

Theater review: 'Woman in Black' haunts Howmet Playhouse

Posted by **Bill Iddings** | Chronicle correspondent July 11, 2009 01:10AM

WHITEHALL -- Whether "The Woman in Black" stands a ghost of a chance of creeping out Howmet Playhouse audiences depends on how willingly folks buy into the spook show. The challenge of scaring contemporary theater patrons into suspending disbelief is frightening.

Subtitled "A Ghost Play," "The Woman in Black," under Jeff Sanders' direction, is effective enough to build an atmosphere, thin though it may be, of unease. Its effect is enhanced by bangs and blackouts, during a show in which the most unnerving word is "children."

IF YOU GO

- **What:** "The Woman in Black," presented by Howmet Summer Theatre Festival.
- **When:** Final performance at 7:30 p.m. today.
- **Where:** Howmet Playhouse, 304 S. Mears, in Whitehall.
- **Tickets:** \$14 for adults, \$10 for students. Box office opens at 5 p.m. Call (231) 894-2540.

Sanders has his two primary players, Tom Harryman and Jeremy Meier, on their games. A third presence is present, maybe. For reasons that should be witnessed firsthand, kudos to Brianna June Clark. And someone else? Breaking the astral plane, how can you be in two places at once when you're not anywhere at all?

Playwright Stephen Mallatratt's 1987 adaptation of the 1983 novella by British author Susan Hill centers on a London solicitor (Harryman) haunted by an evil he cannot shake.

As the story unfolds a quarter century apart, alternately in 1925 and '50, we discover that the lawyer, as a young man, journeyed to a secluded mansion on the East Coast of England. He was to settle the estate of an elderly widow whom no one mourned as the dearly departed. There he was shaken by spectral sights and sounds that went bump in the night. He spied a gaunt young woman overlooking a cemetery, her face wasted to unearthly pallor. This cadaverous chick had (has?) a score to settle. Was she doing it from beyond the grave? Decades later, is she still at it? The big old house is at the end of the Nine Lives Causeway, hint, hint.

Trying to help sort this out is an actor (Meier) whom the older man employs to play his younger self. The idea is to exorcise the older man's memory by revisiting the horrors he's suffered. Ah, good plan.

Hill's book placed most of the story in a bleak house. Mallatratt sets it in a Victorian theater -- not unlike

Howmet Playhouse -- where a play within a play ensues.

In two acts coming in well under two hours, "The Woman in Black" begins as the surprise comedy hit of the season. Laughs proceed from the solicitor repeatedly reading a story that begins at 9:30 on a Christmas Eve, and insisting that, as an actor, he'll never be another Laurence Olivier. The ghost of Sir Larry can rest easy.

Harryman and Meier engage in some character shifting, with Harryman doing the bulk of the chameleon work, employing a variety of dialects. Yeah.

Costumed by Eleanor Goudreau, "The Woman in Black" is possessed by a load of theatrical conventions: sound effects, eerie lighting filtering through smoke, that kind of thing. Brad Dell's set is a workable collection of boxes, and several elevated platforms, accented by a huge door and a costume rack. Come with imagination intact.

"The Woman in Black" might not keep you up nights, but it'll do until something really scary comes along. One thing's certain: After seeing "The Woman in Black," the next time you open a music box will not be reassuring.

Bill Iddings is The Chronicle's former film critic, and currently writes the online blog Extra Iddings. Also an actor, he recently appeared as Gloucester in playwright William Shakespeare's tragedy "King Lear."

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