



Nuts and Merries

Puppets, princesses and drag queens get their fa-la-jollies on in holiday-themed shows

By Elaine Liner

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Mark Trew

Want some silly fun this holiday season? Theatre Britain's *Aladdin* will grant your wish.

Details:

Aladdin continues through December 22 at Theatre Britain, 972-490-4202.

Season's Greetings continues through December 16 at Theatre Too, 214-871-3300.

The Nutcracker continues through December 23 at **Dallas** Children's Theater, 214-740-0051.

The Widow Twankey is back! **Theatre Britain's** annual "panto" production brings the silly old dame, played by a man in glam-drag, out front and center. This year she's at her gawdy, bawdy best as portrayed by **Dallas** actor Mark Shum in *Aladdin*, now onstage for the hols at the KD Studio Theatre.

The panto, long seen as artless low humor aimed at the hoi polloi, has made a rather startling comeback in British theater in recent years. No less than Sir Ian McKellen (Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* epics) is credited with reviving interest in the traditional fairy-tale send-ups, which always star a man in the role of the "dame" and a girl in the role of the heroic son.

McKellen camped it up madly as the Widow Twankey in the Old Vic's *Aladdin*, directed by Kevin Spacey in a sold-out London run in 2004 and again at Christmas in 2005. Since then other legit British thespians such as Simon Callow and John Rhys-Davies (who acted with McKellen in *Rings*) have deigned to don petticoats in comic dame roles. On *Extras*, Ricky Gervais reluctantly played a fey genie in a panto *Aladdin*, adding an extra swish of cool to the genre. This season there are 20 pantos in the West End.

For 11 **seasons** Theatre Britain, a **Dallas** troupe dedicated to English theatricals, has mounted a panto. This year's *Aladdin*, adapted by Jackie Mellor, is a beaut—a riot of magical storytelling and colorful spectacle for the little nippers, with enough dirty double entendres to keep the grown-ups amused. "I've got a lot of old things that need rubbing," the Widow says to the genie of the lamp.

Directed by company founder Sue Birch, *Aladdin* incorporates every stitch of panto kitsch:



corny musical singalongs, hissing and booing the villain, a ghost that appears for no reason and some cool glow-in-the-dark puppetry. Visually, the show is a candy box. Darryl Clements' scenic design suggests a cartoon souk set on a flying carpet. Sam Nance's lighting scheme adds even more sparkle to Robin Armstrong's costume confections. Armstrong has festooned Widow Twankey's enormous gingerbread pinafore with oversized mints and sugared fruity bits, a clever character statement that looks good enough to eat.

Plot is almost nonexistent in these shows—dodging the evil Abanazer, Aladdin's only wish is that Princess Jasmine love him, the one wish the genie can't grant—so it hardly matters that everything stops so storyteller Mustapha Sitdown (Robert Silva) can lead the audience in a happy tune. The point of a panto is to have a good time. The pace is brisk, the puns are ridiculous—this one's set in "Wuncam El-Toumani" —and the laughs are many.

Theatre Britain's cast, led by veteran dame-player Shum, corners the market on cute. Charli Armstrong plays Aladdin with a spunky Peter Pan strut. Ian Sinclair, a recent TCU grad who drew raves in Echo Theatre's *Ladies of the Camellias*, snarls nicely under his glittery turban as baddie Abanazer. Isabelle Culpepper and Megan Penney bring girlish squeak to the roles of veiled ingénues Lavender and Jasmine. And a special nod to the ladies inside the cow costume (Aladdin insists it's a camel). Maureen Whisman lucks out with the speaking role as the front end of the beast. Newcomer Catherine Ratcliffe pays her theatrical dues bending over for 90 minutes as the rear half. Got to say, the girl milks the part for all it's worth.

British humor of a slightly more sophisticated sort pours forth in Alan Ayckbourn's ***Season's Greetings***, a cheesy 22-year-old comedy that's only a smidge moldy around the edges. This one's playing in two productions at two venues: Fort Worth's **Stage West** and **Theatre Three's** underground tomb, Theatre Too. The latter, directed by Kerry Cole, won the coin flip for a review.

Two good reasons to book tix to T2's *Season's Greetings*: Emily Gray and Sara Lovett. These actresses excel at their accents because they are, in fact, natives of Old Blighty, but they're also danderoo at Ayckbourn's tricky U-turns, requiring quiet sarcasm one minute and full-out farce the next.

Gray, a wow this fall as a Dixie gun moll in Theatre Three's *Popcorn*, gets to be sexy-funny as hostess Belinda Bunker, bustling around a country house as Christmas Eve guests pile in. Husband Neville (Greg Forshay) stays distracted by unfinished projects in his tool shed and can't be bothered to lift a finger with decorations. Sister-in-law Pattie (Julie Painter) is hugely pregnant and cranky. Uncle Harvey (Cliff Stephens at the preview reviewed) is a drill instructor with a penchant for weapons; he just wants festivities to unfold with military precision. Then in walks Clive (David Fluitt), a best-selling author who takes one look at Belinda and wants to ravish her under the mistletoe. How they end up rolling on the floor in the dark with the Hallelujah Chorus playing over them takes every minute of the first act to work up to.

Clive is the guest of Rachael, Lovett's character, a disheveled secretary who at 38 has stayed a virgin for no other reason than it's too much trouble doing the deed. She's hot for Clive, who's hot for Belinda, which steams Rachael right down to her unwashed roots. Lovett's awkward, alcohol-induced confession of lust for Clive is so sweet and real, it would hurt to watch if Lovett weren't so hilarious.

Gray and Lovett are admirably supported by the rest of the cast, with one exception. Stan Graner as Bernard, an inept doctor obsessed with his annual marionette show, has all the pizzazz of a sock puppet. His accent is wrong, his hair full of painted-on gray streaks that scream "community theater," and his timing so unpredictable, he throws off the better actors, particularly the wonderful Leslie Turner as Bernard's boozy wife Phyllis. Graner alternates in the role with H. Frances Fuselier, so be sure to ask the box office who's on when.

Other than that, *Season's Greetings* is joyous whirl.

Oh, the hoopla that surrounded the recent *Sound of Music* presented at the **Dallas** Theater Center by the Salzburg Marionette Theater, directed by DTC's former artistic honcho Richard Hamburger. What a weird show that was, complete with a human Mother Abbess who looked like a giant next to the little wooden nuns, and a human Nazi who shot a Bambi puppet dead while the strung-up Von Trapp tykes warbled "Edelweiss."

For more graceful puppetry and a nicer experience all around, see *The Nutcracker* presented by the **Kathy Burks Theatre of Puppetry Arts** at **Dallas** Children's Theater. This nontraditional version of the Tchaikovsky classic is performed with exquisitely designed "black theater" rod puppets. Opening the 90-minute show, the composer appears (in puppet form) to explain how and why he wrote the ballet about little Clara, who dreams of a toy nutcracker that comes to life and whisks her to a land of sugar snowflakes and mouse armies. That part's a little slow, frankly, but the gentle intro seems to lull little ones into the music.

Puppeteers Douglass Burks, Kathy Burks, Sally Fiorello, Ted Kincaid and Patricia Long—cloaked in black velvet that renders them invisible behind their characters—make Clara and her Nutcracker Prince magically dance and fly. Watch for the sassy white poodle who stands in (on tippy-toes!) for the Sugar Plum Fairy in the ballet's most familiar solo.

Several good shows! And a plum part for a pup. Can't beat that.