

## **THE WIZARD OF OZ**

**Directed by Peter Ingledew**

A little boy leaving the Hall after the Sunday matinee of *The Wizard of Oz* was heard to say 'that was the best, best thing I've ever gone to', voicing what many people felt who were lucky enough to see this innovative, delightful production.

From the moment a rainbow appeared and grass waved behind Dorothy as she first sang 'Somewhere over the rainbow', the audience sensed a new magic was happening on the Henfield stage. With Peter Ingledew's vision and Nick Roughton's skill – and, I'm sure, very hard work - the farmhouse was whirled into the air, Dorothy peering from a window, and hurled down again, striped witch's legs protruding from beneath. The projection onto the backdrop provided other extraordinary effects: a waterfall, shooting stars, snow, a magic mirror, a fearsome robotic Wizard of Oz, flashing mouth synchronised with John Coit's eerily distorted voice, a vast hesitating whooshing rocket, and a firework display. The technology could have taken over the show and been all that one remembered – but the excellent acting, singing, costumes and direction balanced the innovation.

Helen Haines was a perfect Dorothy; she played the part with simplicity, charm, a well-maintained faultless accent and pure singing voice. Her companions on the great adventure to find the Wizard of Oz were each well-played: Kevin Locke as the stiff limbed Tin Man, with his superb metallic costume and Ian Henham a lovable trembling cowardly Lion, while versatile actor Nick Roughton gave a remarkable physical performance as the joint-less, boneless (but far from spineless) Scarecrow.

Sharona Key Barry (a very welcome newcomer to the Company) gave us a fairytale Sorceress of the North, and Susanna Seaford played the horribly evil Wicked Witch of the West terrifyingly. Her cackle sent several small hands over wide eyes, and her athleticism as she was upended into the steaming cauldron, striped legs waving, was much to be admired.

The well-known numbers were sung well by leads and chorus, and the orchestra found exactly the right balance with the voices on stage, so the singing could be heard. An annoying hum during the first act on Friday night meant that a few spoken words were lost to me sitting at the back, particularly those spoken by the youngest players. This was a shame as the children in this production looked completely at home on the stage; they sang and acted with enthusiasm and commitment, always engaged with the action on the stage.

There were very funny lines in this show, some in a glorious scene when the coven of three witches took tea together. A delicious scene involved Dorothy and the scarecrow negotiating a rotating bridge, and another beautifully choreographed scene was when three fat little jitterbugs, in amazing costumes with iridescent wings, tormented our heroes into imitating their dances. All the costumes were stunning, the jolly little Munchkins in bright primary colours, size effectively diminished by false shoes cleverly sewn to knees, the people of Emerald City in iridescent green dresses and suits: Louisa Hargrave and her costume team had worked extremely hard to make the show so visually exciting. Rosemary Nice and her make-up team too are to be congratulated on the faces they created, and re-created, as the show progressed and characters changed.

HTC, like Dorothy, has been twirled this January into a new world – of technology. Of course it will not, and should not, replace the painstaking building of the great sets of which we as a Company are justly proud, but it is exciting to have such possibilities as an option for shows in the future, and it was ideal for this magical production. Peter Ingledew, his cast and production team gave us a remarkable and hugely enjoyable *Wizard of Oz*, leaving audiences 'half-melted' with delight. It will be remembered for a long time.

*Rose Sharp.*