


Review: Beauty and the Beast, Royal Lyceum Theatre (***)




When is a pantomime not a pantomime? Or to look at it another way, when is a Christmas show not just a straight piece of theatre?

The Lyceum's seasonal offering this year, enjoyable though it is, seems to want to have it both ways, as a straight family play that lurches into pantomime from time to time, only to lurch back again just as quickly. One minute you're sitting back watching the story unfold; the next you're expected to join in. Or worse, you're expected to shut up again after you've just been joining in.

It should work, and it kind of does, but it still makes for  a slightly unsettling experience. And I'm not sure that the rather fragile, poignant story of *Beauty and the Beast*, with its themes of unconditional love and loyalty, is the right place to be asking the audience to take such a potentially confusing role.

Neil Murray's well-mannered production just needs to let go a bit more, and allow in some of the rude, earthy popularism of real panto. It's a lovely-looking show, with gorgeous sets, evocative lighting and a likeable, enthusiastic cast. Angela Clerkin as the wicked witch, Crackjaw, is properly scary (toddlers watch out), and Ruth Milne and Andrew Rothney have just the right wide-eyed eagerness as the central romantic couple.

 You get the feeling that more laughs could have been had from the goblin Dunt (a world-weary Mark McDonnell) and the ugly sisters Hannah and Hazel (Nicola Ray and Karen Traynor –

with accents to turn milk sour), but it's back to the pantomime/play question again. Writer Stuart Paterson has shoehorned pantomime characters into the story, but director Murray hasn't made them very 'pantomimey'.

By the play's rather low-key conclusion, though, it's the joyful story that has really shone through, and the audience stays enthralled throughout.

Photographs by Eamonn McGoldrick

[Beauty and the Beast](#) continues at the Royal Lyceum Theatre until 31 December