

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Rain or Shine - The Snow Queen

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Preparations for the visit of the Rain or Shine Theatre Company to the Barn on Friday December 6th began as early as 09:00 when Ben, Charles, David and I met to set out tables and chairs. Soon afterwards Angela, Catherine and Lee arrived to organise the day's refreshments before Jean and Margaret also turned up to provide tea, coffee and biscuits for the helpers and actors.

The five strong group of actors, all of them well known to Purley audiences, pitched up at 10:30 in their battered old transit van which, as always, contained all their props, scenery, lighting, staging and costumes. They joined us to chat informally and exchange news before building the set for the afternoon and doing their vocal warm-up whilst changing into costume.

The audience for the 13:00 matinee consisted of year 3 (aged 7-8) children from Westwood Farm Junior School with their helpers, as well as a few villagers who find it more convenient to attend the afternoon performance. This winter's production did not, as in previous years have a specifically Christmas theme, but actor/director James Reynard's adaptation of the traditional fairy tale had more than enough action, movement and comedy to keep the young audience enthralled throughout.

So slick were the changes of costume, scenery and character, that, when I asked some of the children at the end of their performance how many actors there had been onstage, answers ranged from 'five' to 'eleven' - quite a compliment for a team of four plus a narrator.

The audience for the evening performance was slightly smaller than that of other occasions, perhaps a sign of the multiplicity of events that now take place at Christmastime. But those who attended were nothing other than enthusiastic. The cast delighted us all with a play that contained not as much slapstick as usual, despite passing references in James' script to Victor Meldrew, Lady Gaga and Rod Hull and his infamous emu, as well as some lively, chatty ornithological puppets.

The attraction is in watching, in close-up, the skill of the actors. All of them are good, though James, as narrator, does not have the opportunity to display the range we have seen from him in previous roles. But that was more than compensated for by being able to observe Pippa Meekings, the youngest of the cast. She moved seamlessly between the characters of the Snow Queen, Sorceress, Princess and Robber Girl, changing not only costume but voice, posture, facial expression and emotion, almost at the flick of a switch. Even when other characters are talking, it is difficult not to watch her as she can convey such meaning with the flick of a finger or the raise of an eyebrow.

The play and its adaptation contain fun and filliness and, as in all good fairy stories, the innocent charm of Gerda, the heroine, eventually triumphs over the elements of darkness and death. This conclusion makes for an even more enjoyable experience for the audience, who applauded the cast loudly at the curtain and who gave generously to the retiring collection.

Each visit by Rain or Shine is a win-win, grin-grin situation for all concerned. The actors are well received and feel the location is a comfortable one for them; the audience, ranging from six to eighty-six is kept entertained and amused and, perhaps most important of all, Project Purley is able once again to support a local charity. On this occasion we shall be donating £500 to Crossroads, a voluntary organisation which offers respite time and support for carers.

I record my sincere thanks to all those who made the event such a success. Rain or Shine will return to The Barn on Friday June 6th 2014 to perform Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'.

*David Down*