

Pinocchio @ Torch Theatre, Milford Haven ***

Dec 19 2009 by Our Correspondent, Western Mail

LAST Christmas the Torch Theatre's dynamic duo, director Peter Doran and [musical \(#\)](#) director James Williams, bestowed upon the nation a magnificent gift: the most fabulous Cinderella ever.

So what is so surprising about this year's production of Pinocchio is not that it displays much to admire and delight, but that it contains almost as much that disappoints.

The delicious 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 the show opens limply and the first act is often becalmed in long, wordy waters without a relieving sing-a-long in sight.

Russell Clough is an absolutely perfect Pinocchio, Jake Norton always a pleasure every time he appears, playing Lampwick like a spoilt Little Lord Fauntleroy, and Mike Neary keeps things ticking over nicely as Geppetto.

Yet the central, nose-growing scene is laughably lame, a completely wasted opportunity and when Pinocchio moans: "I need oil, I'm so stiff", he could be referring to the show itself.

Fortunately, however, the beautifully sinister and hypnotic Toytown scene, which showcases some haunting 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.

Pinocchio spinning through the air and a mesmerising Hockney-esque Shark's Stomach scene titillate the heart.

But, naturally, it's the two baddies who steal the show. Tom Cullen is irresistible as top-hatted Freddy Fox, with the clever Harry H Corbett voice, while the lovely Catherine Morris as Felina, his partner in deviousness, is never less than magnificent.

Comparisons with Cinderella are unfair: Pinocchio is quite clearly not a pantomime but that more limited, less inclusive format: an out-and-out children's show.

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 teenagers or adults after some festive fun are also bound to go crazy for it. Watch out for the stampede...

Tim Barrett

The panto runs until January 2. The box office number is 01646 695267

