

British Theatre Guide

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Return to the Forbidden Planet

Bob Carlton

Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch

Palace Theatre, Manchester

4–9 May 2015

Twenty-five years ago, before the jukebox musical was a staple of the West End and the actor-musician was a common sight in musicals, Bob Carlton's *Return to the Forbidden Planet* controversially won Best Musical at the Olivier Awards, beating the favourite *Miss Saigon*.

Carlton's script took the basic plot of the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*, which was loosely based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and retold it using a mixture of Shakespeare quotes and hits of the '60s. The multi-instrumentalist performers provided all of the music and sound effects as well as playing the characters in a slickly-choreographed, fast-moving and funny show.

It certainly looked like something fresh and new in the early '90s; I saw it a number of times and, looking back, it was quite influential on a lot of my own work from then onwards. Can a twenty-fifth anniversary tour recapture that magic or does what was innovative and exciting a quarter of a century ago now look like old hat?

Neither can be said to be true about this touring production, now on the last leg of its scheduled flight; it doesn't have the slickness and energy of the original, but there are a few flashes of brilliance to show just how great a show it was, and could be again.

The rather convoluted plot has Captain Tempest (Sean Needham) and his crew land on a remote planet populated only by Dr Prospero, a brilliant scientist, and his daughter Miranda (Sarah Scowen). Prospero has invented telegenesis, a way of making real objects using just the mind, but he is full of bitterness towards his wife Gloria (Christine Holman) who left him stranded in remote space.

There is even a love triangle, as innocent Miranda tries to persuade indifferent Tempest to take notice of her, but the ship's cook falls head-over-heels for her at first sight.

The opening section is a little slow, with comic business that doesn't hit the mark, Shakespearean lines delivered with little attention to meaning and uneven pace. It really starts to kick in when Dr Prospero first appears on the screen. Jonathan Markwood delivers the verse perfectly with his beautifully rich voice, merging seamlessly into "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood".

The other stand-out performance is Mark Newnham as Cookie, who, after feeling betrayed by Miranda, gives an emotional rendition of Zombies hit "She's Not There" with a very long guitar solo to emphasise his feelings. This is a real showstopper, but there is much more of note from this talented performer.

There are noticeable absences from the original: robot Ariel (Joseph Mann) is not on roller skates so his spectacular choreographer is replaced by a few high kicks; no one is yanked up into the air

by the tentacles of the monster from the id. The live video feed of Cookie's guitar solo is there but doesn't send up the clichés of pop TV programmes—not a crash zoom in sight.

The on-screen chorus is played by Queen guitarist Brian May, which seems appropriate as he bridges the worlds of astronomy (the original was Sir Patrick Moore) and rock music, and he does a pretty decent job of it.

Overall, it is a bit of a disappointment to someone who was such a fan of the original, but there are some very enjoyable moments and a pretty rousing scripted encore—even if the sound operator was going more for volume than clarity at this point.

For a newcomer, it is musically very good, funny in parts and quite entertaining, but it would be great to see what a fresh director with a background in physical comedy could inject into a show that could still be a West End winner if moved up a few gears.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)