

**Pump House Children and Youth Theatre**

**FRIDAY 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010 – RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET**

REVIEWED BY ANN HERTLER-SMITH (NODA LONDON YOUTH ADVISER) ON BEHALF OF JILL HAISTEAD

Return to the Forbidden Planet, which is loosely based on Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' and the Sci-Fi film 'Forbidden Planet', opened in the mid 1980's in The Bubble Theatre's tent. It transferred to The Cambridge Theatre in the West End in 1989 and won two Olivier Awards for Best Musical in 1989 and 1990.

I had never seen the show before and knew virtually nothing about it. My thoughts and expectations about it were that it would be a far fetched, rather flimsy story held together by a series of 'pop' songs and that it would have a loud score and that the staging would involve a lot of technical trickery.

My thoughts and expectations were largely met by the production staged by The Pump House Youth Theatre Company at their theatre in Local Board Road, Watford. The whole company consisted of 33 young people whose ages range from mid teens to early twenties but they were split into two casts each one performing four times. Only two cast members appeared in all eight performances. This way of working allowed many more young people to be in the show and to have room to move on the limited stage area.

The clever set design by Lucy Houbart created several different levels which kept the cast in perspective while maximizing the performing area and adding interest. Each level had different control panels and operating desks with lots of different handles, wheels and knobs for the cast to keep busy with. Coloured strips of lights on the front of the raised areas and various other flashing and scrolling lights added extra atmosphere to the interior of the spaceship which was all painted white. Around the sides and back of the stage black flats painted with astral swirls and stars completed the set. Technical effects, such as offstage singing videoed live and other graphics displayed onto a scene above the stage, sliding doors, huge tentacles of a monster on stage and in the audience and even a space ship flying through the auditorium all worked extremely well. The set was complimented by excellent lighting. I did however have a concern over the level of sound from the hand held microphones which distorted the clarity of diction as they were passed from person to person for singing and dialogue. I suspect that the show is usually done with hand held microphones but I personally would have preferred each performer to have had a radio microphone although clearly each change of microphone had been 'choreographed' and was well rehearsed – I never saw anyone unsure where to get their microphone from. Costumes were very good using lots of shiny black, white and sequined fabrics along with coloured leggings. All the shoes were white and glittery and all the girls had whacky white wigs. The boy's hair was all 'styled'. The make-up was very good, in particular Ariel and Prospero. Congratulations to everyone in all the offstage departments on what was obviously a huge team effort.

The six piece band under the excellent control of George Wells were positioned on the stage right corner of the acting area and George kept good control of both the band and the singers as they performed from all areas and levels of the stage.

The overall direction was in the capable hands of Lee Farman who had put a lot of thought into ensuring that not only the featured principals were given good direction but also the chorus, who were never standing around idle but always subtly busy with their various jobs in the background. All the main characterizations were well defined. A general comment would be that young people seem to naturally speak very quickly and this was particularly noticeable in the 'Shakespeare' script which needed to be slowed down for the audience to better understand what was being said and to 'point' the difference between it and the normal conversational script.

The choreography was good and captured the different dance styles simply and the cast moved and danced on all the different levels making it really interesting to watch. There were a couple of numbers towards the end when the movements were a little ragged with arms and legs not always fully stretched.

On entering the auditorium many of the cast were on stage and busy with the business of flying their spaceship. The whole cast attacked the show with energy and conviction and committed to the different genres of 50's and 60's music and dance styles although of course none of them would even have been born when the songs were top of the hit parade!

Bosun Arras (Sean Lovell), Cookie (Tom Scarborough) and Captain Tempest (Ben Rhodes) created good characters all using facials consistently throughout and they delivered their lines well but occasionally the singing was slightly out of tune. It is interesting to reflect how difficult some pop songs are to actually reproduce as well as the originals. Science Officer (Niamh Brewer) and Miranda (Saoise Brewer) both looked fabulous and moved naturally around the stage and delivered their songs well and with confidence never coming out of character. Ariel (Jessica Sullivan) made a fabulous entrance on roller skates which she managed well on the small stage. I felt that Jessica relaxed out of the part towards the end of the show and I personally would have liked to have seen her moves more 'robotic' from the outset. Navigator (Toni Lovell) and Narrator (Laurence Bisdee) played their smaller roles well; Laurence did well to keep going through the wolf whistles at his costume which was a dinner jacket complete with stockings and suspenders. Prospero (Adam Feighoney) stood out with his really strong performance, well done.

Thank you very much for inviting me to stand in for your NODA representative, who was indisposed, and for the warm welcome. It was a most enjoyable evening.