

THE TIMES

January 7, 2008

The Mystery of Edwin Drood

Sam Marlowe at the Warehouse Theatre, Croydon

“Let us all be as vulgar and uncivilised as it is legally possible to be,” urges the dapper master of ceremonies at the beginning of Rupert Holmes’s musical. Ted Craig’s production is accomplished, quirky entertainment, bursting with energy and panache. The 1986 Broadway production of *Edwin Drood* won five Tonys; yet the show’s success has never been repeated in the UK. It’s certainly a curiosity; loosely based on Charles Dickens’ final, unfinished novel, it gives the action a meta-theatrical, music-hall setting, and invites the audience to unravel the plot and to supply an ending.

The urbane, gavel-wielding Chairman introduces us to a company of Victorian actors, who play figures from the Dickens story. After the title character’s mysterious disappearance, we, as spectators, vote to decide who is his killer. Holmes makes no pretence of simulating the weight and complexity of the Dickensian narrative. The show’s concerns are not literary, and it is far from intellectual or psychologically probing. It’s a comic thriller, a romp that, blending melodrama and broad humour, playfully sends up theatrical conventions. Its interactive element makes it novel and engaging. Is John Jasper, the creepy choirmaster and Drood’s uncle, really as sinister – and as unhealthily interested in his nephew’s lovely young fiancée Rosa Bud – as he appears to be? What secret is carried by the hot-headed Neville Landless and his tight-lipped twin sister Helena, recently arrived from Ceylon? And what is the true identity of Dick Datchery, the watchful stranger in the shadows? It’s an enjoyable theatrical parlour game to pick through even the silliest of the available hypotheses. Holmes’s score is stuffed with terrific tunes, from patter songs to lyrical ballads and numbers packed with dramatic punch. Indeed, the sophistication of the music is the show’s most satisfying aspect. Jasper frantically laments his Jekyll and Hyde-style split personality in *A Man Could Go Quite Mad*. Later, he lingers lasciviously as Rosa sings the shivery, plangent *Moonfall*, a minor-key, chilly love song that for all its loveliness is tinged with sexual dread.

The cast of actor-musicians perform with brio, led by the musical director Stefan Bednarczyk as both the Chairman and as one of the least likely murder suspects, Reverend Crisparkle. Kit Benjamin is a lupine Jasper, and Kate Feldschreiber, playing Drood in the dapper fashion of a musical-hall male impersonator, is likably perky.

Cleo Pettitt’s designs are a marvel, conjuring the Victorian theatrical setting, the cobbled streets of Dickens’s cathedral city of Cloisterham, a pungent East End opium den and even the startling onstage arrival of a steam train. When it springs such surprises, this show, though slight, can still delight.

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