

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Pig

Nick Cassenbaum, Abi Anderson

JW3 / Plotnek Productions

JW3

10 December 2023–7 January 2024

Think, think, think!—is not an audience riff associated with pantomime, but extraordinary times call for unorthodox methods and JW3s 'Jewish Pantomime' has a few surprises up its sleeve.

Against a backdrop of a giant tablecloth that could be associated Mum or Bubbah's house, we learn that Red, played by an enthused Gemma Barnett, is trying to save the world. Armed with a dodgy energy detector and a red puffa-coat worthy of ASOS, Red's scientific ambitions have led her to detecting new sources of renewable energy. We learn this passion is matched by a love of the two women in her life, despite the broigus between them, and it is this row between Mum and Bubbah that spurs her into the forest to check-up on her eccentric Gran.

Tiago Fonseca's cartwheeling, tenacious Jewish Bubbah is as compelling as Debbie Chazen's garrulous Londoner Dame—both extending the reach of their chutzpah in bursts of adapted pop-ballads, circus antics and rude dresses, featuring bagels and traditional sweet treats.

Characterisation is a strong suit of this panto, which becomes more obvious with the entrance of Josh Glanc's Big Bad Pig—a cross between licentious Terry Thomas and a corrupt MP feigning innocence—'BP' is an effortless force of revulsion and humour. So much so, that we almost like him. Sounds familiar? BP wants to steal all the Bubbahs in the world to sell their terrific power as a new source of light, fuel, heat etc.

Panto is a poor man's entertainment, with roots spread across every form of variety, vaudeville and commedia. It is only right that political comment is slipped between magic tricks (Mother Hoodman's bottle act) and flying sweets. But this panto goes a step further in tying up all of its semantic loose-ends—the Big Bad 'Wolf at the door' has been replaced by a pig running an energy company, Mother Hoodman is trying to reduce her meat intake, presumably as a check against her carbon footprint, a young girl is leading the bid for positive change and nobody can pay their bills—a fact that's sung about liberally and referred to throughout.

In previous decades, such broad swings at one political party might have divided an audience, but it is clear that the makers of *Little Red and the Big Bad Pig* are confident that their audience is on-side. By the time BP has hooked our Dame's flatulent bottom up to a generating machine and references to embarrassing moments at family weddings and Purim have been scattered across the story, children and adults have fully bought in to the show.

The question: do we need a Jewish pantomime? almost seems irrelevant, as Nick Cassenbaum's script has provided such a succinct version of the form that you would be hard-pressed not to enjoy this romp in disco-curtain woods, irrespective of your cultural or religious background. This begs

the question of whether panto, at large, is prohibitive to people from non-secular or Christian communities.

Regardless, this show has successfully brought a community together around a celebration of Jewish culture at a time when many Jewish people are worried or suffering. Red and her Crew do not infer the horrors of the middle-eastern conflict in this particular mix of fairy tale and British domestic hokum. It could be argued that Jewish popular theatre has traditionally sought to unite communities in a politically febrile climate—as far back as Ezekiel writing for Roman amphitheatres.

The Jewish Panto treads a very careful line with integrating Yiddish songs, music and dance. It is interesting that the bulk of these finger-clicking, foot-tapping ditties were added to the finale of the show in moments that saw families around me join in with undivided delight.

If anything, there is space inside this skilful show, beyond bagels and broigus, for more of this 'Jewishness'. Happy Hanukkah!

Reviewer: [Tamsin Flower](#)