

THE HAUNTING

By Hugh Janes

IES Warehouse theatre 12/9/14

THE PLAY

The Haunting is a relatively recent play by Hugh Janes, an actor who transferred his skills to writing plays, covering such diverse as adaptations of Wagner and Jeffrey Archer. The play is based (somewhat tenuously) on some of the stories of Charles Dickens- I saw the preview several years ago, after which it transferred to Windsor and henceforth was performed world-wide. The latest performance is I believe in Northern Canada!

The play is basically a two-hander, the genre and scenario being similar to 'The Woman in Black', however, this piece is simpler, and the ghost is not as malevolent! The plot is driven by retrospection and exposition by the dual protagonists.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

The eerie atmosphere was provided immediately. The lights were muted and we heard signs of an approaching storm. Furniture covered with dust-sheets is always visually intriguing; anonymous, but we always speculate about what they conceal; a metaphor for the play? The set of the study was asymmetrical, providing an intriguing and slightly out of kilter acting space. Shelves were laden with the books, panelled walls and the furniture all seemed solid and redolent of the era. Some books, however, were clearly post 1865!

Lighting was deceptively simple. Practical candles, which can be a little risky, worked well enhancing the ambience; these were backed up with subtle stage lighting. There were a few times, though, when it was a little too muted for us to see the action properly, and some of the nuanced acting was lost.

Stage management was smooth. The books flying off the shelf, and the sudden appearance of the ghost were real surprises, and beautifully engineered. Continuity was good.

The sound greatly added to the atmosphere. There were two very well crafted soundscapes to accompany the Light Brigade report and the re-telling of Twitchen's story, which drew an audience into a place where simple story telling doesn't go. There was an otherworldly sound effect on the utterances of the ghost, too. Some of the sudden surprise effects could have been louder, though; so that they startle the audience as well as the cast.

The costume for the two main characters was appropriate, and the Miss Havisham wedding dress for the ghost was detailed and well realised.

Direction

There were some serious challenges for the director here. A full length play with a cast of two; some inconsistencies in the script, and much of the dialogue was reporting and exposition. The play was well cast, so an audience is fully aware of the contrast between the two main characters; David being young imaginative and excitable, compared with Gray's stolid cynicism. Their relationship was rather static and formal at the beginning of the play, but as it progressed, became more fluid. The movements and blocking also reflected this contrast; David pacing nervously, and Gray more or less static, clearly taking ownership of his space. As negotiation between them gathered momentum and the temperature rises, both characters become more animated. I felt the space could have been used a little more effectively during these sequences- they tended to speak facing each other across the stage a little too often. However, you co-ordinated the story-telling monologues very well, as the stories were being told to the audience rather than to each other. The soundscape was especially important in these sequences. The appearances of the ghost were beautifully handled - there were spine tingling moments when she seemed to appear from nowhere! This was very clever co-ordination. A play like this is often advertised as a horror story. This wasn't, it was a ghost story. You recognised this, as you made the play intriguing rather than terrifying, and surprising rather than shocking. There were textual inconsistencies; David's apparent inability to recognise his own sister, Gray's change of mood at the start of Act 1 Scene 3 and the rather clunky and illogical flashback at the end. These appeared as anomalies when I read the script;

however these were mitigated by the direction, apart from the final sequence. It's clever to leave an audience guessing, but this end left us dangling; was David hallucinating? Dreaming? Or a ghost from the future? David would have been in his mid teens had he been in this scene!

ACTING

The actors clearly invested well in their roles, and were aware of character traits, and the types they represented, although from the text they were there to serve the plot rather than being fully rounded characters. Again, this was a limitation of the script. The actors were aware of the contrast between them, and it was clear that you as director had paid attention to detail and were successful in making them more three dimensional.

Chris Williamson - David

At first, I was worried that you were acting this character rather too nervously, and were too subservient to the patriarch Lord Gray. However you translated David's deference to concern as events unfolded, and your reactions to the phenomena were finely nuanced and added to the tension. I felt that on a few occasions, especially earlier on, you spoke a little too quickly and some words were lost. This was understandable, as you were doing a very good job of portraying the character's excitability. I liked the way David eventually stood up to Lord Gray in Act 1 Scene 3, and also your telling of Twitchen's story. The soundscape helped, but I felt you were telling your story not only to Gray, but also to a rapt audience.

Dave Goodall - Lord Gray

Earlier on, you presented your character as being stolid, pompous and not prepared to suffer fools gladly; you were abrupt and rather rude to David on first acquaintance. You used the space and disdainful expressions and gestures that contrasted very well with the nervy and deferential David. You looked as if you owned the space, and your delivery of your lines was measured and laconic. You used the sub-Wildean put-downs well to further embarrass the

unfortunate David. You showed your anger with him later, when you felt he was duping your character, and built up the temperature nicely. As the play develops, Gray becomes guardedly intrigued by the events, and if I'm going to be hypercritical you might have signalled your change and reaction to the strange events a little more demonstratively to the audience. The story you tell of the Light Brigade, enhanced by the soundscape was atmospheric and pitched well. I also liked the cameo of the elder Lord Gray as we go back in time at the end of the play- this was more of a caricature, but the last line was pregnant with meaning 'She'll be safe enough in our hands, I assure you!' She was anything but!

Scarlett Wells - Mary

Scarlett, as Mary you were a very dramatic presence onstage. Your expressions and movements were stylised and spooky - facial expression appropriately blank. I still cannot work out how you made your entrances and exits! Your contribution was limited by the script; however you performed a very convincing cameo of a vulnerable innocent victim. Well done!

This was a very good production of a play that presents challenges to its presentation. The effectiveness of good teamwork was abundantly obvious, and the cast clearly enjoyed the performance, and those challenges were addressed- you all showed a healthy respect and understanding of this genre.

Well done and thank you!

Dave Walsham

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