

British Theatre Guide

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The Lad Aladdin

Berwick Kaler
Theatre Royal, York
(2005)

"We're a Happy Family" is the title of this year's Songsheet, and there can be no better description of the team behind York's Christmas extravaganza - it's not so much a pantomime, more an eagerly-awaited family reunion. The Dame (Berwick Kaler), Dame's Son (Martin Barrass), Villain (David Leonard) and Principal Boy (Suzy Cooper) have been treading the Theatre Royal's boards for a combined total of 78 pantomime seasons, and long may they continue to do so.

The Lad Aladdin is Berwick Kaler's surreal version of the traditional tale, co-directed with Damien Cruden. It opens with a filmed sequence in which the wicked Abanazar (David Leonard), now living in exile in Scarborough, visits a fortune-telling gypsy who bears an uncanny resemblance to Jimmy Nail in drag. Having learned the secret of the Magic Lamp hidden in a cave on Mount Everest - which can only be discovered by the sort of virtuous youth unlikely to be found at Scarborough - Abanazar commandeers the nearest beach donkey and sets off for China.

This being a panto, Old Peking has many reassuringly British features including a dysfunctional royal family. Emperor Yu Pong (Dan Wilder) wants his daughter Princess Su Doku (Elianne Byrne) to marry the stage-struck Prince Nin Com Poop (Vincent Gray, who also appears as the Genie of the Lamp), but fate intervenes when humble ornithologist Aladdin (Suzy Cooper) falls for the Princess and is promptly sentenced to death by the Emperor. Mind you, no self-respecting royal would want to ally himself with Aladdin's mum, the sartorially-challenged laundress Widow Twankey (Berwick Kaler), and gormless brother Wishee Washee (Martin Barrass).

The Executioner turns out to be self-confessed friend of Dorothy with an impressive chopper, but before he can get to work, Abanazar appears on the scene. Posing as Aladdin's long-lost uncle he whisks the lad off to the comparative safety of Mount Everest, ostensibly to seek the elusive Great Bustard.

It goes without saying that Aladdin finds the lamp and marries his Princess - a panto story is merely a peg on which to hang local allusions, topical gags and gloriously irrelevant set pieces. This production features a circus scene in which Twankey and Wishee Washee perform a wire-assisted tightrope act (the sight of Berwick Kaler dressed as Shirley Temple will stay with you for a long, long time) and dunk Prince Nin Com Poop in a tank of water. The mother and son double act also perform a superb Abba skit during which, dressed as Frieda and Agnetha, they belt out "Pooper Scooper" and "Portaloo". A car wash sequence gives them an opportunity to get soaked to the skin, but they dry out in time to make an appearance as Charles and Camilla

Nigel Hook can always be relied upon to come up with designs that put many grand opera productions to shame, and this year he has excelled himself. The set and costumes are a riot of colour, Berwick looks ravishing in his pagoda-themed outfits and there is a fine selection of animal life on display. Twankey makes her spectacular first entrance on Caramel the camel, a lovable

beast despite its unsavoury habits, and her pets include a giant panda, a dodo and an outrageously scene-stealing crocodile who seems to be trying out for a starring role in *Peter Pan*!

In short, if you want to see an example of panto at its delirious best, look no further than The Lad Aladdin. Even people from Scarborough will find it irresistible.

At the Theatre Royal, York, until 4th February 2006

Reviewer: [J. D. Atkinson](#)