

A CHRISTMAS CAROL
The Everyman Studio Theatre, Cheltenham
Saturday 10th December 2016

"It just goes to show what you can do if you're very creative." observed the lady sitting behind me at the end of this engaging production of Charles Dickens' festive parable. Agreed, especially when you have all of twenty square yards of snow-powdered space in which to display that creativity, whilst surrounded on all sides by your audience. Dickens in the round - a new experience indeed. Innovation is a powerful force, and someone has clearly harnessed it in full measure. This seasonal serving by Gloucestershire-based Red Dog Theatre is an inspired re-invention of this timeless tale, as well as a masterclass in multiple role-playing by the minimal, five-strong cast and crystal-clear diction. A Yorkshire-accented Scrooge and a Welsh Jacob Marley prove further novelties, but that is barely the start.

Yard brushes masquerading as hatstands, two remarkably adaptable bed-cum-desk fixtures, with every outfit and prop imaginable biding their time beneath the lids, pointed to a fertile imagination working overtime. But what finally did it for me was the hauntings. More than ever in presentations of *A Christmas Carol* I see echoes, intentional or not, of *The Woman In Black*. Featureless white masks peered scarily through the darkness, as the massed ghosts of Christmas Past roused Scrooge from his complacent slumber. I half-expected to see a rocking chair pitching back and forth at the foot of the bed.

What happened next, however, caught me totally off guard. Beneath a towering bonnetload of illuminated fruit, in swept the gaudy Ghost of Christmas Present, straight out of the Notting Hill Carnival and asking *"Scrooge, have you ever seen the like of me?"* No, and I'll wager neither had any of the spectators, and when did you last see Bob Cratchit's children dangling as dolls from their mother's waist, while Tiny Tim was carried lovingly around as a set of little clothes thrown over a wire frame? You'll have to use your imagination, however, when the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come shows up.

Honouring a commendable trend to collapse the entire story into one act without trying the audience's patience, it's all done and dusted in only 85 minutes; less is so often more, and anyone seeking temporary relief from the last-minute shopping et al. will enjoy a quick and refreshing tonic here. The seriously stressed-out are at least guaranteed a happy ending, and as regards everyone else, I have little doubt that nothing will you dismay. A Merry Christmas to all!

Simon Lewis