



THEATRE REVIEW: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

“We are the people of this town,” chant the villagers at the start of *Beauty and the Beast*; this year’s Christmas panto at Theatre Royal, Winchester. The scenery and costumes make a fantastic first impression. Early on we learn that it is set in France – the land of current protest and unease – but then there is mention of Brexit, too.

The two-hour performance is littered with plenty of fun, jolly japes, double entendres

and lots of ‘Oh no it isn’t’. In the shopping scene where Wally (Ed Thorpe) arrives on stage with a trolley, mum Dotty (Julian Eardley) – in a flamboyant dress that only befits a pantomime dame – asks whether he got what she wanted. “Did you get Oxo?” she questions. “No, they ran out of stock.” And so the gags continue to roll right on until “Bras?” “No they went bust!” Writer and director James Barry has clearly enjoyed himself here and even my daughter Harriett (7) gets the jokes and is in stitches.

The cooking scene delivers another volley of laughs. Poor old Wally can’t seem to ask for

flour without it being blown into his face in only the slapstick way that pantomime can deliver.

My wife Caroline and I enjoy watching the reactions of our three children throughout the performance. They are thoroughly engrossed, lost in the land of make believe. It’s a chance to dream and they will inevitably re-enact parts of this performance back at home. While for me, Dotty is the strongest and most enjoyable to watch, all the cast needs congratulating. “I shall dream about the witch [Malevolent] (Sarah Annakin),” says Henry (2) who is enthralled for the whole performance; a massive achievement. Not a traditional pantomime, this love story with its lessons about beauty, substance and character could well go on to stand the test of time. It is sure to make many happy families this festive season.

“I laughed at the same jokes as you did,” Caroline tells me later. We always have done but the challenges of parenthood, especially of late, can leave you feeling that you have lost your sense of humour. On our way back through the city centre we stop and watch the Eastleigh Scout Band playing Christmas carols and it is a perfect end to our little trip to Winchester.

Written by [Tim Saunders](#)