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PANTONI PANTOMIMES BABES IN THE WOOD

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Babes in the Wood

by Lynda Murdin

Hull New Theatre. Until January 19.

Is it any work for grown men, you might find yourself wondering when watching veteran comedy duo Little and Large in the Hull New Theatre's terrific production of *Babes in the Wood*. But then are they grown men?

The years may have passed but only Eddie Large's waistline has grown. This diminutive pair of grandfathers seem to keep remarkably in tune with youngsters, establishing instant rapport with their cheeky banter. Large in particular looks like an oversized child himself, a naughty cherub with gleeful eyes and a range of funny voices. He has something of an anal fixation and tells quite a few poo and bum jokes, which delights the kiddies.

The routine of various gestures – clap, wave, swim etc – that he and Little establish with the audience must be a panto first, containing as it does a scratch of the bum.

At least it makes a change from being wee-wee-ed on by Billy Pearce's toy dog, as I was for the past two Christmases when sitting in this same theatre. Of course, the duo do plenty of other gags to appeal to mum and dads, including a reference to the war in Afghanistan.

"It's Bin Laden," says Eddie on

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meeting the evil Sheriff of Nottingham, who's wearing a medieval head-dress.

They're playing troubled troubadours, hired by the Sheriff to kidnap the Babes. Truth to tell, whatever disguise they adopt, they never really convince us they're anyone other than Little and Large, straight drama not being their forte. Fortunately, if they do on a very odd occasion forget a bit of the script or muddle Hull suburb Kirk Ella with Kirkcaldy, then they can rely on a helpful prompt from the Babes – played by a proficient and self-possessed Rachel Elizabeth Cook and Thomas Pearman.

Although containing elements as varied as the patchwork of a troubadour's waistcoat, this production's greatest strength is the clarity of its narrative. There's nothing like a good story, well told,

to prevent audience members wandering off to the loo.

Its overriding cohesive force is Jared Morgan who makes a simply splendid Sheriff, using actorly skills and songous vocal techniques, to strike terror into the heart.

Little and Large might not have as much dynamic energy – nor sex appeal – as Pearce, who developed an adoring fan club in Hull and has now taken his toy dog to the Bradford Alhambra. Male glamour this year is provided by the blond and bronzed Richard Swerun who rose to fame in the lead role of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. With shirt slashed to the waist and wearing bandana and arm bands fashioned out of metal-studded leather, Swerun gives a contemporary look to the character of Robin Hood – though the year is 1194. He is introduced by a rap song – *We call him the Hood – shout Hood, Hood, Hood,* led by Friar Tuck (a suitably genial Jim Brooks).

Robin Hood is sometimes played by a principal boy, a female thigh-slapping figure missing from this interpretation. But the dame is always a male. Peter Thorne's bustling and friendly Nurse Glucose offers no rivalry to Swerun in terms of male glamour – though she does her best, poor thing. She it is who sends out sweeties into the audience, using a catapult to reach the Circle – is this Nurse complying with health and safety regulations?

Pantoni Pantomimes, led by managing director David Lee and director Rita Proctor, always seem to pride themselves on putting on a good show with attractive sets and an agreeable blend of old panto traditions and current pop songs. Dance happily continues to be a key element of the Hull panto. Proctor also choreographs and her teams of youngsters – including the tiny tots in the Skelton-Hooper Starlets – make you want to weep, they look so cute in their gorgeous medieval costumes – particularly in the sumptuous red and gold finale. And they dance very well, too.

There are also eight professional dancers, so the stage fills with life and movement during some set-piece ensemble numbers. It is, however, a mistake to expect the professional male dancers to double as the Merry Men. They don't exactly look like burly hewers of wood and when they deliver dialogue, dramatic tension drops.

Sound quality was another problem. Duets by Swerun and Emma Stace as Maid Marian were particularly affected by fluctuating volume levels.

For once, there is no song sheet. As preparations were made for the final walk-down, Little and Large performed a well-rehearsed routine at the front of the stage. Large did impersonations ranging from Bob the Builder to rock dinosaurs Status Quo. Long may their status quo continue.

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