

British Theatre Guide

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Jack and the Beanstalk

Simon Stallworthy
Gala Theatre, Durham
(2011)

In an age where the genre of pantomime is a big bucks business dominated by huge companies including Qdos and First Family Entertainment, it is commendable that some theatres still choose to produce their Christmas shows in-house. It is even more of an achievement when relatively small theatres, such as The Customs House, South Shields (which seats 441) and The Gala Theatre, Durham (which seats 500), stage productions which not only hold their own against the corporate big boys but, in many ways, better them.

Once again, Simon Stallworthy takes charge of the pantomime at Durham's Gala and he sticks to the tried and tested winning formula that has proven so popular for the past four years. His script is crammed so full of corny comedy gags, thigh-slapping adventure, romance and marvellous magic that you're eating your interval ice cream before you even know it!

Taking heed of the old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", the cast is led by the usual linchpins. Paul Hartley and Jane Deane, as Jack and Jill, are the daftest double-act in pantoland and the kids love them for it. Year after year, this dynamic duo amazes and entertains the audiences with an array of physical comedy and circus skills—and, year after year, their popularity increases. Donald McBride dons the flamboyant frocks once again, this time to play Dame Shrivell, complete with trademark 'posh Geordie' dialect. And Neil Armstrong makes a welcome return as Fleshcreep, Giant Blunderboar's horrible henchman.

Alongside the familiar faces are some new ones. Jane Holman is a delight as frazzled Fairy Hazbean, Mark Stratton plays it straight as Baron D'Oolally, and Hayley Emma Otway is his feisty daughter, Lucy. The inclusion of Brian Blessed's booming voice as Giant Blunderboar is a clever way of getting a star name on the poster without busting the budget, too.

The essence of true panto is woven throughout the entire show, which sticks closely to the original concept: plenty of audience interaction encouraging the kids to get involved, references to local places and current events, the obligatory slosh scene, a frantic foray into the auditorium, a side-splitting 'Twelve Days of Christmas' routine (complete with preposterous props!) and of course the mandatory sing song towards the end and prior to the inevitable wedding. All tried and tested stuff—it's what the audience demand and is certainly what is delivered.

Technically, this is an impressive production, too. Initially, I was concerned about the sparsity of the sets, but these fears proved to be unfounded when it became apparent how much the performers actually use the stage space. In fact, any additional scenery would not only have been superfluous, but a potential hazard. Deborah Shaw (keyboards) and Carl Thomson (percussion) competently boosted the recorded backing tracks and conveyed the impression of a full orchestra, while Jane Moran's choreography was executed with precision by five dancers and a troupe of babes from the Gala Theatre Stage School.

Pantomimes don't come much bigger than this 'giant' production (pun intended!) of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which is highly recommended. However, it is advisable that tickets should be pre-booked rather than turning up 'on spec'. With demand so high and tickets selling so fast, a number of performances are already sold out—and that is probably the most resounding endorsement of all.

Runs until Saturday 7th January, 2012

Reviewer: [Steve Burbridge](#)