

WINDLESHAM DRAMA GROUP

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Windlesham Drama Group visit to Sucey - en - Brie, Week-end 15th/17th September 2006

33 members and friends of Windlesham Drama Group embarked on their 3rd visit to Sucey - en - Brie between 15th and 17th September, as guests of Les Baladins du Val de Marne. We had previously taken and performed two light hearted, typically English plays ('Close to the Wind' by Richard Everett and 'Wild Goose Chase' by Derek Benfield) so this time, it was decided that we should introduce our French friends to pantomime. Having successfully put on "Cinderella" at Windlesham Club and Theatre in January, we agreed to adapt this for Sucey. It may seem unusual to put on pantomime in the early autumn instead of at Christmas time but the ball at the Royal Palace soon became a Halloween Ball and at least the pumpkin for Cinderella's coach was fresh and not plastic.

We loaded a hire van with props, costumes and scenery on the afternoon of Thursday the 14th ready for two 'volunteers' to set off for Dover and the evening ferry across the channel. They stayed overnight in a hotel just off the autoroute at Bethune. This meant that the journey down to Sucey could be accomplished on Friday morning, without getting caught up in the usual week-end traffic from Charles de Gaulle Airport and around Paris.

The rest of the party took the 1040 Eurostar to Paris and were due to arrive at Sucey by 4pm.

As it happened, the van arrived at the Centre Culturel just after 1 o'clock and by the time the train arrived, it had already been unloaded and all the costumes were on hangers in the changing rooms.

The majority of us were hosted by French families but because of the size of our party, it was necessary for some to stay in a local hotel and join the rest of the group for meals with our hosts. The children in our group were invited to have their meals with French families with children of a similar age.

Everyone had time to relax and refresh themselves before a 6 o'clock reception and introduction at the Centre. This gave those who had been before a moment to greet old friends, and for those on their first visit an opportunity to make new ones. We then split into smaller groups for supper with our host families.

Various activities were arranged for the Saturday morning for those not involved in constructing the scenery. These ranged from cycling in the grounds of the old chateau, to a gentle browse round the Saturday morning market, or for the more avid shoppers, a trip to the nearby Creteil shopping mall.

Lunch was provided at the Centre Culturel, which turned out to be a veritable banquet, including of course the famous Brie cheese, which it has to be said was far nicer than any brie we can buy here in England.

After a few hours free, Saturday afternoon we got down to the serious business and rehearsed for the evening show.

The history, traditions and vagaries of English pantomime had been sent on ahead and were translated into French by one of Les Baladins, so by the time they came on stage, no one was surprised by boys dressed as girls and vice versa and the near capacity audience were quite fluent in "Oh yes it is! Oh no it isn't! Etc.." Our mole had also identified those in the audience who merited 'special treatment' in the time honoured tradition of pantomime.

Performing on a small stage with a cast of 20 was not easy, particularly with so little time to adjust. Nevertheless, judging by the comments received, the show was a great success and was thoroughly enjoyed by cast and audience alike.

When Prince Charming performed his (her) final number in French, we thought the applause would never stop.

After the show we were treated to a further delightful meal, this time provided by the local council of Sucy en Brie, before returning to our host families tired but very pleased with the success of the evening.

There is one Sunday every year when Sucy - en - Brie cuts itself off from the outside world. Roads into and out of the town centre are closed and the whole town is taken over by an enormous antiques market. Our invitation to visit had been designed to coincide with this quite spectacular event. We just had time that morning to browse the market and sample the local produce before we returned to the hall to pack up everything for our return trip.

Lunch was again provided for those who could manage to eat any more before we said our farewells at Sucy - Bonneuil station. This time Eurostar had the edge and crept silently into London Waterloo at 7.40pm whereas the van finally chugged into Windlesham just after 11.30pm.

Since these exchanges started in 2001, personal friendships have developed and on this occasion, because with the pantomime, we were able to include some of our younger members, new friendships have begun between youngsters sharing a common interest.

One of the difficulties in arranging exchanges of this nature is in the selection of suitable material to perform which will be both interesting to our local audience and at the same time enjoyed by those who aren't necessarily fluent in the language. On this occasion, pantomime was an ideal choice for us because the spectacle of the costumes, the music and dancing together with the antics of the various characters, not to mention the slapstick, could be enjoyed regardless of the dialogue.

Les Baladins are currently performing "Uncle Vania" by Chekov. In any language, this is a serious and challenging piece which explores relationships and inner feelings of the various characters. It is demanding in itself for the actors to perform, but without us fully understanding the dialogue we would be unlikely to do it justice. Although some of our group are going back to Sucy to see it, it is probably not suitable for them to bring to England.

Les Baladins were so welcoming and so generous in their reception; we can't wait to invite them back to Surrey Heath and hopefully we can return their hospitality either late 2007 or early 2008.