

The Railway Children – Encore Productions – 27.10.18

The classic tale of three well-to-do children and their mother who are uprooted to the country following a severe change in the family fortunes due to their father being jailed and their attempts to get him pardoned.

Challenges: It is important that Perks should present as mature and have excellent clear diction, whilst having the ability to relate well to young actors as in a sense he narrates the piece and is very much the pivotal role. This ability to relate and work with young actors of course also holds true for Mother, the Doctor, the Old Man and Mr Szczepansky. For the piece to work on any real level it is vital that there is a clear character difference between Bobby, Phil and Peter and the Perks Children. I am interested to see how all the various scenes are portrayed in such a comparatively small and intimate working area.

The section above was written some after research including reading the script (thank you) and together with my own knowledge of the play, I hope gives you my insight into what I thought I was coming to see. As with any review, do please remember as you read it that these are my thoughts on the things I noticed, or that stood out to me, good and bad, on the one evening that I saw the play. It should also be borne in mind that I saw the London Cast (looks good written like that!) whilst your Regional Representative, Joe, saw the Oakworth cast. They are written entirely in the hope that they will help and encourage and in no way deter you.

Before proceeding on the actual review, I need to say right now that I thoroughly enjoyed the whole evening, some good acting and plenty of energy, so if some of my comments seem over-picky do please remember it is always more difficult to write an adjudication for a good production than for one with little flaws and errors along the way! I must also make mention again at how totally delighted I am to see young people so heavily involved and clearly so enthusiastic about performing 'a straight play' and so giving them a real opportunity to learn some old-fashioned stage-craft. In fact, my only real criticism (if indeed it can be called such) is that I was enjoying it so much that I made very few notes – I was just drawn to watch – so I did! Watch and thoroughly enjoy!

Stage Presentation

Setting: You perform in such an intimate setting that the audience is almost sitting on the stage with you, so you really can do nothing that will not be seen by that audience which of course comes with its own set of opportunities and challenges. By necessity therefore you perform to an open set and on entering the theatre I was impressed by the scene before me which certainly looked as if we were walking into a country Station and walking back in time around a century. Everything looked to be in period although I did feel that the office door had a real wobble to it on occasions. It was a great touch to have the stage full of young actors 'playing'. It worked so very well and really set the tone and time setting and feeling for the piece and very well done in clearing the stage so efficiently as the performance in chief was about to begin. Well done to the set designer and construction for coming up with such a good set. However, as it was very much a fixed set I did feel as the play progressed that it was hardly a workable set. The frequent 'traffic jams' on the very narrow walkway did greatly restrict the movement of characters, and result, by necessity, in very many straight lines – never a good thing. Would it have been possible to split the stage instead? (I only ask/suggest). I was not too keen on the 'bed' utilised from the train carriage, although that is perhaps an unfair remark as I am unable to think of any other way of doing it. The train making its appearance at the end of Act 1 was wonderful such a shame that the theatre would not allow the use of a smoke machine but what a wonderful effect was created by the talcum powder! It certainly looked very real! A real stroke of genius from someone – well done!

Props: Generally looked appropriate and very generally good, but just a few little bits did mar it somewhat the trunk looked wonderful and the right era but it was very obviously empty and contained only the props that were to be placed on the table – which then made it look false – perhaps you could have padded the bottom with copious quantities of screwed up newspaper so that items appeared to be taken from a full trunk? Likewise, I did not notice any biscuits or sardines both of which were mentioned in the script, and the bottle of 'ginger wine' had a modern supermarket label stuck on the bottom. Similarly, the pram with the birthday gifts. The parcel that Bobby was going to take to the rubbish looked identical to the parcel of clothing that Mrs Perks had said they were going to keep. Very small things but somewhat jarring and so easily amended without adding in any way to the work for the crew during the performance.

Sound & Light: Lighting was good and timely – I am unsure of the limitations of the lighting desk but perhaps dimming the lights in the ‘candle-lit’ scenes would have created a good atmosphere. Generally, sound was good – however actors young and old either need to project more over sound effects or find some business to fill the time until the sound fades as some dialogue was lost or difficult to hear.

Costume: Many, many congratulations on all the costumes every single person on the stage looked exactly right and a special mention of footwear. So many people spoil excellent costumes by poor footwear – not so here – the footwear was simply superb – great attention to detail – many, many thanks. My only very slight comment was in Act II the ‘Old Gentleman’ was sitting on the train not wearing a jacket! (I did warn you that some of the comments would appear over-picky!)

Hair & Make-Up: Again, very good – certainly nothing jarred – I thought the make-up for Mr Szczepansky was excellent, and with another eye for detail the Perks children generally had messy and untidy hair whilst ‘The Railway Children’ had brushed, clean and tidy hair – it makes all the difference – well done!

Effects: Many of the ‘effects’ were produced by the cast as it were and so were excellent perhaps a little loud sometimes, particularly if people were attempting to speak over them but generally very good. Can I also congratulate everyone on and off stage for the lack of ‘noises off’! With so many young people noise backstage seems to be almost inevitable but absolutely NOT so in this production, I did not hear a sound. Thank you and Well done.

Direction

What a challenge for a directorial debut! Not only a cast of no less than 10 young people, but those young actors were all double cast, so double the work at a stroke. Before I say anything further I must congratulate Josh (and I understand Jake as well) not only on accepting this marathon challenge, but also for doing it so well. The direction was generally good, and all the various elements of the production were drawn together and the vision for the piece was incorporated into each one, so the end result was greater than the sum of its individual parts. One small point to note, cast need to be given some ‘business’ to cover laughter or sound effects so that the opening (in some cases almost whole sentences) of lines are not lost. The casting was generally good and there was some good interaction and believable relationships between characters. The cast were focused on the production, watching, listening and reacting and so creating the impression that we were there and watching the children adapt to the massive change in their lives. Director Josh Hankey drew together a not just one but two casts of energetic and enthusiastic actors and worked with them to develop believable characterisations. This was a classic case of good script, direction and acting all working together to produce a common goal.

Pace: Did seem a little sticky in places, and the moving on and off of the table, although generally accomplished quickly and quietly, did not help with that making me wonder once more about the possibility of a split stage or even right down stage left, with the railing and grass to wave from down stage-right? There did seem to be some uncertainty about some of the lines in places, and slow pick-ups on other occasions.

Groupings: Really as already covered for me the set did not really work all the time – it was a great set – but the narrow walk-way made groupings difficult – not to say impossible.

Movement: Everyone moved with a clearly defined purpose – and injected exactly the right sense of urgency into the movements to make it real

Teamwork: Absolutely apparent – in spades – everyone seemed to work well together and perhaps more importantly enjoy working together which does come over the lights. It was a most enjoyable production from beginning to end, and a joy to watch so many people of such varied ages all working together, apparently enjoying doing so, and the result being a great piece of theatre.

Overall: The director is responsible for drawing together all the various aspects of the production including the set and how it works for both cast and crew, adding their own vision and interpretation of the play then and presenting it to an audience on the stage as a cohesive whole – and that holds true whatever genre of production it is. The Railway Children is quite a fragmented piece with all the various scene changes but despite my concerns over the set and the additional problems which it caused you, and as if that were not enough a double cast to contend with as well, you handled it well. Taken as a whole I would say that this

was mission accomplished – true there were a couple of sticky moments but overall the audience (including myself) thoroughly enjoyed the production and demonstrated it visibly with your well-deserved standing ovation at the end.

Acting

I am, perhaps unusually, going to start by congratulating the entire 'adult cast'. Forming and projecting a relationship on stage can be a challenge on its own. However, when you multiply that by two as you had to do with your double cast, it can easily become something of a marathon – not that it looked as if it was so many many congratulations on that single aspect before I start with anything else. The play demands and delivered excellent chemistry and totally believable characters and relationships. Many congratulations to the whole cast, young and older. Your focus on the piece was apparent and you all watched and reacted with interest and remained focussed and in character so delivering honest and believable performances.

That said a couple of specific, albeit very brief comments,

Mother – Dawn Lloyd – I confess this was a different characterisation of the part and on a personal level, not one I was not altogether comfortable with. You certainly had some excellent facial expressions which clearly demonstrated the stress you were living with but somehow the rapport with the children seemed slightly uncomfortable. Be careful to keep your vocal volume up. You really looked the part and I must repeat how much I enjoyed your facial expressions which were supremely expressive.

Seb Farrell as Albert Perks – What a wonderful characterisation study, exactly the right character, vocally very good and totally believable. You had a superb rapport with all of the children and I especially liked the collection of the tickets on entering the theatre done in character and displaying the same excellent rapport with the children – Thank You.

Old Gentleman – Andy McQuoid – A nice gentle and wholly appropriate character – you worked and interacted well with the children and oozed 'very important person'. I particularly liked the waving from the train which increased in intensity as the production progressed. Vocally good, but watch you don't swallow the end of lines.

Mr Szczepansky – Lovely and very believable portrayal – loved the excitement and hand shaking towards the end and the repetition of the train times. Vocally perhaps a little quiet at the beginning but as you were not speaking English not a problem at all. The 'halting English' was very well done.

Jo Preston as Doctor – Very quietly spoken – perhaps ideal for the sick room but less so for the stage and I would have liked to see a little more of the bustling G.P. of yesteryear. That said you portrayed a quiet and calming effect which would I am sure have been greatly valued and appreciated by patients.

Bobby – Emily Barrow – Good stage presence and some great facial expressions and believable accent. Once more I would have liked just a little more volume and do try to slow your speech down a little.

Dan Wilson as Peter - Lovely vocal tone, clear and good accent – loved the facial expressions especially when torn in the scene when the 'birthday treats' were being planned.

Natalie Jaques as Phyllis – Nice character with obvious differences between you and Bobby. I particularly liked the obvious concern and fear at the beginning in the change of circumstances.

The Perks Children – **Joe Bostock** as John, **Andrew Dawson** as Alfred, **Harlie Bundy** as Edith, **Lewis Hewitson** as Bert, **Rebecca Ellison** as Emma, **Isla Graham** as Joan and **Alfie Okell** as Jim with an apology for treating you all together but I would have been saying the same thing to each of you; you had obviously spent time on characters as each of you was a totally different character from each other and vastly different from 'The Railway Children' and it showed wonderfully. You had some great comedic lines which were much appreciated by the audience and which you handled very well. As previously mentioned just try and project a little more and try to slow down your speech a little so that we can hear all that you

say. You all had great accents which again contrasted so very well with Bobby, Peter and Phyllis which was so important.

My apologies also to **Jane Newey** as Mrs. Perks (lovely scene with Perks in Act II): **Laura Cupit** as Mrs James: **Anabelle Taylor** as Mrs Walker: **Christina Wernham** as Mrs Dawson: and **Rachel Sutton** as Mrs Baker: Good portrayal of 'good strong northern women' who added to the reality – just please watch your vocal projection! **Jake Hankey** as Mr Gordon and The District Superintendent – hope your shoulder soon recovers and well done for continuing! **Nick Cupit** as Father great rapport: I found I would have been saying much the same for each and every one of you which would have made some incredibly boring reading so, and I do hope you don't mind, but my comments apply equally to each and every one of you:- It is incredibly difficult to sustain the journey that the main characters are making throughout the play: but almost more difficult for the actors playing smaller but vital roles within the piece to maintain it. You did it wonderfully. Every one of you watched and reacted with such interest and remained focussed and in character for the duration of the piece so delivering honest and believable performances without at any time drawing attention away from the main focus of the piece. Well done and many congratulations to each and every one of you.

In conclusion, this was a well-acted piece, which really demonstrated the importance of caring and being cared for out through all the problems and hurdles of life as the family refuse to let sudden poverty diminish their social conscience. In many ways it has been a difficult review to write as the bottom line as it were was that as a whole I thoroughly enjoyed the whole production – I found it absorbing and a pleasure to watch. Any negative comments in the review are to a fairly large extent nit-picking. My very warmest congratulations to everyone connected in any way with this gentle classic story. Very well done, thank you, and I wish you all every success in future productions, (and please invite me to see The Wind in the Willows)

Christine Hunter Hughes – 27.10.18