

BEAUTY and the BEAST. Bampton Players. Bampton Village Hall. February 2017
Director: Avril Saxby. M.D: Hugh Saxby.

As the lights went down in the intimate village hall, the audience were drawn into a bright set, imaginatively painted to match the 19th Century French era. For such a small stage, it would have been easy for the area to become cramped and messy but clever staging ideas and use of the auditorium for some exits and entrances made it easy for the cast to move around, creating the illusion of a spacious performing area.

We were almost immediately greeted by the wonderful character of Felix, a French poodle, who completely stole the show with an excellent performance from Zara Beeden. Zara's expressions and mannerisms were perfectly timed; she reacted to other cast members with finesse and had the audience in stitches throughout the show. Possessing such superb intonation, it was a very fine line between this and throwing the occasional line away, something to be constantly aware of.

The majority of key cast members performed to the best of their ability, being convincing in their character portrayal. Some however, showed signs of struggle when not quite able to match the enthusiasm and confidence of others, leading to the occasional forgotten line or being unable to adequately portray their full potential.

Beauty as her name implies was just that, in face and manner. As a stage performer 'first timer' she managed a capable, charming performance. For future productions, her apparent slight lack of confidence in her abilities, as seen, will now surely be affirmed.

Although initially Ma's (Dame) entrance from a curtained door in the auditorium distracted nearby members of the audience as she sang 'Nothing like a Dame' over the action on the stage (a possible warm-up maybe?), the remainder of Paul Edward's performance was fantastic with the audience enjoying it immensely.

As the Beast, Gavin Haig's acting ability could not be disputed, being persuasive and credible, but even a very smart satin jacket and frilled shirt could not disguise the fact that his 'beastie' costume looked rather like a disgruntled, cuddly teddy bear, albeit an extremely well-groomed one!

Together the cast were a strong team, particularly in chorus numbers such as 'Bad Romance', this could have been enhanced even further with the audio being louder for the cast to hear their cues, however once they got going, the sound was tuneful and spirited. Leading many of the songs, Jaques (played by Josh Goodwin) exuded stage presence, enthusiasm, and managed to get the audience on side within minutes of stepping on stage - no mean feat!

Particular mention absolutely must go to the incredible 'living furniture' costumes which were fabulous! Careful consideration had obviously gone into the practicality and design of these inspired costumes, allowing the cast ease of movement and performance, even when wearing a full wardrobe or armchair!

Altogether, this was a wonderful performance by the Bampton Players; I would even go so far as to say it is my favourite production by the Players to date! Congratulations on producing an evening of excellent family entertainment!