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Photo: Mark Garvin

Mayhem and Laughter at People's Light

by Kristen Shahverdian

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and thINKingDANCE continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

It was cold and rainy outside, but inside the theater, I felt warmth and joy as I listened to the laughter all around me. People young and old and families across generations filled the seats at People's Light for the world premiere of [Little Red Robin Hood: A Musical Panto](#).

This is the 16th Christmas panto presented by People's Light. Having experienced it several years ago, I know it is a family-friendly form, and so I brought along my 9-year-old son. [Pantos](#) are a British tradition, and are outrageous, silly, slapstick plays with a feel-good story about good and evil. The stories of pantos come from well-known fairy tales, and for this panto playwright Kathryn Petersen collides [Little Red Riding Hood and Robin Hood](#). The two original stories overlap a wooded location and a rebellious lead character (a teenage Red Riding Hood deviates from the path in the woods and meets the wolf; Robin Hood steals from the rich to give to the poor). While pantos have an "anything goes" sensibility, there are also conventions, such as a matriarch in drag, song and dance numbers, audience participation ("cheers" and "boos" throughout), a candy hand-out (we get Swedish fish!), and satire with commentary about local and national politics.

As the play begins, we learn that Robin Hood has died, the Merry Men went into hiding, and the evil Lady Nottingham has taken over Nottinghamshire. The animals of the forest devise a plan to fight back by creating a printing press of their own. They recruit a 15-year old orphan, Amelia (played by Viveca Chow), to deliver a message of rebellion. While reluctant at first, she becomes the heroine, and ultimately saves the forest from Lady Nottingham's wicked plans.

Lady Nottingham (played by Mary Elizabeth Scallen), represents big business as she struts across the stage in tight black pants and

purple feather boa announcing that all the animals should be killed for their pelts. She tries to bring the audience onto her side by calling us her “little villains.” She is great fun, with her over-the-top pronouncements: her hatred of animals and her love of plastic straws. The actors encourage the audience to “boo” when Lady Nottingham enters the stage, and when she announces her plan to cut down the trees in the forest, my son is so moved, he yells “shove it!” across the crowded theater.

Environmental concerns run throughout the play. Amelia is modeled after Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. Like Thunberg, Chow plays the role of Amelia with an action-oriented passion. With her bow and arrow in hand, she saves the animals from destruction. The Ancient Oak Tree is a vast, captivating structure with green, billowing wings that stretch across the stage and a trunk that extends to the rafters overhead. On top of the trunk sits Ebony Pullum, and she provides the tree’s voice with deeply resonant, yet wordless vocalizations that only our heroine Amelia understands. Amelia’s youth, her ability to connect with nature, and her desire for action feels reflective of Thunberg’s passion.

Furry animal characters are another convention in panto. Rocky the Raccoon, Bert the Beaver, and Skippy the Chipmunk (Susan McKey, Victor Rodriguez Jr., Eli Lynn) operate like a comedy routine in an old Hollywood musical. They exude enthusiasm and drive the song and dance numbers (music and lyrics by Michael Ogborn) with high energy. Lupo (Armando Gutierrez), works for Lady Nottingham and is in conflict: he wants to be a “big bad wolf,” but when Lady Nottingham orders him to kill and eat Amelia, he cannot do it. Lupo comes to accept his true self while singing, “I’m looking at the wolf in the mirror.” Floyd Flynn Finkelstein (Christopher Patrick Mullen) plays the operator of the paper and is very deft at moving between a nervous newspaperman and a confident journalist simply by placing a visor on his head.

[Director](#) Bill Fennelly states, “a panto opens its arms wide and invites everyone to come on in, sit and laugh together.” Future shows include relaxed performances, family-friendly Panto Pride, Open Captioning, and half-price Access Nights. During my matinee performance, the actors brought an audience member onstage to become part of a lineup in Lady Nottingham’s attempt to find Amelia. As the audience cheered and laughed for our comrade onstage, I felt the theater become a community for an afternoon and a place to celebrate all of us.

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[Little Red Robin Hood: A Musical Panto](#), People’s Light, Nov. 13-Jan. 5.

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