

British Theatre Guide

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

Great Expectations

Charles Dickens, adapted by Theresa Heskins
New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme
(2008)

Charles Dickens' tale of a young man's journey from humble surroundings to a gentleman's life in London has been one of the favourite novels of the New Vic's artistic director Theresa Heskins since she moved from a London council estate to Oxford University. So she probably didn't have hard times deciding whether to adapt *Great Expectations* for the Staffordshire theatre-in-the-round.

The New Vic has a great reputation for its innovative productions which usually transcend the difficulties of staging plays in such a restrictive space. So there were great expectations that Heskins' offering would live up to the theatre's usual high standards. And mostly it doesn't disappoint.

Heskins decided there was no point trying to improve on Dickens' wonderful language, so she hasn't rewritten a word. Instead she's condensed the story by taking out various characters including Compeyson, the second convict Pip meets on the marshes; Molly, housekeeper to the lawyer Jaggers who's Estella's mother; and Orlick, the evil labourer employed by Pip's brother-in-law and village blacksmith Joe.

For the most part the abbreviation works splendidly; there are only a few passages in which the pace slackens and verbosity takes over.

Heskins must have decided that keeping everything simple was the way to succeed with *Great Expectations*. One of the most successful aspects is how the action moves seamlessly from one location to another with an actor shouting "London!" when a scene is set in the capital or several actors' whispering "Satis House" when Miss Havisham's home is the focal point.

The eight actors create more than 70 characters between them, yet there's never the impression that this is a low-budget production.

Michael Hugo does a terrific job as Pip, developing from a frightened youngster into an immature young man who has hankerings to better himself and finally into a gentleman who realises the hard way that material success doesn't necessarily lead to happiness.

Janice McKenzie impresses as Miss Havisham, desperate for revenge against the male population after being jilted on her wedding day until the shattering revelation that she's turned her adopted daughter Estella into a similarly bitter woman.

Emma Pallant's Estella is haughty although not quite capturing the full extent of the character's coldness and contemptuousness towards Pip.

Gracy Goldman gives us a feisty Mrs Joe, Pip's sister, but she's perhaps not as overbearing nor as stern as Dickens intended.

The convict Magwitch is a difficult role and Stephen Finegold isn't as menacing in the early scenes on the marshes as he might be. But later he excels as Pip's benefactor. There's also a stark contrast between the two characters Finegold plays, especially when he transforms himself from Magwitch into Jaggers in successive scenes simply by removing his coat.

Strong performances from John Elkington as both Wemmick and Pumblechook, Morgan George as Joe and Jon Trenchard as Herbert Pocket add to the enjoyment.

Unfortunately the show peters out with the last meeting between Pip and Estella when they vow to remain friends. Heskins, in the programme notes, says she feels the ending is a long time coming, so she's streamlined the conclusion. To me it seems everything is so final; maybe in the novel Dickens leaves just a hint that the couple can have a future together.

However, that doesn't detract too much from what is clearly a slick, compelling production.

"Great Expectations" runs until May 17th

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)