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Theater BY SHARLEEN NELSON

Old Kipps/The Actor (Davis N. Smith) and Young Kipps (Bryan Scott)



HOWARD HUMMEL

The Haunting

A tale of the past returns at Cottage Theatre

The stuff we conjure up in our own imaginations can often be far scarier than the images we see onscreen. With only two actors onstage and using minimal props, Cottage Theatre's production of Steve Malatratt's *The Woman in Black* asks a lot of its audience. It invites and encourages us to pretend and sets out to prove that it's not so much what you see, but what you feel.

Arthur Kipps (Davis Smith) is an old man haunted by a story from his past. The narrative is so horrible he has been unable to tell anyone, but he has written it all down in a protracted manuscript. The play opens on an empty theater where Kipps has come to enlist the aid of a young actor (Bryan Scott) to help him recount his tale. Convincing Kipps that the best way to tell the story is to show rather than to tell, the actor refashions it as a performance piece with himself assuming the role of Kipps while Kipps takes on the incidental characters in the story. With the two using the minimal props on hand, the layers of suspense and tension build slowly as the story unfolds.

Kipps, a young London lawyer, is summoned to Crythin Gifford, a remote fishing village on the eastern coast of England, to attend the funeral and settle the estate of a recently deceased elderly widow, Mrs. Drablow. Kipps finds that the locals are uneasy about taking him out to Mrs. Drablow's house. Situated on Nine Lives Causeway, Eel Marsh House is surrounded entirely by marshes. It's completely cut off from the mainland, so people can only get to and from the remote property during high tide. Kipps is undaunted by rumors of a mysterious woman in black, a malevolent ghost whose vengeful powers have transcended death and wrought fear and tragedy upon the small town, and a reluctant driver agrees to take him out to the property. Over the course of several days, while sorting through Mrs. Drablow's papers, Kipps endures a terrifying experience of inexplicable noises and chilling events.

Although the foreshadowing in the story itself renders it slightly predictable, the abilities of the two actors are superb. Davis Smith persuasively conveys the affectations of the elderly Kipps, painstakingly shuffling across the stage and speaking in a cracking, feeble voice. Equally impressive is his aptitude for assuming multiple roles. With a simple change of hat or coat, Smith's transformative demeanor and intonation aptly reflect his changing personas — from waiter to nervous agent to world-weary trap driver. Likewise,

Bryan Scott is outstanding as the exuberant young actor, first boldly unafraid of ghosts but later terrified by an unseen and malevolent force.

In addition to their fine performances, the actors' interaction with props brings the story to life. An old chest as the centerpiece serves as both a writing desk and a bed; with two chairs facing it, it becomes a seating compartment on a train, and alone it's a pony and trap. Eerie lights and recorded sounds also build tension, and the timing of the sound effects juxtaposed with the action on stage blends seamlessly. A black screen, which divides the stage to create a semi-transparent dreamlike atmosphere, and a fog machine also serve to further enhance the spookiness factor.

Considering the nervous laughter when the fog rolled in over the marsh and things went bump in the night, I'd say that the play successfully taps into the audience's collective imagination.

The Woman in Black runs Feb. 2-4 and Feb. 9 and 10. Tickets may be purchased from the Web site at <http://www.cottagetheatre.org/tickets/> or by calling the box office at 942-9195. **EW**

Opening Nights

OTHELLO

Opens Friday, Feb. 2 at LCC's Blue Door Theater. You know the plot. You know the whole jealousy thing. You know the ol' trick of handkerchief secreted by evil villain in the perfect place to make hero into tragic figure of murderous rage. Now see how LCC's student-run production takes the classic and deals with the Bard's bad lovers. Show dates are Feb. 2-4, 8-11, & 15-17. Call 463-5202 for tix.

THE BIG KNIFE

Opens Wednesday, Feb. 7 at the UO's Arena Theatre. Clifford Odets, famed for the rousing *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!*, takes the intricacies and betrayal of Hollywood to task in 1949's *The Big Knife*. Does absolute (star) power corrupt? Absolutely, Odets and the UO show us, just in time for that fakest of star parades, the Oscars. Show dates are Feb. 7-10 and 15-17. Call 346-4363 for tix.