

British Theatre Guide

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Cinderella

Christmas pantomime by Paul Hendy
New Wimbledon Theatre, London
(2005)

Once upon a time big glittery pantomimes meant either Paul Elliotts E&B or the Qdos group would feature prominently in the production credits. Both enjoyed the benefits of back-stocks of sets, costumes, scores and scripts, brought out and freshly furbished each season.

But this year a new kid is on the block. First Family Entertainment is now offering star-studded pantomimes at eight leading venues from Glasgow to Brighton. Big names behind this venture are Howard Panter's Ambassador Theatre Group joining forces with David Ians Clear Channel Entertainment, intent on creating brand new versions of the old favourites.

Without having seen all their other productions it's a fair guess that, for this first season, Wimbledon wins the jackpot with a strongly cast, sumptuous staging of *Cinderella*, wittily scripted by Paul Hendy, plus gorgeous costumes and settings in best panto style by leading theatre designer Terry Parsons, and a transformation scene with a pair of pure-white Shetland ponies to draw Cinderella's coach.

It seldom seems a good idea for an actor to combine his supporting rôle with the directing chore. But as a lovelorn Buttons, Peter Duncan carries off the double-act with distinction, including a sploshy wallpaper sequence, as he slithers across the stage and ends up pouring a whole bucket of green sludge over the head of comedian Tim Vine, playing a cheeky Dandini.

Any doubts one might harbour about a chap playing Principal Boy are swept aside by John Barrowman's dashing, musically assured Prince Charming. A leading musical star and romantic comedy actor, Barrowman is light on his feet, with a touch of the Hugh Grants, perfect casting as Cinderella's dream hero.

She is delightfully played by Naomi Wilkinson, better known for her work on children's television, who brings an attractive directness and simplicity to the part. And though this may be just a pantomime moment, the first meeting of Cinderella and the Prince in the woods carries a charge of romantic energy, with more pleasurable shivers to come as the couple dance at the Ball and are happily reunited in the crystal slipper sequence.

Richard Wilson making his first foray in pantomime is a bumbling delight as a Caledonian Baron Hardup, but tells a bad taste joke about the Hemel Hempstead inferno that should have been cut.

The other big name, also making her panto debut, is the eternally youthful Susan Hampshire, a twinkling Fairy Godmother delivering her rhyming couplets with grace and style.

Wimbledon regular Gerry Zuccarello again choreographs the show with eight brilliantly talented young dancers. Indeed the dance highlight of the evening is a dazzling Gypsy czardas for the four

couples, fizzing with danger, speed and precision a thrilling departure from the usual ho-hum, jerky show dancing that passes for choreography in most pantomimes.

Finally we have sly Dave Lynn and beanpole Steve Marc, outrageously camp as the Ugly Sisters, who end the evening on a glamorous note with their *La Cage aux Folles* effect for the wedding walkdown.

Reviewer: [John Thaxter](#)