

AMATEUR THEATRE REVIEW: *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* – Harlequin Players, Harlequin Theatre, Northwich

"Once upon a time that never was..."

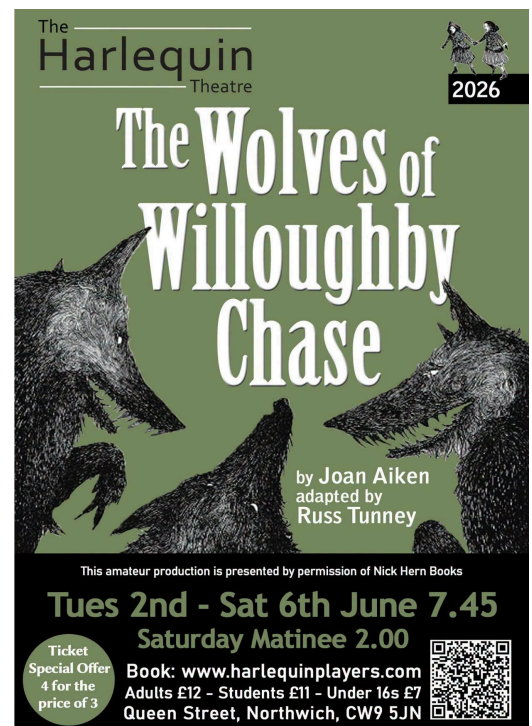
There is something wonderfully magical about theatre that invites an audience to step into a world where imagination reigns supreme. Russ Tunney's adaptation of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, based on Joan Aiken's beloved novel, does exactly that. Set in an alternative version of England where wolves roam the countryside and danger lurks around every corner, the story follows cousins Bonnie and Sylvia Green as they battle injustice, outwit villains and discover the true strength of friendship, courage and resilience.

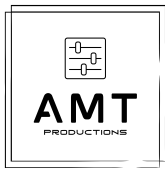
Originally adapted from Aiken's much-loved children's novel, Tunney's version embraces the possibilities of live theatre through narration, physical storytelling, puppetry and ensemble work. It is a play that balances gothic adventure, comedy and fairy-tale fantasy whilst never losing sight of its central themes of courage, loyalty and hope. Under the direction of Yvette Owen, Harlequin Players delivered a production that fully embraced that spirit, creating an evening that was imaginative, engaging and filled with theatrical creativity.

One of the greatest strengths of the production was Owen's clear and imaginative directorial vision. Every scene felt purposeful, every entrance and exit carefully considered, and every performer understood the role they played in creating the wider world of the story. Rather than allowing the chorus sections to become repetitive, Owen cleverly divided them between dedicated narrators and ensemble poetry, ensuring that every member of the company had meaningful opportunities to contribute to the storytelling.

What impressed most about Owen's direction was the clarity of her storytelling. In a production that features wolves, trains, sprawling country estates, children's homes and snowy landscapes, it would have been easy for the narrative to become confusing or cluttered. Instead, every creative choice felt purposeful and connected to a clear artistic vision. The physical theatre, narration, puppetry and ensemble work all served the story rather than distracting from it. Owen trusted both her performers and her audience's imagination, allowing theatrical creativity rather than elaborate spectacle to drive the production. It was a direction that felt confident, thoughtful and full of heart.

This approach worked particularly well through the performances of narrators Azalia Norton and Annabel Tickell. For a young performer, Azalia carried a significant responsibility, guiding the audience through the story whilst remaining fully connected to the action around her. She delivered her narration with clarity and confidence, giving weight and meaning to every line. Her puppetry work was equally impressive, helping bring the production's beautifully crafted geese to life.





Annabel Tickell, however, delivered one of the standout performances of the evening. There are certain performers who immediately command attention whenever they step onto a stage, and Annabel is undoubtedly one of them. Her narration was delivered with remarkable confidence, precision and maturity, demonstrating stagecraft well beyond her years. She understood how to control the rhythm of a scene, allowing important moments to breathe and ensuring the audience remained captivated by every word. Combined with excellent puppetry and an exceptional stage presence, she proved herself to be a young performer with an extremely bright future ahead.

The production's storytelling atmosphere was enhanced further through the recurring poetic narration, including the haunting phrase, "*In a land that never existed.*" These moments created a beautiful storybook quality that transported the audience into the dark, snowy world of Willoughby Chase. The line itself carries a fairy-tale quality that perfectly reflects the spirit of the play, suggesting a world where imagination and reality intertwine. Its repetition became one of the production's most memorable theatrical devices, helping to bind the story together from beginning to end.

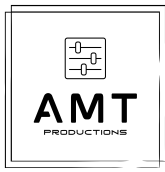
Visually, the production was exceptionally inventive. The use of a large white gauze across the stage was particularly effective, serving both as a projection surface and as a means of revealing entirely new performance spaces. Images of wolves, train tracks and Willoughby Chase itself helped establish location, whilst lighting behind the gauze transformed it into a window through which audiences could glimpse the interior of the house. It was a wonderfully creative use of the theatre space and demonstrated Owen's determination to utilise every available inch of the stage.

Perhaps the most inventive staging choice was the use of the performance space hidden behind the gauze. Through carefully placed lighting, audiences were suddenly able to glimpse the interior of Willoughby Chase beyond the projected imagery, creating an entirely separate playing area without the need for large scene changes. The effect felt almost magical at times and demonstrated a wonderfully creative understanding of how to maximise the theatre's space. It was one of those theatrical moments that reminded the audience how powerful simple ideas can be when executed well.

The staging itself was simple yet highly effective. A painted tree draped in white fabric instantly evoked a frozen landscape, whilst old suitcases, wicker baskets, wooden boxes and practical furniture created levels and variety throughout. The train sequences were especially impressive. Through carefully choreographed movement and the use of different stage levels, the cast convincingly created the illusion of a moving train carriage. The physical theatre work here was excellent, with performers swaying and shifting together to mimic the motion of travel, creating some of the production's most immersive moments.

The wolves themselves were another highlight. Physical theatre can often be difficult to execute convincingly, yet the cast fully committed to the movement style, creating creatures that genuinely felt threatening and alive. The wolf sequences helped establish the danger that hangs over the story from the very beginning and provided a constant reminder of the darker forces lurking beyond the safety of home.

Lighting by Adam Wade and Chris Pepper played a crucial role in establishing the atmosphere throughout. Rather than relying on complicated effects, the design used carefully placed spotlights



and subtle shifts in colour to create a world that felt mysterious, cold and often unsettling. The contrast between the projected imagery and the illuminated scenes behind the gauze was particularly effective, helping create multiple locations without interrupting the flow of the storytelling.

Sound design by Andrew Walker also deserves considerable praise. From the moment the audience entered the auditorium, eerie Tim Burton music established the tone of the evening. The use of wolf sound effects heightened tension throughout, whilst selections inspired by the haunting soundscapes associated with works such as *Edward Scissorhands*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Coraline* complemented the gothic fairy-tale atmosphere beautifully.

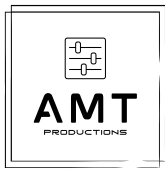
Costumes, designed by Yvette Owen and Pam Holland, were another triumph. The story is famously set in "a time that never was, in an England that never existed," and the costumes embraced this concept wonderfully by blending influences from different eras. Each character was clearly defined through costume, whilst the wolf masks were particularly striking. The attention to detail throughout was evident, and it is especially impressive to learn that many of the costumes were created by the director herself alongside her mother.

The props also played a vital role in creating the world of the production. The wolf heads and goose puppets, crafted by Pam Holland, were exceptional. The geese quickly became stars of the show in their own right. Beautifully crafted and expertly manipulated, they felt remarkably lifelike throughout. Puppetry can often succeed or fail based on the smallest details, yet these creations consistently convinced the audience, drawing smiles whenever they appeared. Alongside the impressive wolf heads, they demonstrated the enormous amount of skill, creativity and craftsmanship that had gone into every aspect of the production. Every prop, from lanterns and wicker baskets to washing boards and wooden carts, felt purposeful and contributed meaningfully to the storytelling.

Credit must also go to Stage Managers; Debbie Pearson and Becky Wollaston, whose work behind the scenes ensured the production ran smoothly. With multiple locations, puppets, props and costume elements constantly moving throughout the performance, their contribution helped maintain the pace and professionalism of the evening.

At the heart of the story are Bonnie and Sylvia Green, and both young performers carried the emotional core of the production with confidence. As Bonnie, Kitty Clarke-Oakes delivered a performance full of warmth, determination and emotional maturity. She captured Bonnie's natural leadership qualities whilst maintaining the kindness and dignity that make the character so easy to root for. Her facial expressions remained truthful throughout, allowing the audience to experience every challenge and triumph alongside her.

Annie Argent-Belcher was equally engaging as Sylvia. From her first appearance, she demonstrated confidence and sincerity, holding her own alongside more experienced performers throughout. Her performance was thoughtful and emotionally grounded, helping the audience invest fully in Sylvia's journey. Annie displayed excellent focus throughout and maintained strong characterisation from beginning to end.



George Robinson brought tremendous energy and charm to the role of James. Instantly likeable, he filled the stage with enthusiasm and personality whenever he appeared. His expressive reactions, particularly towards Letitia Slighcarp, often generated laughter and demonstrated excellent stage awareness. There was a natural confidence to his performance that suggests a bright future ahead.

Isaac Birkett stood out more in the second act as Simon the Goose Boy, who quickly became one of the audience's favourite characters. Isaac's portrayal was heartfelt, sincere and full of warmth. Simon's loyalty and kindness provide much of the story's emotional foundation, and Isaac captured these qualities beautifully. His performance felt honest and believable throughout, making Simon a character the audience genuinely cared about. It was also impressive to see him contributing to the wolf sequences earlier in the production, demonstrating strong versatility as a performer.

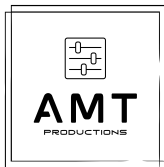
Of course, every great adventure needs memorable villains, and this production certainly delivered. Gwen Leadbetter embraced the role of Letitia Slighcarp with confidence and conviction, creating a villain who was immediately dislikeable. Her commanding stage presence and strong characterisation ensured she remained a constant threat throughout the story, whilst her facial expressions revealed layers of manipulation and cruelty beneath the surface.

Alongside her, Gabriele Di Potenza brought a strong sense of menace to Josiah Grimshaw. From his first appearance, he established himself as a character not to be trusted. His performance carried a persistent sense of unease, ensuring that even Grimshaw's friendlier moments felt suspicious. It was a convincing portrayal that contributed significantly to the darker atmosphere of the piece.

One of the evening's strongest performances came from Tina Wyatt as Gertrude Brisket. Some performances remain in your memory long after the final curtain, and this was undoubtedly one of them. Tina combined exceptional comic timing with wonderfully exaggerated characterisation to create a headmistress who was both hilarious and terrifying. Her command of dialect, expressive facial work and complete commitment to the role made every appearance a highlight. Particularly impressive was her ability to switch effortlessly between false respectability and outright cruelty, creating a fully realised and unforgettable character. It was an outstanding performance.

Another standout came from Serena Cowell as Dr Field. Serena delivered one of the most refined and believable performances of the evening. Every movement, reaction and line felt truthful and motivated, demonstrating the confidence that comes with experience. What impressed most was her ability to make the audience believe completely in the world around her, even when that world existed only through imagination. Her portrayal was subtle, natural and deeply effective, serving as a wonderful example of understated acting at its finest. As an experienced performer, writer and director, her understanding of storytelling was evident throughout, strengthening every scene in which she appeared.

Among the supporting cast, Adrian Grace brought warmth and sincerity to Sir Willoughby Green and later the Inspector, providing a welcome contrast to the story's villains. Becky Wollaston contributed strongly both as Aunt Jane and within the narration, bringing warmth and commitment to every scene. There was also something particularly lovely about seeing Becky share the stage with her daughter, a reminder of the unique way community theatre brings generations together.



Rosie Birkett gave a confident performance as Mrs Gripe, establishing the character's authority and importance within the narrative, whilst John Booth brought genuine warmth and kindness to both the Train Guard and Mr Wilderness. His performances were grounded in sincerity, making his characters instantly trustworthy and likeable.

Poppy Wishart-Terry impressed as Emma and within the ensemble, bringing innocence, focus and confidence to her performance. Her solo moments were handled with assurance, whilst her work within the physical theatre sequences demonstrated versatility and commitment.

The ensemble contributions from Jackson Birkett and Rosie Wollaston were equally valuable. Both performers played important roles in creating the atmosphere and storytelling of the production. Jackson's work within the wolf sequences helped establish the darker tone of the play, whilst Rosie brought authenticity and emotional truth to the children's home scenes. Both demonstrated strong ensemble awareness and contributed significantly to the success of the production.

Throughout the production, the wolves themselves became more than simply physical creatures. They represented fear, danger and the darker forces threatening Bonnie and Sylvia's world. Their constant presence reminded us of the obstacles the young heroes faced, both real and symbolic. This made the line, "*There were no wolves to be seen on this journey,*" particularly poignant. The disappearance of the wolves symbolised the defeat of evil, the restoration of hope and the promise that brighter days lay ahead.

What made this production particularly special, however, was its sense of community. Harlequin Theatre continues to provide opportunities for performers of all ages to develop their skills, gain confidence and create lasting memories. Watching adults and children sharing the stage together served as a wonderful reminder of the importance of community theatre and the positive impact it can have on people's lives.

Looking across the stage, it was impossible not to reflect on the memories being created. Some performers were taking their first steps into theatre, whilst others brought years of experience and knowledge. Yet throughout the evening, there was a clear sense of collaboration and mutual support. Community theatre provides far more than entertainment; it builds confidence, develops communication skills, encourages creativity and creates friendships that often last a lifetime. Watching adults and young performers sharing the stage together served as a powerful reminder of the positive impact organisations like Harlequin Theatre continue to have within their community.

As Harlequin Theatre closes one successful production and looks ahead to the next, the company is currently seeking directors for future productions. With an intimate and versatile performance space, a thriving creative community and a proud eighty-year history of producing ambitious and varied theatre, it offers exciting opportunities for both experienced directors and those looking to take the next step in their creative journey. If you are interested in becoming part of the Harlequin family, they would be delighted to hear from you, harlequin.theatrechair@gmail.com.

The production closed with the hauntingly beautiful line, "*The sleepers dream and the dreamers sleep and all is still and silent,*" a fitting reminder that although the adventure had ended, the magic of the story would continue long after the curtain call. Throughout the evening, Harlequin Players

