

# Live theatre review

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The actors and director of The " Woman In Black" had complete power and control over the audience's reactions and emotions.

For our Drama GCSE we went to see " The Woman in Black", on Monday 1st December 2003. The play was showing at the Fourtune theatre and was based on a book by Susan Hill; which was adapted by Stephen Mallatratt.

The " Woman In Black" is about a middle aged solicitor called Arthur Kipps, who years earlier had lost an infant son following some eerie incidents in an English town. In hopes of getting rid of his personal demons and ghosts, he approaches a young actor to turn his written account into a theatre piece (re-enactment.) It shows all of the happenings with a recently deceased woman called Alice Drableau and her remote, mysterious house.

The play explores the issues of the supernatural and things beyond the human world, such as ghosts and things that are invisible to the human eye; created by mime and the actors and audience's imagination. I think that the play and the actors explored these issues very well, but I am not sure if they were explored in a believable way. I thought that the first half of the play was quite slow, tedious, and we weren't drawn in so there wasn't any control over us whilst watching it. However, when the play reached the second half the pace started to pick up, and tension was created, which drew us in and gave the actors control over our reactions. It was remarkable how far people in the audience were willing to go with their imaginations. They seemed to be really involved with the performance; I think that to a certain extent we all were.

The play was structured with flashbacks and crosscutting which gave us a more in depth understanding of what had happened in the past to effect the future. The actors took us on a journey with them in whichever time they were in. We knew what time they were in, as the actors clicked their fingers towards the lighting technician each time. At first it didn't seem to be part of the performance, later on when it occurred again it was clear that this was a repeated action and was necessary to the play. When actually thinking about it they were actors, acting as though they were acting a re-enactment.

Quite confusing I thought. The lights changed from being bright when in the present, to being dim; and almost seemed like sepia tones to give that more ancient feel when in the past. I don't think that this was done as well or creative as it could have been. The clicking to me just seemed odd and something that didn't belong in the play, even though I can understand what they were trying to do. The lighting technician brought us back to reality and removed us from the performance; it drew us back out from the tense gripping story. The tension that was built up before these points suddenly dropped and then tension tried to build up again after that point. The actual changes between times eras was very fast, it was almost like there was a sudden change in tempo for that split second.

The structure of the stage also affected the amount of space used by the characters. In the first half of the play we only saw half of the stage. The basic layout of it was rather boring. There wasn't much space for anything and the layout just wasn't interesting or eye-catching at all. As the play moved into the second half, the other part of the stage was revealed to us. It

was an exciting change that spiced things up a bit. They suddenly had so much more space to work with.

The "Woman in Black" has two main characters. Arthur Kipps played by Paul Stewart and the young actor who is actor Matt Holland. There was also the shadowed "Woman in Black" (Who is Alice Drableau the deceased,) although she didn't have a huge role in the play. The two main actors portrayed many characters, with the usage of costume and their vocal techniques and tones of voices. I thought that they portrayed the different characters quite well but it definitely wasn't believable for me personally. The actors changed costume in front of us (the audience), which once again drew us away from the drama. In my eyes. Once again, I realise that this was part of the piece, and if you think of it as an actual play, it was a great technique to use. I just found it rather off putting when I was actually getting into the drama; I realised that we weren't seeing the story, we were seeing people tell us and re-enact the story.

Some of the two men's movements were very interesting and engaged us in the performance. Mr Kipps didn't really use much movement when narrating. On the other hand when he took on the role of other characters and the young actor played a younger version of Mr Kipps, they used movement to the best of their ability. An example would be a simple motion of a horse and cart. The two characters mimed this very well in a believable way, showing how they would be when on a real horse. A great bit of movement that I found really effective, was when they pretended to be on a train. The actors were really aware of the space and objects around them. For example they

used 2 briefcases as doors and a couple of chairs as seats, when walking through the imaginary train and we could tell instantly what it was. One of the men walked sideways along to show the compact space on a train, the two men also sat diagonal from each other which gave us the impression that there could have been more people on the train.

The woman in black definitely had the ultimate power over the other characters reactions, and over us. She moved silently in and out drifting along in an almost Godley fashion and She made it look as though the dark stage was her shadowed sky; she was swooping down and scaring the prey. We were the prey, and we were shocked, in fact some people did let their emotions get the better of them. She wore pinnacled headgear, under a black veil. The black costume seemed as though it was to symbolise death and possibly evil.

I would say that the actors had partial control over the audience and controlled the tension and atmosphere. The blackouts and lighting also helped create the woman in black's fast movement on the rocking chair; she was furious, focused and very creepy in a psychotic sort of way. This drew us in further. A rocking chair normally moves slowly and contains a nice old person maybe knitting. It came as a huge shock when this happened, because it was such a huge contrast. There were two moments where there was a huge amount of control on the audience. The young actor approached a door this was concealed before and as it is now in light we are intrigued to know what is behind it. There was a lot of tension at this point and the use of

pauses made the intense slow hand movements towards the door quite nerve-wracking. It was surprising how much this affected people.

A great moment of tension which created a really strong atmosphere was when the young actor who was pretending to be Mr Kipps was sleeping. There was a long empty silence and a complete blackout. This was a moment that was really tense, we the audience were also in a total blackout, so they were putting us in the same situation. We were under control, as we couldn't see anything, so we didn't really know what was going on or what was going to happen. We were really involved. The actor also used a torch in the audience, whilst the whole room was black. The light was shone all around the audience, kind of like a spotlight. This whole moment, reminds me of childhood and being scared of the dark.

Set, lighting, props and special effects I feel were all necessary to create a real sense of atmosphere. There were quite a few sound effects, to try and make the play seem as real as possible. Not only that, but some of the sound effects seemed to be symbolic. The sound of crows at the Graveyard, I'm sure this is a bad omen, death and a sign of evil. The sound of a rocking chair, which sounded like a heartbeat racing, to build tension and suspense. A double use. A music box in the Childs room, so innocent, yet the music seemed quite creepy when in the dark. Lots of them seemed to symbolise childhood, the innocence, and good. Because we knew what was going on and it was dark and tense, that goodness seemed almost possessed by evil.

I thought that the sets were great and were concealed very well behind the gauze. It helped them to change the environment and setting quite efficiently

without us knowing. From a graveyard which was furniture covered in white sheets maybe to symbolise ghosts, or when a person is dead them being covered in a sheet to be concealed. A sense of age and death. We saw the old house, which was covered in sheets again, kind of like an old house that hasn't been lived in for years, derelict. They created long stairs for the characters to run up and down, that for me seemed to create a gradual build to something. There must have been something at the top of the stairs. Also a child's room. A sweet little room, distorted from the innocence of it as soon as the woman in black steps in it.

The play ended at a climactic cliff-hanger and it was gradually built up to a high point of tension. I personally didn't find it a fear-provoking piece of drama although I know others did, and I can understand how it happened. People were sucked into the drama and its world and certain things didn't remove them from it. I felt that all of the clicking and the people in the audience screaming just distracted me too much for me to actually enjoy it. I thought that they made a great effort with only two actors, it must have been a lot of hard work, and it used lots of great techniques. They definitely used role play a lot, when becoming different characters and acting out their situations. Marking the moment, using sound and light to emphasis something, such as the immensely tense movement towards the door; will he open it won't he? Clear usage of crosscutting to show us different times they also used different lighting to show this. Narration, this kept informing us of what was going on, Mr Kipps was telling us the story.

I think that the playwright wrote the play to make the audience think about death, how it is a time of isolation. Maybe to make us remember a time when we were scared, something that everyone can relate to. Fear. I think he also wanted to tell a story that would excite people and to bring the typical ghost story to the 21st century.

People enjoy being scared because they get to use their imagination. Most of the play just really reminded me of childhood memories, something that everyone in the audience could relate to. Being scared of the darkness, that children's room with the music coming from a doll, the excitement of discovering something, bag loads of curiosity. This was why we felt so involved, small parts of the play would have related to us as the audience. We all know it is safe environment/ atmosphere, and that the play isn't real life, but there is still that sense of danger. The thrill of not knowing something. The idea that we have all been scared in our lives, something that we can relate to. The thing is that I thought most things were just too predictable. We knew something was going to happen, we could kind of guess what would happen; we just didn't know when it would happen.