

Dragon's stage is haunted this Halloween

By Ande Jacobson

The Woman in Black, adapted by Stephen Mallatratt, is an impressive ghost story set in a small Victorian theatre and currently haunts the Dragon stage. Susan Hill's 1983 horror novella of the same name was the source for this stage version, a play that has been running



in London's West End since 1989. It's tough to tell an effective ghost story on stage, but this one is riveting. The plot follows Arthur Kipps, a man haunted by a terrible secret from early in his career as a London solicitor. He hires an actor to help him reenact the events that have haunted him so his family and friends will finally understand the horror that he's been living with. Then he hopes he can bury the past and move on with his life. Sounds simple, right?

Director Meredith Hagedorn is known for bringing a rather eclectic selection of plays to Dragon, and this little gem is nicely timed for the season. This two man show (well, except for the ghost), has a few surprises. In the program, Lessa Bouchard is *The Woman in Black*, Tasi Alabastro is *The Actor*, and Kevin Kirby is Kipps, though that might be just a tad misleading.

Alabastro's character, "The Actor," is the real Arthur Kipps theoretically many years past the traumatic events. The play begins with him struggling alone on the stage as he tries to read his manuscript detailing his story. Kirby's character, "Kipps," is really the actor Kipps hires. He pops out from an unexpected vantage point giving Alabastro's character some pointers on how to better read his lines. During a brief early exchange, they establish that "Kipps" will play the younger Kipps in this reenactment, and "The Actor" will play everyone else the real Kipps met along the way all those years ago.

The play is written such that the real Kipps is a middle-aged man looking back at events that happened thirty years earlier, but Alabastro clearly isn't that old. Likewise, the actor the real Kipps hires is written as a much younger man, close to the age Kipps was when

the events occurred. Hagedorn's casting choices flip the ages of the actors playing the roles changing the dynamic between the two men in a positive way. The reenactment happens much sooner than thirty years hence. It also makes the acting instruction Kirby's character provides in the story more believable. His instructions seem to come from a mentor drawing not only from his training, but from his own life experience.

The men then proceed to tell the tale. Kirby's two characters are quite distinct. As the actor for hire, he's a friendly Irishman, clearly comfortable on the stage, fluid in his movement, and encouraging in his directions as he gently coaxes his pupil telling him "we'll make an Irving of you yet." The Irving referenced is none other than Sir Henry Irving, a celebrated English actor from the period. As Kipps, Kirby switches to Received Pronunciation (RP), and his mannerisms become a little stiffer, his demeanor more formal making it very clear when he's "Kipps" and when he's "himself." He has a number of hats and coats set on stage for "Kipps" to use depending on the location, time of day, etc.

Alabastro as the real Kipps proclaims he is not an actor but works hard to assimilate the instructions he's being given. For the bulk of the story, he is playing everyone but Kipps. Like Kirby, Alabastro also has a number of clothing items on stage. As he becomes each new character Alabastro dons a different hat, coat, prop, accent, and manner. At first, his characters are quite exaggerated, caricatures really such as Tomes, an office assistant who has a rather disturbing snuffle and Bentley, Kipps' boss who's quite hefty and chomps on his pipe as though his teeth are clattering from the cold. By midway through Act 1, he transforms more easily, his character clearly growing as an actor.

Kirby and Alabastro interact directly much of the time, but they also take turns with the narrative, telling the audience portions of the story in the voices of their characters providing a nice mixture of action and good old-fashioned storytelling. Given the landscape of the story, there is much drawn by description and left to the imagination, but their details are so vivid, that the audience members may believe they've seen more than they actually have. One rather nice invention is Spider, a small terrier that shows up midway through the story. Both men handle that well, each petting the invisible little dog with care.

Janny Cote's set is elegant and effective. A large scrim stands partially upstage set inside a frame with a door that resembles the drawing room of an opulent English manor house. The audience eventually does get to find out what's behind the scrim, but that mystery will remain intact for now. Aside from the wealth of hats and coats hanging stage right and stage left, there are a number of props such as a trunk, a large box, and a chair which become a horse cart, a train, and a desk among other things. The actors move the props into position during their dialogue, which aids in the transformations. At first, Kirby's character introduces many of the props to Alabastro's character as part of the teaching on how to reel the audience in.

This is a ghost story, and the lighting and sound design provided by Jeff Swan and Lance Huntley are critical for the full terror of the story to come to life. Both elements are extensive in this production and blend seamlessly into the action. The audience members notice the sounds and the lights when they are supposed to. Like the props, those are introduced by "Kipps" as he teaches "The Actor" the intricacies and magic of "recorded sound" and lighting with a snap of his fingers.

This Dragon production is a wonderful Halloween treat and shouldn't be missed. There is a good deal of humor in portions of the story. Like most good ghost stories, there is also suspense and some creepy unsolved mysteries that will encourage after-show discussion. And of course, there is some twisted terror that will likely cause many to jump, but it wouldn't be much of a ghost story without that. There are some logic holes, and while an observant audience member may notice a few inconsistencies particularly if they've read the play, that won't detract from the story or the performances.

And what of the woman? Well, she's spooky and impeccably dressed, but you'll have to come to the show to see how she fits into the story. After all, I wouldn't want to deprive you of a good scare.

What: *The Woman in Black* adapted by Stephen Mallatratt

Where: Dragon Theatre located at: 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA 94063.

When: Thursdays – Sundays through 2 November 2014

See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo courtesy of James Kasyan)