

# The Dragon scares up 'The Woman in Black'

By Joanne Engelhardt

For The Daily News

Many theatergoers know that Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap" is the longest-running non-musical play in the history of London's West End.

Now -- quick! -- what's the second longest-running non-musical play? Anyone? Anyone?

The answer is a 1987 play called "The Woman in Black," still running in the West End and now on stage through Nov. 2 at The Dragon Theatre in Redwood City. Billed as a ghost story, it is based on the book by the same name written by Susan Hill in 1983.

Only two actors perform all of the play's various roles, save for a few quick glimpses here and there, high and low, in silhouette and in the flesh, of the mysterious "Woman in Black."

Fortunately, those two actors, Kevin Kirby as solicitor Arthur Kipps and Tasi Alabastro as the Actor, are both superb. While Alabastro makes use of a series of complete costume and hair changes, as well as remarkable facial and verbal tics, yet it's Kirby who is more fascinating to watch during the two-hour production.

Unlike the book, Stephen Mallatratt's adaptation uses the device of a "play within a play." A traumatized Alabastro approaches Kirby with his self-penned manuscript which, he says, he wants to read to his family and friends, to warn them not to follow his example. But after only two sentences, the worldly Kipps (Kirby) reprimands him that his audience will soon "expire of boredom" due to Alabastro's delivery. "Performing is an art that requires tears and time," he chides.

Soon Kipps takes over reading the story, slashing whole sections and giving it the actor's artistic arsenal of enunciation, emphasis, pauses and grimaces. From that time on, Kipps acts out the character who experiences the stressful ordeal and The Actor (Alabastro) performs a wide assortment of roles ranging from a landowner, a pony-and-trap driver,

and various local villagers.

Sometimes it's not easy to follow this rather circuitous (and not always engrossing) story. It starts with the death of a rather reclusive widow, Mrs. Drablow. The widow harbors a terrible secret involving her sister who, although unmarried, bore a son who eventually came to live with Mrs. Drablow. But the sister later visits him and eventually becomes so attached to him that she plots to run away with him. But a tragic accident on the foggy marsh takes his life before she can carry out her plan, and the sister goes mad.

There are a few shrill shrieks and occasional frenetic laughter to give the story an edgier tone, but the thriller aspects are minimal. Director Meredith Hagedorn and set designer Janny Coté conspired to give the *Dragon* some spooky effects, mostly sudden short flashes of the *Woman in Black* high above or to the side of the audience. Eventually, the locked door on the set mysteriously becomes unlocked and the audience gets to see an interior room decorated as a nursery. Then the *Woman in Black* dashes into the room, rips apart a teddy bear and furiously pulls baby clothes from a dresser.

It's all intended to generate a bit of pre-Halloween ghostly terror, but it's all rather tame stuff.

What really makes this production zing, however, is stellar sound by Lance Huntley and effective lighting from Jeff Swan. Huntley in particular must have worked overtime to get just the right level of sound to envelop the audience on all sides.

Coté designed a serviceable set with only a few pieces of furniture: a large trunk, a black square and a chair. But those three pieces are surprisingly adaptable, becoming a working desk, the pony-drawn carriage and much more. The actors' costumes hang on hooks on each side of the stage, so the two actors change clothes on stage, all the while continuing their dialogue.

That dialogue, in fact, is sometimes what's troublesome with this play. It's kind of the equivalent of having two "talking heads" chattering away. Occasionally there's a lengthy description with a lot of colorful adjectives but not a lot of action. (The audience knows something's coming up when they hear foreboding music from time to time.)

Nevertheless, if "The Woman in Black" has been playing nonstop in England for 27 years, it must certainly have something going for it. Dragon deserves credit for bringing relatively obscure plays to Peninsula theatergoers, and the first-rate cast definitely makes a case for giving this "Woman" a look.

Speaking of that woman, she's played by Lessa Bouchard in deathly gray makeup intended to make her look eerily fragile. Then costumer Erin Haney gives her a drop-dead gorgeous black pleated gown. An enigmatic woman, indeed.

Email Joanne Engelhardt at [joanneengelhardt@comcast.net](mailto:joanneengelhardt@comcast.net).

## Theater

What: "The Woman in Black" Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City, CA 94063

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Nov. 2

Tickets: \$30; 650-493-2006 or [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net)