

## Review of *The Snow Queen*



*"Snow Queen sparkles this Christmas"*

by Avril Silk for remotegoat on 30/11/13



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Rain or Shine Theatre Company's delightful production of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' at the wonderful Corn Barn, near Cullompton, ushered in the Christmas season as surely as the delicious mulled wine and minced pies served in the interval. The supermarkets have been trying to locate my I-love-Christmas button to no avail, but this well-loved traditional tale, faithfully adapted, directed and well narrated by James Reynard, with Richard Watson's original, atmospheric music turned on the lights.

A simple set by J.M. Fox (a close relative of the director!) proved flexible and effective; fabrics over blocks gave us a river, a sledge, a throne, a forest cave and more. Beautifully made props – flowers, the sun, birds, a window sparkling with frost – brought colour and variety, helped by intelligent lighting. I liked the idea of a large scenic picture book instead of backdrops, but hankered for a brown leather cover with gilt lettering and maybe more scenes, with the book playing a larger part in the narration.

Jayne Meekings' costumes were often gorgeous – especially the fabulous gowns worn by Pippa Meekings as the Four Seasons. Wearing lederhosen is a tough call for a grown man, so my heart went out to Tyler Coombs as Kai... It's also a tough call for adult actors to play themselves as children, adolescents and young adults and I felt happier when Kai and Gerda (tenderly played by Claire Tucker) left childhood behind.

I first loved 'The Snow Queen' because it was a girl undertaking the dangerous quest instead of the usual likely lad, but Gerda is expected to be innocent and kind which doesn't always lend itself to adventurousness. I would have liked a bit more zest; I suspect Claire would have enjoyed finding Gerda's inner feistiness. The character of Kai presents different problems as he switches from good to nasty in a twinkling. I thought the suggestion of autism in Tyler's performance was very clever, contrasting well with his vigorous enthusiasm before the splinter froze his heart.

Snow Queen Pippa Meekings stole the show with her expressive face and versatile voice. James Reynard's subtle rewriting of her confrontation with Gerda was well done, lending poignancy and dignity, and I liked his decision to avoid making her totally evil. However, I have an issue with the removal of some of the darker elements of the story – I want the Robber Girl to be really edgy, so there is more than a whiff of danger to spice up the action. Darker shadows mean, for example, that Gerda's goodness doesn't have to be quite so bright – she can be more nuanced. Similarly, Anthony Young's Demon worked very well tonight as a pantomime baddie, but my preference is for some gleaming, dazzling evil at the start to provide a stunning contrast with the enduring love Claire Tucker exemplified, not only for Kai, but for every person and creature she encountered.

This warm-hearted production emphasises innocent charm, with inventive humour which will be enjoyed by all age-groups this Christmas.