The Pantomimes

During the 1960s and early 70s I was a regular member of the Woodford Valley Pantomime Group. This was composed of mainly local people who put on an annual play or pantomime usually at Christmas time. Quite a number of people of all ages were involved in each production, all under the eagle eye of Miss Doris Potter. She herself, almost single handedly, wrote, produced, directed, prompted and cajoled everyone to really perform to the best of their ability. A very enjoyable time was had by everyone who had a connection with our plays. So what an excellent way to get to know a good number of other people. Many of them have remained lifelong friends.
Alan Thies



Rehearsal for Robinson Crusoe. 1966

They were written by Doris Potter. I do once famously remember being prompted by Miss Potter and saying. “I’ve already said that!” Which is not terribly professional is it? They were fun. Mrs Dart who was the Rasch secretary at Heale House, she played the piano very well and very spiritedly. I remember singing, ‘The sun has got his hat on …’ I did most of them - I wasn’t to be stopped once I’d got started. The curtain was down at least as much as it was up. The scenes were very, very, short. It was very funny. I always said. “It’s much better to be in them, than to watch!”
Stephanie Down



Snow White and the Gypsies. 1967

We used to have good fun in the pantomimes; singing away there - joining in the choruses with Barbara. We used to sing. “When I was just a little girl, I’d ask my mother what will I be, will I be handsome - will I be rich? She said so tenderly.” We used to sing. “Que sera sera, whatever will be, will be. Que sera sera, tomorrow you’ll wait and see, que sera sera.” That’s the song we used to sing. It was lovely.
Phyllis Wigmore



Ali Baba. 1968

I’ll always remember we went down the Reading Room for rehearsal, the kids done their little bit first and then one of the parents said. “Wouldn’t it be nice if the grown-ups done a pantomime for the village, to come and have a laugh?” Well, we were all for it. We done the hula hula girls in grass skirts. Well, Major Rasch down at Heale, he laughed his head off when he saw us - I’ll always remember it. The grass skirt I had was Lady Tryon's. I asked for it when I was up at The Manor. The cook said. “Lady Tryon’s got one - I expect she’ll let you have it.” And she did. All the others were homemade ones, made of raffia. I’ll always remember the girl Peters, she was the head singer and of course she had to have a grass skirt you see. When she seen mine look, she had to have the real thing. So Miss Potter said to me. “Barbara would you let her have the grass skirt you’ve got and you have the one made of raffia?” I said. “No. This was lent to me and I’m responsible for it.” And I wouldn’t let her have it. Stubborn little bitch I was. I’ve had my good ways but I’ll have things right. I wouldn’t be pushed on or anything like that.

We did pantomimes for Woodford School to buy things for them. They didn’t charge much for anyone to go in, a few shillings I suppose. But we used to get two packed houses up Inchcape Hall there. We had one down Woodford too. They had a makeshift stage that they could fold up - I think, down at the Reading Room. That year, that was about the first year, the mothers - we done ‘The Rainbow’ and we sang, “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” We had a drink or two, we used to call in on the Bridge and get a bottle and have it back stage see. Reg Sheppard and Miss Potter said, “There’s no drinking before we go on stage - you’ve got to be sober.” I thought - you go on mate. Poor Audrey, she was on one end and she fell off the end of the stage. She ran round the back of the stage - we shuffled along look and she come in the other end. Nobody knew any different!
Barbara Portnall



Lady Trumpington’s Triumph. 1969



Cinderella. 1971



Dick Whittington. 1972



Lib and Let Lib. 1973