



## [The Wizard of Oz](#)

at Heywood Civic Centre

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) December 2017

The Wizard Of Oz is one of the Western World's most beloved and famous children's stories, which first came into being as a novel under the title The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by Frank L Baum in 1900. Since then, the novel has been republished several times, and its story adapted for film, TV and of course the stage.

It is however, only the second time that yours truly has ever seen this story performed as a pantomime - another famous, traditional and child friendly form of entertainment. You would think therefore that the two would go hand in glove. The first time I saw this combination was an utter disaster, and so, I am extremely happy to relate that Trio Entertainment's panto version was indeed traditional, family friendly, and true pantomime. Oh yes it was!

Sadly I have some issues with the adaptation by Liam Mellor, simply because too much of the story was left for us to fill in ourselves. This, for someone who already knows the story is fine; but the target audience for this show more than probably don't, and so we needed the story to be told either by narrative or action. There was no tornado, and we didn't see Dorothy or her house fly through the sky. We had no idea that the scene immediately following Kansas was The Land of Oz, and we didn't see the dead witch under the house - a child had to go off stage to bring on the red slippers. There was no yellow brick road. So the 4 companions were travelling to the Emerald City using what? Their own intuition it seemed.

The gates to the city and inside the Wizard's chamber was exactly the same set, and therefore confusing. We were not told and never understood why Dorothy suddenly walks off stage and enters with an empty bucket and throws the 'contents' of the empty bucket at The Wicked Witch who immediately starts to scream and then disappear in a cloud of pyrotechnical smoke. None of these things, and others, were explained (or at least not sufficiently and at the right time!), and so a prior knowledge of the story was necessary.

However, none of that diminishes the energy and talent of the cast. For my money, the most consummate performer this evening was undoubtedly **Victoria Roberts**. Her classic, interactive and spot-on interpretation of The Wicked Witch of the West, and her excellently measured cameo of the Kansas harridan Esme, were superb, and worthy of the West End.

Coming in at a close second was **Lauren Ramsey** who was much underused this evening as Dorothy. It was obvious that she was a triple-threat and yet sadly was never really given the opportunity to showcase her dancing talents. Her lovely singing voice was pleasant and sonorous and her acting, in a part which is usually either portrayed as bland or completely OTT, was given a very genuine and human touch, and it worked very well indeed.

The three stooges of Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion were all also excellently cast, and their individual characters came through and shone. **Mike Smith** as The Scarecrow was personable with cheeky Northern charm as he chatted to and reacted with the audience, and his self-effacing comedy, and the fact that he didn't take any of it seriously won the children over, and some of the adults too.

**James**

**Edgington**

was a very likeable Tin Man with a lovely singing voice, and

**Jordan Kennedy**

, the smallest of the three, for obvious comedic reasons which were never really fully developed, made for a rather loveable and cuddly, cowardly Lion. Again, I loved the Elvis 'King' of the jungle idea, this worked superbly, but was never carried through. It seemed that the director,

**James Williams**

, had many great ideas but simply didn't cohere any of them or continue them through from beginning to end.

Unfortunately it was the same with the accents in this show. We started with most of the cast speaking in American accents of one variety or another, which is exactly as it should have been since the action was in Kansas. Hickory, Dickory and Doc, (another great idea which never materialised!) three farm hands who become the Lion, Tin Man and Scarecrow were good here, and showed a different side to their characters and acting abilities. Well, two out of the three did. Smith was exactly the same, and still spoke with his northern comedy accent. Once we arrived in Oz, then this gave licence to the whole company to change their accents as they seemed fit. The worst offender here was **Liam Halewood** who played Faramant, The Gatekeeper. We went from US drawl to Liverpudlian incorporating everything in between! He did prove to have a competent singing voice and be an impressive majorette however.

**Julia Haworth** completed the principal cast as Glinda, The Good Witch. She looked pretty and spoke in rhyme, as indeed she should, as this is pantomime.

The ensemble and young dancers were provided for by Middleton based dancing school, Anita Tymcysyn School Of Dancing, and what they did was good and proficient, adding colour and movement to the stage, and peopling the emptiness. It is my thinking though that they too were underused and were not given sufficient opportunity for their talents to shine. How easily the youngsters too could have been The Wicked Witch's minions, and how easily all the ensemble could have been citizens of Emerald City, and why didn't we have a scary dance sequence in the wood? Oh well.

There is one thing, which I have left until last, which is my bete noir when it comes to Musical entertainment. Pre-recorded backing tracks! This is live theatre, live entertainment, and so the music should always be that too. Sadly due to financial issues, there are many companies out there who resort to playback tracks, and this company was no exception. Shame.

However, with some excellent lighting and SFX (**Paul Carney-Fleet**), colourful costumes (Trio Entertainment), and some catchy pop songs and extremely corny jokes; this is traditional, family-friendly pantomime and this evening was enjoyed heartily by all the youngsters in a packed auditorium.