

The Mystery of Edwin Drood

Dickens is all the rage in London this Christmas, from the return of David Edgar's two-part adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* at the Gielgud to *A Christmas Carol*, relocated to a South African goldmine, at the Young Vic, but this 1985 Broadway musical version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* offers a wittily appealing Music Hall treatment of something altogether rarer: his final, uncompleted work which it conscripts the audience into trying to resolve. That brings it partly into the realm of panto, amplified too by the principal boy being played by a woman, with the audience voting on the fate of Drood and in turn for possible candidates for his murderer - as well as a happy ending for two possible lovers to be united.

With just one writer, Rupert Holmes, taking on the rare triple duty of providing the book, music and lyrics, it provides a jauntily melodic Americanised view of traditional English forms. Even if the tone is too relentlessly upbeat to ever allow us to invest in any of the character's plights or motivations, Ted Craig's production makes it bounce along effortlessly enough to carry the day and the play. It is much aided by Cleo Pettitt's atmospheric set that instantly turns the Warehouse into the Music Hall Royale with a cut-out representation of Cloisterham High Street brilliantly created behind the prosc arch.

Stefan Bednarczyk presides over the proceedings as the Chairman but also doubles as both the Reverend Crisparkle and the evening's musical director. The show, a fast flop when it first came to the Savoy Theatre in 1987, is already booked for a longer run in Croydon than it ever had in the West End, and deserves to thrive there for the resourceful and intimacy it creates.

Mark Shenton The Stage 19.12.07