

Society : Panda Players
Production : Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
Date : 20 March 2026
Venue : The Elgiva Theatre, Chesham
District : 11 S

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Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to see your 2026 production, the drink and the warm welcome I received from Pam Peel and your excellent front of house team.

This was a big show to undertake – if for no other reason than to take on a much loved story which is best known in its film version, and present it on the Elgiva stage will always present problems, if for no other reason than the fact that it is much easier to create the vital special effects on film than on a stage, especially where there are no heavy duty flying effects. Everyone involved did a sterling job with this, but it does, inevitably, present problems for all the techie crew not to mention your Director, Amber Dye. I suspect that the need to hire the flying car took up a fair amount of your show budget too, didn't it? Did you consider using a cyclorama cloth with projections/lighting effects for the floating/flying car? I was uncertain about the initial positioning of Chitty on stage as the audience could clearly see a rod which would elevate the car when the time came!

Amber directed and choreographed the show. I was very puzzled by the twirling lady with a lampshade on her head but it was only later that I realised that she represented the filagree nursery music box in the number *Hushaby Mountain*. I really liked the ingenuity of the toy shop with its hidden spaces under the floor and also by the good use of the pit by the two Vulgarian spies.

A small point, but I think that Truly's motorbike was later in period than 1910, when the show is set. Obviously, a real period machine is not easy to come by but did you think of just pushing the front wheel on a little and leaving the rest in the wings? Caractacus, when diagnosing the problem with the motor, could then have exited and come back on, perhaps with an oily rag? Just a thought.

MD Lou Marron and her eight strong band worked hard; however, at times both principals and ensemble seemed out of synch with their musical cues, but hopefully that was just a communication glitch the night I was there. The standard of the singing, both principals and chorus, was fine, by the way, and showed the dedication of all concerned.

Your SM, Lauren Robson, and the crew worked hard to set the various scenes which presented well and the set, built in house by Jeremy Meeson and David Winney, said all that needed to be said about the various venues depicted on stage. Particularly impressive was the hired car of course but the Baron's birthday scene with the revolving music box with Truly Scrumptious was particularly effective.

It was unfortunate that both Sound (Roger Knight and William Allen) and lighting (Ben Terry) were unable to create the illusion that the car was first floating on the sea and then flying. Was this just down to the cost element? Lighting effects could have been used to give the illusion of the waves with SFX enhancement; projecting moving clouds onto the cyclorama, instead of using the star cloth, might have worked better, especially as the dialogue indicated that it was daylight and not night.

Walking clouds in front of the car just was not the same and provoked giggles from the audience on Thursday night.

Had you used projection, of course, it would have been easier to present the audience with the illusion that the car was moving instead of using cast walking backwards as, from where I was sitting, the angles looked odd.

Properties, Christine Evans, Nikky Meeson and Kristian Price, were good but I would have liked to see a few more toys in the toy shop. Presumably time to set them was a factor? I assume the children's beds were hired so it was only when they arrived that it was discovered just how small they were! However, surely Jeremy and Jemima should have tried to lie down and not fall asleep sitting up?

Costumes, as is usually the case with Panda Players, were very good and appropriate – Trish Lewis, Alison Ruffell and Marion Raeburn-James did a sterling job here.

The four strong make-up team, Olivia Dale, Kitti Hamberger, Nikky Meeson and Esther Dendy, enhanced the cast's characters well. I assume you were also responsible for the wigs, which were very good?

Your programme was very well designed as usual and I hope you will enter it for the 2026 programme awards.

Both the adult and child ensembles were excellent; many of you had small named roles too which were well sung and acted. Characterisations were all very good.

In the role of inventor Caractacus Potts, Matt Winter sang and performed well in all respects. Your floppy clown was especially effective. More visible excitement when Chitty flew would have been a nice touch.

Nara Clapperton's delightful singing voice and acting skills brought the role of Truly Scrumptious to life and your puppet doll was superb. You could have turned round to join the children's wonder at the flying/floating car's antics too.

The two Potts children, Jeremy (Avnell Agarwal) and Jemima (Florence Spencer) performed very well; you both reacted to the magical car's abilities. You also impressed me with your attention and reaction to the unfolding storyline; very well done both of you.

David Lewis's excentric Grandpa Potts was well played but I think you were unsure of some of your vocals at times, weren't you? I may be wrong, in which case I apologise, but I thought I saw you taking your lines from your MD once or twice!

Baron and Baroness Bombast – Barry Dell and Marion Raeburn-James respectively – were really excellent; you both had a very good sense of comedy timing too and your accents were pitched just right.– I was a little surprised that your big number *Chu-Chi Face* did not feature a few more murderous attacks but may be that is only in the film version? An empty bottle or vase or even a knotted cord held ready to strike, quickly hidden as your potential victim turned round?

The Toymaker, extremely well portrayed by Trish Lewis, was a delight. A really excellent performance Trish. Your costume was particularly good and you acted the role out, using telling facial expressions and you conveyed your worry that the children might be found very well.

The Childcatcher was very menacing as she crept around the stage. Emma Lancia really put her all into this small, but very vital, role and your performance added such a lot to the production.

David Mundy made the most of the part of Lord Scrumptious and was suitably brusque and dismissive.

The two Spies, Goran and Boris, (Alison Ruffell and Dave Evan-Watkins respectively) added a vital element of bumbling comedy. You never overplayed it either – these are almost pantomime comedy baddies but you pitched it well. Your number *Act English* was one of the highlights of the show.

This was a very entertaining evening and I am sure that this was not the easiest show to perform in The Elgiva. Congratulations on tackling the technical complexities as well as you did. There was a recent touring production of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and I understand that they may have had some techie hiccups too. This is inevitable of course with a production which has to match the reality of a stage show with the expectations of the audience and the advantages of cinematic magic.

I wish you success with your forthcoming events, both on the social and performance fronts.

Judith

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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY:

Regional Celebration Day Sunday 14 June 2026 (*full details available in due course*)
NODA National AGM & Presidential Gala 18-20 September 2026 - (*full details to be announced*)