BEOWULF

Set between the 8th and 11th century, the old-English heroic Anglo-Saxon poem has been adapted for film, a comic strip, musicals, plays, a rock opera and even a board game. Charles Court Opera now embrace the folk-tale theme for their fifth annual pantomime. We find King Hrothgar, the drunken Danish king gracing Heorot Hall, constantly struggling with monster Grendel, who captures a human daily to feed an insatiable dragon. Beowulf takes up the King’s cause, managing to chop an arm from the mutant, so rendering him useless in his quest. In true panto style, all then decide to join forces to slay the dragon, but one by one they rescind until only Beowulf and young Swede Wiglaf dare to undertake the daunting task. Naturally, love is never far away, here provided by pretty Princess Hrothmund. Beowulf does not survive the ordeal with the dragon in the original poem, but clearly that is not the fairy tale ending required, so some embellishment is necessary.

Reworked showtunes feature heavily in this production, accompanied by James Young and David Eaton on two pianos, together with drummer Ben Calvert. Opening strongly with ‘Good Morning’ from Singin’ in the Rain, Sian Winstanley as The Spirt of Good Cheerprovides beautifully delivered poetic narration. Simon Masterton-Smith as King Hrothgar bizarrely morphs into a would-be stand-up comedian to rather lame effect, before breaking into song, declaring ‘I Need a Hero’. Enter Kevin Kyle in the title role, with faithful sidekick Wiglaf who is charmingly played by the vocally delightful Amy J. Payne. Together, they have a ‘cunning stunt’ demonstrated in semi-operatic style. Unconvincingly slow-motion stage combat ensues and Grendel (Philip Lee) loses a limb in the battle.

After all that nonsense, it’s time to meet the dame, zestfully played by artistic director John Savourin. The show really moves up several gears as the pink-bespectacled beauty greets us, adorned in heavily backcombed, beehive blonde wig. He commands the stage by cheerfully chanting ‘My Name Is…..Grendel’s Mother’. Music is churned out at every opportunity, culminating in the Les Mis-style, courage-summoning act one finale, as the would-be heroes prepare to face the beast. At last, glorious harmonies abound.

More bad jokes, such as “We’re a fastidious couple, he was fast and I was hideous!” take us to Grendel and mother dueting with ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life’ before she saucily proclaims “I’m going to help Wiglaf get wood” and rushes off with a cheeky glint in her eye. Abandoned Grendel is left to sing ‘Empty Chairs at Empty Tables’, a surprising song choice for panto but richly delivered by Philip Lee. Love is in the air it seems, as Beowulf falls for Princess Hrothmund (Catherine Kirkman) while the dame and Wiglaf waste no time, joining closely together to humourously dispatch Dirty Dancing’s ‘I’ve Had The Time Of My Life’ in response to their amorous capers. All that’s needed now is a kiss……

The action hots up with a Love Story style kitchen scene, only here the recipe is not pasta but fishy fingers. Competing cooks are recruited from the audience, reminding me of Bruce Forsyth’s Generation Game. Wiglaf, Grendel and his mother treat us to Gina G’s ‘Ooh Ah Just A Little Bit’ before shying dough at seated onlookers and even a custard pie in one unfortunate’s face. Tunes follow thick and fast, including more from Singing In The Rain, Les Mis and even a little West Side Story.

A fun experience, this unusual seasonal offering develops after a somewhat slow and shaky start. Act two is much more buoyant, vibrant and snappy, largely thanks to the excellent John Savourin, who is quite extraordinary and infectiously amusing.

Will it all end happily ever after? Discover for yourself and enjoy the obligatory community singing finale!

- - - - - - - - - -

REVIEWED: 10/12/11

By Gareth Richardson @BargainTheatre

9th Dec 2011 - 8th Jan 2012

The Rosemary Branch, London, N1.