

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!

Song of a Preacher Man – 28th October 2017 – Wycombe Swan

Three unrelated people looking for love are drawn to a Soho coffee shop that once held significance for them in different ways. In the sixties it was called the 'Preacher Man' and run by a man of wisdom. Today, it's run by his son who lacks the astuteness of his late father, so love needs to find a way.

That's the premise of this enjoyable musical directed by Craig Revel Horwood and featuring the songs of Dusty Springfield.

Diana Vickers, Debra Stephenson, Michael Howe and Ian Reddington led from the front an excellent cast of singers and musicians, belting out Dusty's classics that carried the narrative forward without feeling they were shoe-horned in to the story.

Personally, I would have liked some more 'Belters' and bigger dance numbers as per the finale, but that didn't distract from a very entertaining evening and a fitting tribute to the legend that was Dusty Springfield.

Blackadder – 11th October 2017 – Wilde Theatre – South Hill Park

It can't be easy recreating an iconic comedy classic such as Blackadder as audiences will always have the original locked into their psyche and expectations will be high.

Having grown up with the series, I took my seat with similar baggage, but that was soon stowed once the cast settled into their roles.

Adrian McDougall, in the unenviable position of following Rowan Atkinson as Edmund Blackadder, won me over very quickly with his performance and others cast members did likewise, culminating with a full on, Rik Mayall would have be proud, scene smashing appearance of Alex Harvey-Brown as Lord Flashheart.

Four abridged episode linked by new character, Professor Christopher Starkers, gave director Nicola Allpress plenty to play with. Adding some nice original theatrical treats along the way, Nicola and her team certainly met expectations and if that was her version of one of Baldrick's 'Cunning plans', then it worked, M'Lord.