

# The Woman in Black

Well, at least she's a ghost who goes with everything.

**"The Woman in Black"** has played non-stop in London since 1989 and now haunts Redwood City's Dragon Theatre. Here, a man with absolutely no imagination and no artistic sensibility (Tasi Alabastro... and for the record we're referring to his character there) wants to produce a play based on what he insists is a true ghost story that actually happened to him in a typical Old, Dark House in a remote county some years ago.

His partner and acting coach (Kevin Kirby) doesn't care one way or another if the story is true, seeing it as just a good opportunity to drum up a new gig. Unbeknownst to the characters, the supernatural shenanigans might not all have stopped...

There are strange things to see, strange sounds to hear and strange secrets to be uncovered, and in the end everyone learns that even someone else's haunting can become a very personal thing indeed. The small Dragon Theatre makes for a nice close-quarters haunting, and Jeff Swan's playful lighting effects chip in a lot of atmosphere.

How scary is it? It depends on who's asking. There is a third actor playing the titular spook (Lessa Bouchard) and we'll cop to jumping a little at her first entrance, unexpected as it is. A person born just this minute in the remotest part of the world could still anticipate the surprise at the show's end, but it remains an effective and jarring capper with a palpable hum of anxiety leading up to it.

But actually, if anything is stopping "The Woman in Black" from really scaring us it's Kirby. He seems an able actor in other regards, but whenever he cries out in apparent fear, it's funny rather than harrowing. Rather than be preoccupied with all that, it's best just to enjoy the long stretches of Kirby reciting Stephen Mallatratt's (surprisingly effective) narration, which conjures up vivid images of remote countryside and foreboding architecture.

Kirby, we should note, is a fine mime, playing with a dog that isn't there and slogging through a swamp that doesn't exist in an ably convincing manner. Most of "The Woman

in Black" takes place against a simple black screen that we only occasionally see behind, leaving Kirby mostly empty space to fill with gestures and a well-developed sense of make-believe.

Not counting the ghost, who is as much a visual effect as a performance, it's an entirely two-man show. Alabastro plays a paradox, a dull literalist without a creative bone in his body who nevertheless believes in ghosts and is haunted in every sense of the word. As himself he's noticeably flat, but when asked to become other characters he invests them with a kind of loony exaggeration that's funny but also disquieting.

The problem with "The Woman in Black" is that it's a bit anemic. The characters make much of stripping the story to its basic elements, but the show is too long at two hours, and the scares and surprises that come are too small. Those chomping at the bit for a ghost story (it is Halloween, after all) or just curious about the West End's second longest-running show can have a good enough time, but if you're not already feeling enamored of "The Woman in Black" when you sit down then it's probably not going to meet you halfway on a lot of things.

**The show is good for:** Audiences who really want to be scared.

**The show is not good for:** Audiences who think they're too cool to be scared.

*"The Woman in Black" runs through Nov. 2 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit [DragonProductions.net](http://DragonProductions.net)*