The Woman In Black

PLAY CRITIQUE

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Beginning Drama

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 I attended the Ocala Civic Theatre’s production of *The Woman In Black* on December 1st at 8:00 pm in Ocala Florida. This has been one of many productions I have seen at this community theatre and, like my other experiences; I found the acting, directing, and production quality to be at a very professional level. I would recommend the show to anyone who enjoys mystery and horror. I would not recommend that small children see this show because it was scary and is a long piece with a run time of two hours. The play’s plot revolves around Arthur Kipps, a middle aged lawyer who hires a professional actor and rents out an old abandoned theatre to reenact the ghostly events that occurred during his last job. Mr. Kipps was hired to handle the estate of the recently deceased Mrs. Drablow who lived in a secluded house surrounded by an ominous marsh. The vengeful spirit of Mrs. Drablow begins to haunt Mr. Kipps while he is in her home and through a series of plot twists it is revealed that Mrs. Drablow’s curse isn’t one that can be easily broken. The script itself uses the creative play within a play device so that “The Actor” plays the role of Athur Kipps, while Arthur Kipps assumes the role of all the other characters. The script itself is a true gothic horror worthy of the recent film adaptation staring Daniel Radcliffe.

 Chip Morris, a local actor, played the role of Arthur Kipps; however, due to the creative device of the script, his character assumed the role of many characters in the story. His performance was nothing short of impressive. He artfully bounced from role to role changing characterization as quickly as he changed dialect. Mr. Morris was able to handle not only one British dialect, but several different dialects reflecting various regions of the United Kingdom. His performance was an accomplishment for this already decorated performer. For the play concept to work, Mr. Morris also had to believably convince the audience that he was traumatized by the effects of the spirit of Mrs. Drablow. Again, Mr. Morris didn’t disappoint, embodying the mantle of a truly broken man seeking any chance to rid himself of the horrors he experienced at Drablow Manor.

 Alan J. Hickey portrayed the role of “The Actor” but again, because of the play within a play structure of the script, he also portrayed the role of Arthur Kipps. This was Mr. Hickey’s debut at the Ocala Civic theatre. He was a less experienced actor and while his performance was not as impressive as Mr. Morris’ he was still able to keep up. There were some clear physical choices that Mr. Hickey made when playing “The Actor”. In particular Mr. Hickey, when playing “The Actor” used very grand gestures that fit well with the acting style of the Victorian period. When he changed to playing the role of Arthur Kipps, there was a clear change of physical characterization. The grand gestures and overall presence of a Victorian actor vanished and were replaced by a stiff and nervous lawyer. While Hickey only played two roles compared to the eight characters played by Morris, he handled them well and deserves praise for his efforts. Vocally, Hickey also had to handle a British accent but, there was little vocal change when moving from “The Actor” to the role of Kipps. A more pronounced difference vocally would have helped establish more clearly who he was, which was confusing from time to time.

 The set for the production was very simple but extremely effective. The design of the set was a simple bare stage with old crates, boxes, torn draperies, and dusty furniture. The scenic design consisted of what you might expect to see in an abandoned theatre. These boxes and crates, through some simple theatre magic and use of sound and lighting effects, transformed into various locations including Kipps’ office, a stage coach, and Drablow manor. The actors wore simple Victorian garments of the day. The actors changed roles with the use of hats, coats, and small items. A technical challenge for a production like this is the handling of the special effects related to the appearance and disappearance of the ghost of Drablow Manor. This was handled well with the use of scrim and the casting of two actresses as “The Woman in Black.” This allowed for her to be in two places at once. Through the use of lighting, music, a simple set, and simple tricks, the audience was immersed in the terrifying world of Arthur Kipps. The dark colors and dim lighting brought the elements of the production together with great effect. The appearance of the Woman in Black was startling. The ghost had very stark make-up. Her dress was long and black sweeping the floor. She also wore a black bonnet which obscured the ghost’s face.

 The OCT’s production of *The Woman In Black* was directed by Dr. Alex Pinkston. Dr. Pinkston had a clear concept of the show and was able to pull together all of the production’s elements together to achieve this concept. It was clear that Dr. Pinkston wanted to focus on the “theatricality” of the production. He achieved this by never taking the audience away from the abandoned Victorian theatre. The sets were not literal. The audience was asked to accept that while the actors were sitting on a large crate, the characters were indeed riding a stage coach. The overall effect of this concept was that it allowed the audience to feel as if the ghost were actually visiting the theatre they were sitting in. The success of this concept left the audience wondering if they too had been cursed by Lady Drablow.

 In my opinion this production was excellent. The Ocala Civic Theatre is known for putting on professional level productions using talented amateurs from the community. This production achieved the same professional quality this theatre is known for. The actors, even though they were amateurs, were as talented as many professional performers. The director developed a concept that pulled the audience into the action while the actors juggled multiple roles and dialects to great effect. *The Woman in Black* made for an intense and spooky night of entertainment that I will remember as an excellent example of fine community theatre.