



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society	Quay Players
Production	Shrek
Date	Thursday 11 August 2022
Venue	Greenwood Theatre
Report by	Matt Bentley

Show Report

General

Shrek is a gift of a show. It's an extremely well-known property with an excellent book and cracking musical numbers. It was absolutely the right call to push through with this production, despite the challenges of the past few years, and the appreciative opening night audience is evidence that all the hard work paid off.

It's not a show without its own pitfalls, though. As it was written for an American audience, it does require a significant amount of effort on the creative team's part to navigate those elements that we, as a British audience, may perceive as being panto-esque, which isn't an issue stateside. In addition, not only is it based on a film that almost its entire audience would have been intimately familiar with, it also has a pro-shoot of the Broadway production readily accessible via various streaming services, so it comes with a high level of expectation.

This production navigated these challenges well. There were moments where a few performances slipped into panto mode, but overall it stayed on the musical theatre side of the tone divide. It also brought fresh interpretations to some characters, while giving the audience a solid presentation of the story they know and love.

Sound

It's important to acknowledge the sound situation early on, as it had an impact on several other production elements. The sound design by **Steve Lonsdale** and **James Rogers** was well planned, but let down by the quality of the equipment, although perhaps some of this was down to opening night glitches. However the sound did, regrettably, impact on the enjoyment of the otherwise excellent production.

Sound quality is one of those frustrating elements of a musical that can so easily be undervalued and it is well worth stretching the budget to ensure good a quality system with clarity in sound with no interference or sound loss, to support the excellent performances being demonstrated on stage.

Direction/Choreography

It would be an understatement to say that this production had its challenges. Following the understandable changes that had to be made to the creative team following the pandemic, **Eleanor Strutt**, ably assisted by **Zoë Stockwell**, had the unenviable task of rehearsing a cast made up primarily of performers they didn't select into a show they didn't choose, and which had a wealth of expectations heaped upon it. They also had to merge these pre-existing cast members with some new

ones, and get through a rehearsal process that I can only imagine was plagued by uncertainty due to absences from illness.

The success of this production is a testament to their hard work and clear vision. The performers had been encouraged to make strong acting choices, and the relationships between the characters were well drawn.

This was particularly apparent in the musical numbers. What's Up Duloc and Morning Person both stood out by piling joy upon delight, with slick choreography and high entertainment value. I Think I Got You Beat featured strong storytelling as we witnessed Shrek and Fiona get naturally closer without it feeling forced, and Travel Song was a comic highlight.

I do have some nitpicky concerns with some of the staging choices, which I'll address below, but overall a difficult job very well done.

Musical Direction

Musical Director **Mark Smith** had similar challenges which he also saw through to a very successful result. The band worked together well to produce an excellent accompaniment, and the ensemble harmonies in particular sounded great.

My main concern here was the cuing, particularly after vamps. There were a couple of times where we got dead moments on stage as a vamp went longer than anyone seemed to be expecting, and a few moments where I saw cast members cuing the MD instead of the other way around. It's quite possible that this was due to a need for more foldback on stage or for more clarity with the performers' expectations, but either way this is something to look at in the future.

Cast

Shrek provides some fantastic challenges for performers. The title role, for example, requires an actor to perform through extensive prosthetics including having their ears covered, portray a well-loved animated character while also showing subtle shifts in manner to allow for the character's wide arc, and do it all while maintaining a Scottish accent (thanks Mike Myers).

Fortunately **Thomas Outhwaite** was up to the task, giving us a comparatively sincere Shrek who invited us on that journey and developed nicely as the show progressed. When Words Fail and Build a Wall were particular highlights that showed off Thomas's voice well. It is challenging to keep animated in heavy prosthetics and there were times when the energy dropped a little and a few comedic moments were lost, but these were rare.

Cat Palethorpe's Fiona proved an excellent foil for Shrek. The character is significantly expanded from the original film, and so there is more freedom for interpretation. Cat brought a warmth to the role that could believably melt Shrek's harsh exterior while still being the wonderfully sassy and cynical anti-Disney-princess we all know and love. As mentioned above, Morning Person was a highlight of the evening.

Fiona's journey to becoming the older, more realistic princess was supported by **Eliza Nabbaro** as Young Fiona, playing the character as quite naïve but still with that steely determination that would see her through to adulthood, and by **Sophia Donnelly** as Teen Fiona. Sophia bridged the gap between the other two nicely and has an excellent voice – it would have been nice to see her with more to do in the production somehow, perhaps in some additional ensemble roles.

Shrek's other companion on this adventure, Donkey, was brilliantly played by **Tom Kershaw-Green**. As most of the character's dialogue was written for Eddie Murphy, it can be risky for a white actor to play it as intended. However, Tom found a way through by playing up the camp nature of the lines, to very successful effect. As much as I would have enjoyed seeing more animosity from Shrek for Donkey to overcome in his oblivious way, the two demonstrated a touching bond that kicked off entertainingly with Don't Let Me Go and meant the more melancholic moments in Build a Wall were earned. The comic sequence featuring Donkey trying not to give Fiona's secret away was particularly skilfully handled.

As Lord Farquaad, **Dylan Evans** took the opportunities provided by that role and ran with them to excellent effect. **Beth Sillitoe** was fierce as the Dragon, and nicely snuck in as Young Shrek as well. **Ben Hollands** gave us Pinocchio's iconic voice, which must be a challenge to maintain but was carried off excellently, while **Sarah Marr** was a highlight as both Gingy and the Sugarplum Fairy, sometimes giving us both at the same time without missing a beat.

Ensemble

The ensemble in Shrek has a lot of odd business to do, and will only succeed if they absolutely commit to it. This group were generally successful, but there remained some members who clearly felt self-conscious and pulled back from committing as much as they might have.

On the other hand, there were many who committed completely. It would be unfair to list all those in either camp, but two absolute stand-outs were **Miranda Evans** and **James Purves**, both of whom gave very dedicated performances, whether they were playing their named roles or a bird/skeleton/guard/etc.

Staging

As mentioned above, the direction of this show was strong. However, there were some observations I wanted to make regarding the staging choices that can hopefully be useful advice for the future.

The opening moments of a production are critical. As well as setting the scene, the audience needs to be given confidence that they are in safe hands and that they can sit back and enjoy the show without worrying on behalf of the actors. There is a tendency to be beholden to the script for these moments, and here the opening sequence is written as scenes from a picture book. The blocking was very static as a result, despite there being a lot of music to fill between lines of dialogue. More movement here would have set us up well for the majority of the show, which was far more active.

As mentioned above, the ensemble chorus numbers were highlights and brought that active cartoony feeling to life. Some of that ethos would have gone a long way to enlivening the large ensemble scenes in the swamp at the beginning and end of the show as these were perhaps a little static at

times. There are a lot of new and iconic characters introduced in the early scene in particular, and it wasn't always clear which voice in the crowd was attached to which actor. Similarly, the exit out of Travel Song was somewhat drawn out and perhaps more efficient use could have been made of the wings.

One ensemble number that could have been more effective was Forever. Having the prisoners in their stockades at the front was a nice touch to get us into the song, but it's really the Dragon's number. Bringing the excellent puppet and performer together in a more prominent position would have clearly defined them as a single character, and given her a more appropriate level of focus.

Finally the illusion of Fiona's transformation during the wedding is a tricky one to pull off, and in this case it looked like it got caught on an opening night snag. Tricks like that are so effective when they work, though, so it really pays to spend a bit of extra time running them several times in tech. It's moments like this and those mentioned above that really add the wow factor to a show, which is why I've focused on them.

Stage Management was provided by **Charlotte Murray**, with support from **Elyza Loren**, **Huw Siddle** and **Charlotte von Wittken**. This seemed to go very smoothly on opening night, with the entertaining addition of a number of pre-show announcements from Pinocchio.

Production

A show like Shrek has a lot of moving parts, and needs to tread the line between audience expectations (in this case the iconic 2001 film) and the artistic vision of the creative team. Producers **Sarah Jefferies** and **Jenny Galloway** opted for the sensible choice of hiring the costumes and set as packages, then augmented it with additional contributions from within the production team. I'm sure there are valid versions of Shrek that don't conform as closely to the original film, but these will be time, labour and cost intensive, and run the risk of not working at all. This was a logical decision that really paid off.

Publicity was excellent for this show as well, with frequent social media updates and an effective, consistently-used design by **Coren Hall**. I was surprised to see the cast list released so late as that can often be a sales booster. I would suggest listing cast and crew names as early as possible, particularly on the website, so that acquaintances who may not be fully in the friends and family loop can be made aware and buy tickets.

Costumes

Costumes were provided for the most part by **Utopia Costumes** and managed by **Annie Houseago** and **Sarah Jefferies**, with assistance from **Isabel Murray**. Various cast members contributed additional costumes. Makeup was provided by the **London College of Beauty Therapy**.

Overall the costuming was excellent. Wrangling such a large quantity of costumes is a huge job, and on opening night everything was in place with only one very minor but amusing hitch (a pig with a pink curly tail coming out the front). Hairstyles, makeup and accessories were appropriate, and it was great to see such a variety of instantly recognisable fairy-tale creatures.

My only real concern here was the size of Shrek's false belly, which seemed to go a lot further than I'd seen before, and had an additional effect of inhibiting the actor's range of movements. It would also have been nice for a bit more attention to have been given to the opening family, particularly with a bit of glue added to young Shrek's headpiece, but it was a very brief scene.

Set & Props

The set provided as a package by **Scenery Solutions** was very effective, as should be expected. Props sourced and managed by **Fiona Forbes** were well utilised without making the stage too busy. I particularly enjoyed the hand-painted protest signs, the swooping birds, and the inflatable Bambi.

Lighting

Again, as this is a complicated show, lighting can have any number of opportunities to fall apart on opening night. Fortunately, the slick and unobtrusive design by **Charlotte Gowers** was in place and operating smoothly. Careful thought had clearly been given to all scenes, but particularly the first Fiona transformation in shadow which worked very well.

Programme

A well-designed programme was provided courtesy of **Ben Hollands**, with photography by **Miranda Evans** and **Jon Lo**. MTI possibly needs to update their writers' bios, as David Lindsay-Abaire's is clearly at least 7 years out of date. Unfortunately the programme is ineligible for the NODA Programme Competition as it is missing the NODA logo, strapline and introduction blurb. All of these can be found on the NODA website for use in future programmes.

Front of House

The front of house team seemed a little overwhelmed when I arrived and didn't seem to be expecting me, but were very welcoming nonetheless. As mentioned above, the character announcements in the auditorium were a nice touch.

NODA Website & Production Summary

The Quay Players have presented a traditional and effective production of Shrek, with some stand-out performances, excellent musical numbers and a well-honed band. Although there is some opportunity to push even further from a creative viewpoint, and some technical elements required attention, the opening night audience gave it the enthusiastic support and acclaim it deserved.



Matt Bentley
NODA London Regional Representative & Associate Representative District 1
City & Central London