

The Woman in Black review

Stephen Mallatrat's adaptation of Susan Hill's gothic horror novel 'The Woman in Black' remains one of Britain's spookiest and most absorbing plays.

When I was first proposed to watch Stephen Mallatrat's play 'The Woman in Black' it seemed as an easy and even delightful job; it was one of the most successful and running plays in Britain after all. Little did I know that two hours in the Fortune theatre and a woman running around in a black dress would give me haunting sleepless nights for the rest of the week.

Two actors and a play within a play. This is what Mallatrat had in mind when he was asked to write a low-to-no budget Christmas show for the Stephen Joseph theatre in Scarborough in 1987. A year later, the production was transferred to the Lyric Hammersmith and finally relocated to the Fortune theatre, where it has been played since 1989. In this play, elderly Arthur Kipps (Richard Hope) has written a manuscript of his own story from something that happened to him thirty years ago and hires a young actor (Mark Hawkins) to dramatise it. Whilst the older actor takes the role of more than half a dozen characters, the other one plays a young Kipps who travels to the isolated town of Crythin Gifford to sort out the paperwork of a reclusive widow. It is here where an unsettling series of events start to take place.

Perhaps it was the ingenious use of two actors to play such intricate and numerous characters or simply the ghostly atmosphere created by the emptiness of the stage which converts Mallatrat's adaptation to a captivatingly chilling experience. In one sense, the audience gradually becomes these guilty voyeurs, forced to observe the disconcerting plot and listen to the ghastly screams. Despite the shivers it may cause, there is a humorous touch to the performances which makes it a lot easier to assimilate the troubling horror of some of the scenes, specially Richard Hope's outstanding work. The unusual mixture of humour and terror elevate this play to one of the most innovative versions of the last years.

There is a masterful control over the sound effects; they create this stealthily ambience, building up the tension until it becomes nearly unbearable to watch. Undoubtedly, The Woman is Black leaves behind a disturbing uncertainty of not knowing what lies behind you. Yikes.