

# Theatre in Wales

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## NOT SUITABLE FOR THE OVER-NINES

### PINOCCHIO


The Torch Theatre, Milford Haven , The Torch Theatre, Milford Haven , January 2, 2010



Last Christmas the Torch Theatre's formidable dynamic duo, director Peter Doran and musical director James Williams, bestowed upon the nation a magnificent gift: the most fabulous Cinderella in the history of the universe. EVER. During the summer Doran was at it again, lending his Midas touch to Ayckbourn's 'Norman Conquests' and achieving a rejuvenation and a perfection that inspired awe, wonder and not a little drool. Surely only a deranged nincompoop on a day release pass would bother to try and stage the trilogy again. So what is so surprising about the Torch's production of Pinocchio this Christmas is not that it displays much to admire and delight, but that it contains almost as much to disappoint.

The mouth-watering colour scheme is hot-wired direct from the childlike psyche of the audience and Geppetto's seaside residence, an ingenious, rickety shack, is gorgeously framed against a huge, orange sun and an electric blue sky. Yet, for some reason, the show opens limply and the first act is often becalmed in long, wordy waters without a relieving sing-a-long in the offing.

Oozing a wide-eyed earnestness, boyish good looks and effortlessly excellent body movement, Russell Clough's Pinocchio is stamped with the British kite mark of quality;



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Jake Norton is always a pleasure every time he appears, either playing Lampwick like a spoilt Little Lord Fauntleroy or voicing the cute and clever green puppet Cricket; young Molly Furnival as Marco is impressively comfortable on stage with the professionals in her first major production; while Mike Neary keeps things ticking over nicely as Geppetto, either working the kids like an old pro, or playing the straight man to Pinocchio in a neat bit of 'No-he's-behind-you!' choreography.

Yet the iconic, the pivotal nose-growing scene is laughably, almost criminally lame, an inexplicably wasted opportunity, so that when Pinocchio moans "Oil, oil, I need oil, I'm so stiff," he could be referring to the show itself.

Fortunately, however, the beautifully sinister and sinisterly hypnotic Toytown scene, which showcases some haunting James Williams' melodies and the mezzo soprano talents of Buddug Verona James (swapping her role as the fairy for that of an insidious scooter-riding clown), launches the second act on a high which it maintains to the end.

In the blink of an eye, while James' disembodied voice eerily wafts through the ether like a phantom warning '(this is the) place where you dream and never wake', Pinocchio morphs from 70's children show Rainbow into an episode of disturbing cult series The Prisoner, a transformation which puts the fear of a wrathful God into some of the children in the audience, but one which sees the adults secretly rubbing their hands with barely-suppressed glee.

The Torch Production team has long garnered a deserved reputation for excellence in the world of theatre and here again they imbue the production with a huge 'OOH, BLUMIN' AAH!' factor.

We're treated to one jaw dropping set, one sleight-of-hand special effect after another. There's a bloody 'yowge' shark or shoals of retro, luminescent fish weaving their way through a mid air sea, the amazing sight of Pinocchio spinning and somersaulting through the blackness (look! no wires), and a mesmerisingly minimalist, Hockney-esque Shark's Stomach scene, all stunning corn blues contrasted with the littering of sun-bleached fish skeletons, framed with a gi-normous rib cage. What more could one ask for from a top-notch set? The ossified little sailboat that sits centre stage here would keep any hyperactive grandchild enthralled for hours all on its own, for Kylie's sake.

All titillate the heart furiously and warm every cockle therein with the glow of their daydream magic.

But, naturally, as is always the way, it's the two baddies who still steal the show.

Plucked straight from the dank, steaming back alleys of a farthing-a-dozen Dickensian murder mystery, Tom Cullen is irresistible as that spatted, top-hatted, whiskery galoot, Freddy Fox, with the cleverly intoned Harry H. Corbet voice, while the lovely Catherine Morris, his partner in deviousness, the shambolically scrofulous Felina, is never less than magnificent.

Cullen's fencing bout with Pinocchio in the Shark's stomach is one of the highlights of the show and one of the few times Freddy Fox is not seen twirling his dandified cane, the visible manifestation of his aspiration to toff-ism.

Morris is always a treat to watch cackling and cawing and

scratching her way into our affections like a poor man's, moth-eaten Queen Victoria, all bent and bonneted and chapel black.

The 'Felina' range of designer lingerie for women was almost certainly not named after her though she could well be viewed as a nightmarish, real life, picture-in-the-attic version of a 'velina', the Italian equivalent to a British WAG.

When she hitches up her raggedy skirts, brandishes her broly and roars up the auditorium stairs, screeching 'AW SHURRUP!' with the relish and gusto of a recently blooded, bang-to-rights homicidal nutter, the kids in the aisle seats whimper and cower as if from a force of nature. It's a bleedin' marvelous moment, missus, worth the price of admission alone.

Comparisons with last year's Cinderella are unfair: Pinocchio is quite clearly not a pantomime but that more limited, less inclusive format: an out-and-out children's show, a format which simply does not allow Doran scope to dazzle and tickle us as usual with his inventively saucy wordplay and delectably cheesy double entendres.

Any self-respecting grown-up might bemoan the lack of two, traditionally nasty, bearded men in make-up and frocks. But while this Pinocchio may not be suitable for the over-nines, any Fanta-guzzling, cheeky young shaver worth his salt will go crazy-ape-bonkers for it. Watch out for the stampede.

Reviewed by: [Tim Barrett](#)

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