

British Theatre Guide

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Arbuthnot and Dame Bella's Christmas Adventure

Davey Hopper and Jen Stevens, with additional material by Ray Spencer, music by Jen Stevens, filming by Wycombe 89 Media

The Customs House, South Shields

Released 10 December 2020

They call it a 'family musical' and *Arbuthnot and Dame Bella's Christmas Adventure* has grown out of an ancient (well, from 2018) Customs House tradition of between-panto shows for children, written and directed by and starring Davey Hoppy, aka Arbuthnot, Dame Bella's daft son, along with characters from the previous panto.

When it was obvious that a full-scale panto couldn't go ahead, The Customs House decided to replace it with this smaller show, suitable for a socially distanced (and therefore much reduced) audience. Then came Tier 3, but there was always the hope that today (17 December) we would learn that the North East had been moved down into Tier 2. That, however, was not to be, so now the show is available on DVD (and, when production difficulties have been sorted out, USB) and it's intended to stream it online. Streaming details coming soon.

So, is it a worthy replacement for one of the most consistently successful pantos in the region?

Persevere with these meanderings, dear reader, and you will find out!

Santa has a brother and Arbuthnot has a cousin. Jack Frost (Steven Lee Hamilton) is the bad boy of the Claus family and he hates his brother *and* Christmas, while Dennis (Glen Richard Townsend) is naughty, not nice, and he Does. Not. Believe. In. Santa!

This lack of belief enables Jack to freeze Santa (played—obviously!—by Santa himself) and bring Christmas to a halt. It's up to Arbuthnot, Dame Bella (Ray Spencer), Grace the Elf (Bronwen Hanson), Roxy the Reindeer (Bethan Amber) and Jerry the really cool Snowman (Dale Jewitt), encouraged by The Christmas Fairy (Eleanor Chaganis), to persuade Dennis to believe and so save Christmas.

So, with the support of the good fairy and hindered by the villainous villain, they set out on a quest to restore Christmas to the world!

In doing so, they provide us with lots of (very) (even more very) (extremely very) bad jokes and a load of panto-style scenes. There's one in Santa's workshop (Elf and Safety springs to mind!); there's a gungy slosh scene; there's romance mingled with shyness (and yet more very... Well, you get the picture!) when Arbuthnot and Grace fall for each other; a few opportunities for the audience to shout at the screen (with prompting subtitles); there are brilliant Fox and Shriek sets and costumes from previous shows, and there are songs.

And what songs! All are original, all by Jen Stevens. I've known of Jen Stevens for quite some time but I've never heard any of her work and, on this showing, that has very definitely been my loss. They have attractive melodies which are totally appropriate to the situation. What a difference to the normal shoe-horning in of recent hits with only the most tenuous of links to the storyline!

Making the best of the most trying of circumstances, The Customs House has another Christmas hit on its hands. Not quite a panto—but not far away from it—Ray Spencer and his team have done their very best to save Christmas, and they've succeeded with this new incarnation of “the little panto with the big heart.”

The show is [streaming](#) from 19 to 31 December at a charge of £15.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)