

Imogen Charlton is working towards her Gold Arts Award and recently completed a placement at Queen's Hall Arts as part of the award. She worked backstage with many theatre companies, including Oddsocks, and here has written a review of the Oddsocks show 'The Wizard of Oz'.

Introduction

I watched Oddsocks perform 'The Wizard of Oz Panto' numerous times while I was undertaking my internship at the Queens Hall. The pantomime was based on the fantasy novel by L Frank Baum. The themes of the performance included friendship, belief and always looking on the bright side of life by focusing on what you have got rather than what you lack. This was made particularly apparent by the recurring song 'Keep on the Sunny Side of Life'. This message was relatable to audience members of all ages, ensuring that the pantomime was a joyful experience for the whole family.

Performance style

Performed on the Queens Hall's proscenium arch stage, one could argue that the company adopted a Brechtian style for their pantomime. One element of a Brechtian style performance is reminding the audience members that they are watching a play rather than real life. This was achieved by the company as they would change the set in front of the audience. Brecht also aimed to break the invisible 'forth wall' that separates the performers from their audience. As is the case in almost all pantomimes, Oddsocks broke the forth wall using audience participation and ensuring that their performance is relevant to their audience. Audience participation was particularly apparent as the younger audience members on the front rows were handed poppies to wave when cued and the whole audience was invited click their heels to help Dorothy get beck to Kansas. Also, at the beginning of each half, the cast immersed themselves into their spectators whilst handing out programmes and engaging in conversations. I think that this was of huge significance as it set the atmosphere of a family performance even before it had begun. A young audience member was invited up on stage to help Dorothy call the flying monkeys and many spectators joined in with 'booing' the Wicked Witch of the West and clapping along to the company's original songs. Relevance to audience members of all ages was achieved using a combination of adult and child appropriate jokes, adding humour to the performance. In addition to the classic, 'oh yes, it is', the cast included references to the popular show 'Strictly Come Dancing, rock-paper-scissors, 0-hour contracts, Donald Trump and celebrities such as Russel Crow.

Set

The set was not only interesting to look at but was also used to ease scene transitions between Oz and Kansas. This was represented by a foam mat, yellow bricks on one side and blue on the other. The main feature of the set however was a rectangular box on a wheeled platform base with a variety of flaps on each side allowing it to be used in a variety of scenes. The box acted as Dorothy's house, the witch's castle, had a platform on one side for the Scarecrow to stand on in the field, opened out into a wood for the Tin Man, had a side of painted poppies for the poppy field and had numerous bright sparkly green sides to represent the Emerald City. The box was also used to represent the hurricane as its wheels allowed it to be spun rapidly onstage as it was transformed to represent the land of Oz. The multifunctional box was an invaluable piece of set as it allowed the younger audience members to follow the story with ease and enjoyment. The box was also used to shield the giant robotic looking head that the Wizard of Oz hides behind. The oversized head symbolised the Wizard of Oz's overwhelming power over the citizens of Oz, as well as his lack of human empathy and how distant he has become from the rest of society. His high status was particularly apparent as Dorothy stood next to the giant head and looked so much smaller and unable to stand up to The Wizard. From behind the head came The Wizard himself. The company chose to make their Wizard of Oz impersonate Donald Trump. This not only humoured the more mature audience members, but the fact that he was shielded from sight, protected from judgement, symbolised how Donald Trump is protected by his Presidency against the sexual misconduct claims of over 20 women.

Costume

Classic costumes were used and closely resembled the illustrations by William Wallace Denslow from the 1900 classic. This included Dorothy's silver slippers, rather than the ruby red slippers introduced via the 1939 musical film to take advantage of the new art of technicolour. All four characters wore their original attire although the Tin Man's costume did so with a modern element. The Tin Man wore a red and black checked shirt and jeans with silver patches stitched onto them. He also wore a silver hat and silver trainers. I felt that this choice of costume worked well as it kept enough of the original ideas whilst ensuring that it was relevant to a twenty-first century audience. The costumes were of great importance since all cast members, other than Dorothy, played multiple characters. One of the significant costume changes occurred when Ellie Mackenzie switched between playing the Witch of the South and the Lion. Without the use of costume, this would have become confusing for the younger audience members who would have struggled to follow the story, and ultimately may not have enjoyed the experience as thoroughly as they did. This is an example of the importance of costume, particularly in relation to young audience members and

multi-role play. Overall, the costumes added to the performance as they allowed for clarity over characters, were relevant to audience members and often humorous.

Lights

As well as costume and set, the lighting also enhanced Oddssocks' performance of the Wizard of Oz Panto. The lights were used to create tension amongst audience members at the beginning of the performance when Dorothy's house is carried away in the tornado at both the beginning and the end of the panto. This was achieved using lights of assorted colours that flashed at a very fast pace, creating anticipation amongst the spectators. The lighting was also used to clarify the location of the scene. For example, when the characters entered the emerald city, the lights changed to an emerald green, distinguishing the city from the rest of Oz. Oddssocks also used lighting changes to promote audience participation. The house lights rose when the characters were attacked by the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys, allowing the cast to run amongst audience members. This was particularly exciting for the young children who were helping Dorothy escape from the monkey, enabling them to feel completely engrossed and involved in the performance. Finally, throughout the performance, the lighting was used to direct audience focus via the use of a spotlight. A spotlight shone on Toto on stage left as he was narrating the piece whilst the remainder of the stage was dimmed. The cast on the remaining side of the stage froze to prevent diverting attention from the narrator, creating a 'freeze-frame' onstage. The same technique was effective in the use of flashbacks also.

Sound

The sound and music were other key element of the performance. The company performed their own songs, consisting of 'You Are My Sunshine', 'Keep On The Sunnyside' and an individually tailored song for Dorothy and her three friends. The songs were used to introduce each character in a comical way. All of the songs were performed by members of the multi-skilled cast on the keyboard, guitar, base and drums from stage right. The sound also consisted of numerous sound effects including the sound of the woodman chopping wood for their boat, a dog attacking and the Wicket Witch melting. All sounds were controlled by cast members from the wings, allowing the characters onstage to react accordingly, creating realism onstage. One of the most memorable sound effects resembled space travel and gushing of wind and was used during the tornado when Dorothy travels between Oz and Kansas. This is an example of how sound can be a useful indicator of a scene transition.

Some of the sound effects were used repeatedly to indicate an event. For example, every time the magic hat was used to call the flying monkeys, a magic wand 'whoosh' sound was activated

from the wings, avoiding confusion for the younger audience members who learnt to associate the sound with the presence of the monkeys. The most effective use of sound in the performance was the use of an overhead speaker being used to create the Wizard of Oz's echo of a voice. This was created with the use of a microphone in the wings and distorting the voice accordingly. Combined with the giant mechanical head that The Wizard is shielded behind, the sound created The Wizard's overwhelming atmosphere in comparison to Dorothy and her tiny voice, reflecting his superior status.

Characterisation

Whilst all of the cast's acting was impeccable and all had obviously thought in-depth about their characters and rehearsed their accents, I was particularly impressed with Andrew McGillan's characterisation skills as the Scarecrow. McGillan chose to give the Scarecrow a high-pitched and childlike voice, portraying him as naïve and innocent, evoking sympathy amongst the audience. He also mastered the art of the Scarecrow's physicality. As he is made of straw, the Scarecrow finds it difficult to walk and did so with very loose limbs, dragging his feet as he went. However, with practice, throughout the story his walking improved, giving McGillan the opportunity to display his excellent character development. McGillan also demonstrated how he was able to portray his character's status within his physicality by walking ever so slightly crouched down, at a lower level to his friends, whom he is so reliant on due to his lack of brains. However, once the Scarecrow received his brains and realised that he was more able than he thought he was all along, the Scarecrow stood tall amongst his friends, to whom he then felt equal. McGillan also played one of the Wikies, the sidekicks of the Wicked Witch, and made subtle jokes regarding his own multiple roles by commenting on how good-looking the Scarecrow was whilst in role of his Winki character.

Conclusion

Oddsocks chose to leave a subtle hint of uncertainty over the events that happened in Oz by having Dorothy's Aunt Em hand her the bottle of courage that the Lion received from The Wizard in Oz. This subtle gesture was interesting as an audience member as we are left wondering whether it really happened, as was Dorothy. I not only felt that I was watching the performance but as though I was an essential part of it. The Wizard of Oz Panto was obviously well thought out, rehearsed and delivered with immaculate precision and humour. The company also ensured that each element of their performance, especially the set, complemented their piece. To conclude, I thoroughly enjoyed the performance and would recommend both the show and the company to families of all ages.