

The Mercy Seat – 15th February 2018 – The Studio Theatre – South Hill Park

Set in Manhattan, the day after the 9/11, Neil LaBute's look at unravelling lives is an uncomfortable ninety minutes in the company of two self-absorbed, bickering and tedious lovers.

Ben is a married man who should have been in a meeting in The World Trade Centre at the time of the attacks, but was having sex with Abby, his boss and lover, in her apartment nearby.

Heartlessly using the disaster as a means, Ben tries to persuade Abby to start a new life together, prompting a battle of emotions, as the spineless Ben and argumentative Abby quarrel over what is right for the individual rather than the couple.

Although I never really warmed to the squabbling characters, I found this adult play compelling and thanks to tremendous performances from Anthony Flemming and Julia Chapman, very watchable, and an ideal production to absorb in the intimate surroundings of The Studio Theatre.

Romeo & Juliet – 7th February 2018 – Wilde Theatre – South Hill Park

I've seen a number of productions showcasing differing interpretations of this Shakespeare classic tragedy, but this version is my personal favourite.

I found director Joe Malyan's adaptation absolutely mesmerising. Played out on a stunning set and accompanied in places by a live and original, cinematic like music and choral soundtrack composed by George Jennings, this was an immersive experience.

I sometimes find when watching Shakespeare, that the actors have a tendency to recite their lines, but maybe not always understand fully the nuance of the text. Not so, with this production, every actor involved really 'Got it'. At times, I forgot I was watching Shakespeare as it felt so modern.

Jack Fairey and Laura Hannawin as the doomed lovers were so convincing that one could not be moved by the many emotions their tryst put upon them.

Supported by a very strong and faultless cast and chorus, this production really proved to me that one doesn't necessarily need to go to The Globe or Stratford to see Shakespeare at its best, when we have it here on our own doorstep.

Beauty and the Beast – 8th December 2017 – Wilde Theatre – South Hill Park

Over the years, this show has always been the benchmark production that I judge other local panto's by and many times, others have come close, but never surpassed. This year, it isn't going to be any easier for others as this adaption of Beauty and The Beast has picked up the bench and smashed it out of the South Hill Park.

From the moment, at the opening of the show, when a hilarious tap dancing pantomime horse joins Belle on stage to a terrific Errol Flynn inspired sword fight, you just know you are in for another Fun-filled Feast of Festive Family Fun.

This show is a delight and everyone involved should be as pleased as the Christmas Punch for what they have achieved in a seasonal show that always has high expectations. Expectations, that were met and then some.

Director Adam Stafford has got together an excellent cast with beautiful vocals from Faye Ellen as Belle, a beast of a performance from Matthew Houston and some enjoyable equine antics from the likeable Tom Pepper. Heather Wilson had her wicked witch mode wonderfully turned up to 11 and Wilde Theatre Panto regular and favourite, Brad Clapson, as ever, shone in sequins, sauce and star-quality as Gabby the good witch and then there was Craig Rhys Barlow. For me, the star turn in amongst this galaxy of stars. Playing Norbere for well-deserved laughs as a Welsh speaking, over the top French lover boy with more moves than Tom Jones on a roller-coaster, he practically stole every scene he was in.

Along with a great and enthusiastic chorus of youngsters, the as always creative talents of scriptwriter, Bart Lee, Music Composer, Ron McAllister, Musical Director, Tim Cumper and Set Designer, Victoria Spearing and the rest of the excellent crew, this is once again the panto not to miss this year. It's a beauty!