

# Bristol old vic theatre school



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We have been studying Maria Marten two terms before this performance, so we all knew the play inside out. What we were expecting to see was an eccentric Victorian melodrama with all its over-the-top exaggerated clichés and all the stereotypical characters (villain, hero, heroine etc), and in addition, some pantomime style songs to compliment and break up the scenes. My initial thoughts of the stage and auditorium were of its size. It was a quaint theatre with no reserved seating.

The theatre was a typical black box studio theatre with no fly space. To create an illusion of a traditional Victorian theatre they had built a small proscenium arch stage with a thrust. This can be seen in the sketch on the last page of the review. The set was not a naturalistic one, in that painted backdrops were used with minimal furniture in front of the set panels.

Gauzes were also used to indicate a dream scene, or a ghostly presence, and sliding wooden structures were used to suggest a variety of settings. The most striking scene to me was Maria's death sequence. This was made as over the top and as funny as possible to bring out all the possible humour for the scene in true melodramatic fashion! This was in complete contrast to our production, as we made Nell's death the most comic, and Maria's was the more serious and dramatic. A trap door was used for the grave and the balconies were used to host two angels dressed in white with gold tinsel halos who sung a 'Halleluiah' farewell to Maria. Meanwhile Maria's spirit, in the form of a cardboard cut out of her body dressed identically to the angels, with a photograph stuck on as the face. This whole scene was extremely funny because it was just so outrageous and absurd! To top off the spectacle, clouds were flown in, representing heaven and the like.

Zella and here father Ishmael were seen singing (behind the gauze) with the ‘angel’ figures whilst Maria’s spirit was winched to the heavens! The audience’s reaction to this fiasco was hysteria, as laughter was clearly produced in vast quantities! The scene however was slightly ‘over-done’, but it had the desired effect on the audience and made a smashing end to act one. The lighting was extremely stylised and was similar to pantomime lighting. There was a lot of contrast used in the colours, with somewhat gaudy combinations, e. g. orange and green, which were particularly used in Corder’s, (who incidentally was played by Niall McGregor), scenes.

The lighting suggested time very bluntly. Night-lights were inky blues, and a star cloth was used behind gauzes, which was seen twinkling hypnotically. In Pharos Lee’s first scene with his fellow North American Indians, a fire is seen crackling. Lighting effects were used to create atmosphere within the scenes. The Gypsies were seen holding torches with a simple bulb and ‘flaming’ fabric. These added to the set.

Gobos were used to create scenery, e. g. trees, which were seen in various shades of green projected as backdrops of many woodland scenes with Tim. These gobos gave texture to the scenes and the actor’s face if he/she walked through the light. Lighting direction was particularly used in Corder’s scenes.

Footlights were used personally, but not often, and probably not enough in fairness. Filters were used across the stage, giving different profiles to characters, as they moved about on stage. This added to the stylised performance. There were also two lamps above the doors at each end of the proscenium arch structure, and they were used to suggest Victorian street

lamps. The lighting complimented the set and the rest of the production in such a way that everything blended, stylishly together. The sound used in the play was very typical to the melodramatic style of the performance.

Themes were used for each stereotypical character in the play, and were to introduce a new character to the audience or underscore a monologue.

Thunderclaps were made live on stage, by using a sheet of metal that was flown in and rattled by an actor, stage right. There was also a wooden box filled with dried peas that was used as a live sound effect to create the noise of pattering rain, and the downpour of rain intensified the more vigorously the box was shaken. There was also a wind machine used, which was a continuous whistling sound made by an old fan from backstage in the wings. The main characters were fitted with microphone headpieces, which were used to enhance their voices over dramatic sound effects.

Also, when Zella was acting from her balcony, panning effects and delay were used on her voice to create an eerie and ghostly presence, which haunted Corder. All accompaniment music and themes were pre-recorded. Some of the music used, in particular the gospel style music, in Maria's death scene, enhanced the action on stage. (Maria was played by Jennifer Biddal). Sound effects were used to compliment the performance and characterisations. Effects that added to the atmosphere were things such as the bird song heard in a country scene, and a noise of the hustle and bustle of market trade in the Victorian townhouse.

The birds were sounded too present and were not at all realistic, but the city commotion was effective and gave a greater effect to the scene. The

costumes in the play were fantastic. They were all generally speaking, naturalistic Victorian dress, although there were a few exceptions. Lucy wore an extravagant black dress with gold applique detail that shimmered very eye-catchingly, made from an opulent fabric. The country folk were seen in traditional working dress, although it was a little too 'perfect' for their status.

Nevertheless, they all wore gaiters, which tied in well with the period setting. Both Ishmael and Zella had very exotic and detailed costumes. They both were from Jewish families, and carried all their wealth with them in the form of jewels and gold. Zella wore heavy gold bracelets and lots of charms, whereas Ishmael wore many earrings. The North American Indians were somewhat too fantastical, and did not fit too well with the rest of the play, although they did add a comic touch to it all! In the scene of mourning, due to lack of time for a costume change, the ladies wore black shawls and the men wore black jackets to signal that the whole town was in mourning for Maria's death. There was also black crepe on the door to reinforce this point.

One of my favourite scenes in the play was Maria's death sequence. The reason as to why it was so striking is because it was just so funny! The director (Christopher Denys) had obviously thought of every possible thing that had any potential humour and exploited it completely. The scene begins with Maria walking on stage dressed in make attire. Corder, who has been previously seen miming to dig a grave, robustly takes Maria by the arm and hauls Maria to the grave, which is indicated by a hole in the stage, which is created by a trap door. From then, Corder viciously says to Maria that she should prepare for death, and Maria becomes shocked and

with a sudden move, pulls away from him, and resorts to fighting for her life. They both struggle in slow motion, in a manner not far away from a silent movie, until Maria falls dramatically over, and topples backwards into the open grave, and plummets to her death.

Meanwhile Corder draws a pistol from his pocket and shoots Maria.

Immediately, there is a lighting change, and the spirits of Zella and Ishmael are seen behind a gauze, and on the balconies, are two ‘angel’ figures dressed in pure white, with gold tinsel halos, and they all begin to sing. Then clouds are flown in and from the grave appears Maria in the form of a cardboard cut-out, dressed identically to the angels, with a photograph of her face stuck on. This entire piece is particularly funny because it is just complete chaos as one thing happens after another, building a massive crescendo until the curtains are dropped. Another reason why I like this scene is because it is performed in a modern way, but in the style of Melodrama, and is done so very successfully indeed.

A second scene that stood out was the London rooftop scene, in which simple puppets of Hawkshaw, (played by Ian Bonar) and Pharos Lee, (Steven Miller) were seen chasing William Corder, which had been carefully sculpted into comical and miniature caricatures of the characters were seen chasing after one another on a skyline silhouette of London in moonlight. The lights were only those of the streetlamps in the minute set, but they were very effective as everybody’s eyes followed the characters. The scene was very carefully flown straight into another, and it produced an impressive and roaring reaction from the audience, and was thoroughly effective and was very entertaining to watch. I thought the play was very enjoyable to watch and

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directed magnificently. The best thing about the play, in my opinion, were the songs as they really made the play what it was and gelled everything together, creating a proper Victorian Melodrama.

It was a pleasure to see.