

British Theatre Guide

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

The Signalman and Oh Whistle and I'll come to you my Lad

Charles Dickens and M R James
Middle Ground Theatre Company
Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford
14–19 April 2014

If this production is lacking anything, it is certainly not atmosphere, something necessary for all good ghost stories.

The show kicks off with James's story, *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to you my Lad*, set in the Autumn of 1907 on the cold and windy east coast of England. Professor Parkins is booking into the Globe Hotel, and a room big enough for a desk is essential for his work. The room takes up most of the stage and, not to his pleasure, contains two beds, but he takes it anyway. Could be his first mistake.

Jack Shepherd plays the dried-up old professor, introverted and confident of his knowledge. A colleague commented that he had difficulty hearing his speeches, but I didn't have a problem. He did mumble rather, but in the style of an old professor who expects his students to be hanging on every word.

On a walk along the beach, he discovers an ancient, engraved whistle and, at dinner, regales his golfing friend Colonel Wilson (Terrence Hardiman) with its possible history, his delivery something which bores his friend as it probably did his students. Perhaps blowing it was his second mistake.

The set (Michael Lunney who also directs) is comprehensive, containing every aspect necessary to the tale, including a backdrop of a vast beach with waves rippling onto the shore. It is a slow start with nothing much happening (a good ploy to lull us into a false sense of security) but at night the supernatural takes over to extremely good, and scary, effect.

Shepherd, in bed, has not a lot to say at this point, but it is obvious his character is suffering unbearable agony and sound, as well as visual effects, plays a large part in creating a very frightening atmosphere. The story ends in a rather unsatisfactory manner, no definite conclusion so a bit of an anti-climax, but the Professor is assumed to be suffering from nervous exhaustion. He was not the only one.

After the interval, the curtain rises on an even more impressive and evocative set for Dickens's story. Shrouded in mist and smoke is the arched entrance of a railway tunnel, the tracks disappearing inside; next to it is the signal box where Shepherd's Signalman spends a lonely life looking after the track.

This seems to be a troubled man with something nagging at his mind, his trepidation increased when a Traveller (Hardiman again) calls "Halloa Below There", words he has been hearing from nowhere as a warning of impending doom.

I didn't find this as frightening and scary as the first play, but it had a more definite conclusion, although not a good one so far as the Signalman is concerned. The sound effects of trains hurtling past brought out my own memories of *The Ghost Train*, a film I found terrifying at the age of five.

These plays are not just two-handers. The protagonists are well supported by James Morley, Dicken Ashworth, Jenny May Darcy, and Greg Fitch.

Oh Whistle and I'll Come to you, My Lad is based on the story by M R James and adapted by Margaret May Hobbs.

The Signalman is based on the short story by Charles Dickens and adapted by Francis Evelyn.

It would be a very good production for Halloween.

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)