

**ALADDIN**  
**By Michael Bentley**  
**Essendon Theatre Company**  
**Directed by Michele Haywood**  
**Reviewed by Alison Campbell Rate - September 25, 2015**

Essendon Theatre Company's school holiday pantomime provided a great afternoon of entertainment for an excited audience of young children and their captive adults. Michael Bentley's pantomime scripts tend to go off in many and varied directions and director Michele Haywood pulled all the threads together to create a successful, engaging production. Her task was made more complex by the varied ages and skill levels of the cast. There were some inevitable lapses in volume, clarity and pace which in the overall scheme of things didn't detract from the spirit of the performance. The backstage support given by stage manager Lauren Brown and assistant Maria Kostezky would have been vital to bringing it all together.

The pauper-to-prince story of Aladdin is well known but in this version we also had the addition of some random characters from other stories, plus some rap, the chicken dance, a skateboarding genie and some other odds and ends. Danielle Biksha's set added to the storybook feel. She used a divided flat stretching the width of the stage which could be opened up like a dollhouse door, revealing the larger space behind. Downstage of the flat was for Aladdin's house and other smaller street scenes and behind was the genie's cave and the sultan's palace. Lots of colour in the set dressing and costumes brought the palace scenes to life. The cave scene was enhanced by effective blue lighting and a convincingly large pile of glittery treasure.

The big cast of adults, teenagers and children worked well as a team, giving the less experienced the chance to work on their stagecraft alongside more mature performers. Lessons to be learned include facing the front when speaking, picking up cues promptly, S-L-O-W-I-N-G down delivery and articulating clearly, especially as the audience was young, noisy and mobile.

Steph Morrell did a lovely job as the narrator, Scheherazade, seated on a big cushion by the stage in the midst of her assistants. Steph's animated face and clearly projected voice put us right into the story-telling zone. Congratulations to her little helpers who did the all-important work of carrying the "boo" and "cheer" placards across the front and efficiently swinging the set open and shut for the scene changes. Kirsten Page played Aladdin with engaging swagger and confidence and interacted well with the young members of the audience. Keep the volume up; there was a tendency to drop the voice at the end of sentences.

Kyle Roberts brought a heap of energy and fun to the role of Aladdin's mother, the Widow Twankey. His projection was impeccable and his characterisation garnered lots of laughs. Marina Labib was a lovely Jasmine; she had a bit of attitude, used her face well and articulated clearly. Special praise for Jasmine's tiny attendant who stayed focused at all times. The evil Mustapha Wash (running gag: "Must-have-a-wash") was evilly played by Peter Sackett. Accompanied by

appropriate evil red lighting and an evil belly laugh, Peter was very funny and interacted well with the audience. Again, keep the voice up.

Travis Handcock portrayed the Genie with flair and a fun laidback attitude. He and his mini genie assistant, Xavier Brown, played off each other well and were a slick team on and off the skateboard. Their makeup and costumes were great. Amongst a host of other characters was Clare Molony as the Slave of the Lamp (impressive rapping!), the imperious Sultan played by Mazz Ryan, Aladdin's annoying sister, Wishy Washee, played by Bianca McMurray, (voice up!!) and a couple of hapless rent collectors, Wentworth and Bloggs, played by Alex McMurray and Keith Isaac (a few pace issues).

There were too many cast members to comment on every one but all are to be congratulated, as is Essendon Theatre Company, for presenting an enjoyable and engaging piece of theatre which encourages and celebrates community involvement for all ages.