needed for this character, he could be stern and pompous but he also showed compassion for Belle and obedience to the Beast. He made a super side-kick to Lumiere. Harry gave a clear and thoughtful performance.

BABETTE: Amelia Bennett played the saucy and flirtatious maid who has been turned into a feather duster. She was a delight to watch and listen to as she tried to win Lumiere's affections. Amelia's accent was just right and she was very graceful in movement. She captured the "ooh, la, la," personality of Babette perfectly!

MADAME DE LA GRANDE BOUCHE: This larger than life character is an opera singer who has been turned into a wardrobe. Niamh Cullen coped splendidly with her costume, surviving a fall at the performance we attended, and the challenging vocals of her singing to create that

operatic aura. Niamh did this so well both as a soloist and within the chorus. Along with Mrs Potts, she was sympathetic to Belle and really made her mark on the production.

MAURICE: Fionn Cricket was Belle's father, an elderly and eccentric inventor (we loved his "machine") who was adoring and protective of Belle, and encouraged her to pursue her dreams. Playing a character much older than yourself is not easy and we thought Fionn did really well. His acting with Belle was really sincere but he also captured the craziness of the inventor. Nicely done!

ENSEMBLE: a fantastic group of young actors, singers and dancers who were totally involved and immersed in the production throughout. Within the ensemble, several people played small roles and we particularly enjoyed Jack McConnell as the sinister Monsieur D'Arque and the three silly girls played by Grace Morris, Isla Smith and Hannah McNeill. The dignified and clear narrator who set the scene was played by Hadley Chambers.

SUMMATION

A visually magical production of this beautiful show that had so much to admire and enjoy. It was expertly directed and choreographed by Nikki Mundell-Poole and performed by a fantastic cast of very talented young performers! Congratulations to everyone involved!

Best Wishes

Andrew and Cally (adjudicators)