

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## The Little Minister

J M Barrie

Helen Mirren at the BBC

(2008)

The creator of *Peter Pan* and *The Admirable Crichton* has largely gone out of fashion, although the perennial Peter has a habit of coming back in every artistic form imaginable.

It is therefore of interest to see a work that is now almost 100 years old in theatrical form (but was first seen in 1898 when it appeared as a novel) as a *Play of the Month*, directed by Cedric Messina in 1975.

Sadly, Mr Messina does the cause of the Scotsman who was so popular in his day few favours. *The Little Minister* is a light comedy, but to play it close to farce does not get any more laughs and removes much of Barrie's subtlety.

The one shining beacon and is the lady whose work this series celebrates. She plays Babbie, a bewitching, barefoot gypsy (more fully Egyptian), who is far more than she seems.

The drama is set in rural Scotland in the mid-19th Century at a time when the locals were fearful of occupying English redcoats. Barrie contrasts the attitudes of the wealthy Anglophile Earl of Rintoul, played by Peter Barkworth, and his poorer neighbours, who unfortunately mostly speak with pretty much impenetrable accents.

While the rich man works closely with the English soldiers headed by Nicholas Jones as the silly, self-important Captain Halliwell, the elders of the village have created a private militia to resist the incomers.

Into this confusion comes Ian Ogilvy playing the Rev Gavin Dishart, a real oaf of a little minister, who is renowned for his apparent diligence and religious commitment, although this is not conveyed in any way by the actor.

As soon as he set eyes on the Egyptian, the hunky priest loses his head and, had this been real life, might well really have done so under an English blade. Instead, the lady is equally enamoured, which provides some excellent comedy, particularly after it is discovered that not only is she a flighty ne'er-do-well but, in addition, the Earl's respectable, English-educated daughter.

Dame-to-be Helen is well cast as a posh noblewoman with egalitarian tendencies and plays her part well. Too many of her fellow cast members mug like mad and Ogilvy, soon to be a TV Saint, has a tendency to run and skip around like a reject from *The Benny Hill Show*.

This production does not show off Barrie at his best but there is enough there to suggest that while his work may nowadays seem somewhat quaint and old-fashioned, he definitely deserves to be revived.

Surely, the man to do this is Sam Walters at the Orange Tree. He has already picked one short play, [\*The Twelve-Pound Look\*](#), to be showcased in Richmond and might now wish to think about something with a little more meat.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)