

Review of Alice

The Wonderland of West Meon.

A packed village hall, a tiny stage, a huge cast of young and very young performers; how would West Meon manage to achieve the magic of Lewis Carroll's work within this context? Well, Mary Dawson's directing, so the answer is: brilliantly.

Once again, the youth of the community proved that hard work, dedication and self-discipline can create theatre of a very high order. I found the degree of self-confidence of the word-perfect cast simply astonishing. The action flowed almost seamlessly from one scene to the next, and the set-pieces were a delight. The Mad Hatter's Tea Party was ingeniously contrived, and the trial scene was a triumph of comedy and colour.

With such a large cast, it is impossible to mention everyone, but some performances merit special attention. Use of a "big" and a "small" Alice was a neat solution to the fluctuating size of our eponymous heroine, and Grace Longman and Jessica Willson respectively played their parts with charm and conviction. James Forsyth's Cheshire Cat was a difficult role, being often peripheral to the action, but he played it with verve and confidence, qualities also displayed by Gabriel Jacobs as the Mad Hatter. I enjoyed the vigour and exuberance of Anna Dunford's Duchess and Victoria Rogers' Red Queen, and Rachel Forsyth's White Rabbit was excellently portrayed. Abby Edwards, as we have come to expect, gave self-assured performances as the Dodo and Alf.

However, all the players deserve commendation for their unselfconscious stage presence and their confident and enthusiastic performances. I have often wondered how we get performers to be as good as this, without the giggling, clothes-tugging and words-forgetting which one may find in the young on stage almost anywhere else. I think that there are at least two basic reasons: one is good, confident direction of a professional nature; the other is growing up in a small community, which brings with it a confidence in one's surroundings, a trust in people of all ages and an ability to communicate with them without embarrassment.

It would have been, however, a pretty poor show without the back-stage support, which was of a very high quality and needed more than twenty people. Where does one start? Delightful, original music and lyrics by Theo; a clever script by Helena Gomm, which never lost the Lewis Carroll connection. There were splendid and dazzling costumes by Fi Beardall (who also designed the set) and Tammy Willcock. The ingenious props were made by Jo Mitchell, with creative set-building by Conrad Jenkin. In all, a wonderful production by West Meon Youth Theatre.

A friend of mine, who lives in a neighbouring village, is a retired English and Drama Teacher. He confesses himself slightly in awe of West Meon's three theatre groups and their level of performance. In his village, which is half as big again as ours, there is no theatre group. At the risk of repeating myself, we are so lucky.

Peter Graham.