

# British Theatre Guide

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## Dick Whittington and his Cat

Al Lockhart-Morley

Cambridge Arts Theatre

Cambridge Arts Theatre

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What happens when you take a questionable plot, loud and wonderful costumes, a string of terrible jokes and an evening of sing-a-longs and slapstick? Yes, that's right, it's panto season again, except this time there aren't COVID or omicron outbreaks to disrupt the fun.

The Cambridge Arts gala panto night is quite renowned in these eastern parts as being a special evening in the theatre's calendar. It has every right to, with the yearly pantomime taking place at the theatre ever since 1939 with only one break in the 1990s for building works. Even the aforementioned lockdown restrictions couldn't stop the panto at the Arts, even if in a different format than normal.

The audience was certainly a raucous one, with plenty of whooping and cheering, and even the hardest humbug heart couldn't help but be swept up in the upbeat positive mood created. I felt like everyone in the audience was willing the performance to be a success and to be given a great night out to escape from the current challenges of everyday life.

So, Dick Whittington comes to London town to make his fortune. As with most pantomimes, this plot takes artistic license, moving rather strangely from Cambridge to London to Benidorm with stop-offs at the bottom of the ocean. Although the 'real' story of Dick Whittington has questionable origins, this script seems happy to find its own way of stitching his journey together and, although a little bizarre, does not get in the way of a very enjoyable production.

On stage, the cast seem a very tight ensemble of performers who appear to be really invested in the show. There is a terrific level of energy and commitment from all involved and this countered the various sound issues which at one point saw the Dame enter with a hand held microphone.

The casting is spot on, with Matt Crosby's Sarah the Cook stealing most of the scenes; there is a touch of Lily Savage about his performance and he manages to get the biggest laugh of the evening with his use of a pause before announcing the protagonist's name—it is all about the timing. Nichole Bird's Silly Billie is full of bounce and energy and Adrian Grove plays pretty much every character with great commitment, even if the Spanish accent is a little questionable!

A stand-out performer for me is Rolan Bell as King Rat. Bell is a wonderful villain, so full of poise and presence and totally encapsulating the formidable character without stepping over the line of overdoing it. He somehow manages to channel John Challis's Boycie from *Only Fools and Horses* combined with Danny John-Jules's Cat from *Red Dwarf*. I loved his performance and was totally drawn to him each time that he appeared on stage.

A word of mention for the costume designer Sue Simmerling and her team for dressing the characters in wonderfully vibrant costumes. Sarah the Cook wears such an array of different styles,

even giving a nod to the World Cup and a chance to belt out "Sweet Caroline".

This being gala night, there was one moment of 'shout-outs' which was a little irritating and felt like a commercial break or a theatrical love-in. This is the only downside of a fabulous production which will bring much needed warmth to the people of Cambridge this winter.

**Reviewer:** [John Johnson](#)