

Ding-Dong the Witch is Dead

Tickets for the BRGS production of *The Wizard of Oz* sold out almost as soon as they had gone on sale – and no wonder. Director, Martin Neve (Head of Drama) had put together an incredible cast to deliver a very different version of the classic *Wizard of Oz*.

This was no Judy Garland dressed in gingham frolicking through Oz with the Munchkins; instead audiences were treated to a richly gothic interpretation of this Hollywood classic. Presented in the round, the stage was lit with a single spotlight which picked out a coffin that looked like it held the body of a baby. A more sinister opening would be hard to imagine. Martin said “I had always seen *The Wizard of Oz* as more of a Gothic horror, never fully realised.” Certainly these elements have been picked up in the other musical version of Oz, *Wicked*. Martin commented of the writer of *Wicked* that “Gregory MacGuire didn’t see *Wizard of Oz* as twee or puerile and his book brought out deeper, darker aspects to a tale we thought we knew, but that was, in fact, only half the story.”

The gothic themes weren’t only reflected in the setting and the themes of the production, but also in the music. Musical director Jo Matthews (Head of Music) said that “we tried to pick out the more melodramatic aspects of the score, aiming to create an eerie atmosphere more akin to a horror movie than a frivolous family musical.” Nowhere was this more apparent than when seventy Munchkins appeared on stage as the living dead in ripped clothes, bloody and scarred. Following years of oppression under the Wicked Witch there had never been a more threatening version of *Follow the Yellow Brick Road*, issued almost as a command by the zombie Munchkins.

Director Martin Neve managed to bring a very contemporary feel to the production as he used the script to bring out various issues. There was a strong environmental message from the Tinman who spoke of the smoke-belching factories and their corrosive acid rain in an inexorable process of industrialisation. The ranch-hands back at the farm were not only in-bred, chicken-loving yokels, but they were also suffering from the effects of the credit crunch on market forces.

However clever the script may have been, the power of the production could never have been realised without some outstanding performances and this is exactly what Martin Neve managed to elicit from a group of highly talented students. Hannah Potts has delivered some incredible performances over previous years at BRGS, but now, as a year 11 student, the maturity of delivery and the power of her voice meant that she gave a performance that was truly professional. As Dorothy, Hannah was on stage for almost the entire duration in a hugely demanding role. It will be hard to forget the closing scene after she has returned to Kansas with the remains of her dead dog Toto in her basket; as she holds up the bones and rotting flesh with her family around her, her laugh turns to a cackle and the lights go down!

On her journey, Dorothy is, of course, accompanied by Scarecrow (Daniel Ratcliffe), Tinman (Philip Bacon) and Lion (Hester Owen). Daniel was in his first major theatrical role which played with heart-warming sincerity as the tugging voice of conscience in a cruel world. An equally complex performance came from Philip. Aiming to study medicine at university, Philip’s true potential for acting was given the chance to shine in Oz, having previously been in the chorus of last year’s sell-out *Les Misérables*. Hester Owen’s Lion was particularly memorable.

Hester managed to achieve a beautiful balance of humour and pathos in her delivery of the role.

It's easy to pick out the main characters, but what made the performance an outstanding one was the commitment from all the actors. Some had learned how to speak in a Southern American drawl (Connie Hartley as Aunt Em and Patrick Holt as Uncle Henry as well as the ranch hands) and all were utterly believable in their role. Also delivering an assured performance as daunting Grande Dame Almira Gultch was Natalie Baines. Sara Davison was stunningly beautiful as Glinda, the White Witch and her soft singing tone even melted the hearts of the zombie Munchkins!

But what of the Wicked Witch? Bright and smiley Hannah Wilkinson transformed herself into a green-skinned personification of personal greed and malevolence. Her mastery of the wicked cackle is unlikely to be bettered by anyone. Christian Schofield who we're more used to seeing performing as part of the band *Marshalls*, made an excellent Wizard of Oz, roaring out his threats from behind the Emerald frontage of his palace. He was protected by the equally sinister Robert Stott, playing the Guard, who is proving to be an excellent character actor.

The logistics of putting on a production with nearly 100 cast members meant that the success of the show was founded upon the tireless efforts of a large number of backstage crew. As one make-up artist said: "Have you any idea how long it takes to create seventy zombies? We start getting ready as soon as the bell goes for the end of school to get them on stage in time!" For everyone involved, they can feel a tremendous sense of pride at a performance that would have been equally at home as a professional stage production and it will not only have created a lifetime memory for those who watched, but also for everyone that helped to make it happen.