

British Theatre Guide

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Ghosts

Henrik Ibsen in a version by Frank McGuinness

Duchess Theatre

(2010)

Ibsen is usually relatively understated, allowing symbols as well as words and actions to convey some of his most important messages. However, in Frank McGuinness's raw, explicit version of *Ghosts* (first seen at the Bristol Old Vic in 2007), we discover that a rather more forced vision can be equally disturbing.

This production is directed by Iain Glen, who also takes the role of Pastor Manders. On this occasion, Glen offers us a far from conventional interpretation of this holy but flawed priest.

This repressed, sanctimonious Pastor Manders is a model of stiffness, looking rather like Abraham Lincoln but speaking with the Northern Irish accent in the bold manner of the Rev Iain Paisley, never more so than when he begins to pontificate at volume about the monstrous behaviour of others.

A first glance at the spacious, barely furnished Alving conservatory designed by Stephen Brimson Lewis gives no hint of what is to come. Just outside, the final touches are being put to a state-of-the-art orphanage designed to memorialise the late Captain Alving, a man with all of the qualities of a latter-day saint.

Within two hours, the orphanage and all that it stands for have been wrecked, together with the hopes and illusions of two generations.

The opening scene shows us a working-class father and daughter, the Engstrands. Ever reliable Malcolm Storry plays seemingly solid Jacob and Jessica Raine feisty Regine. Their bickering about the future veers between his dream of a stable life for them both and her fantasies about marriage to the young man of the house.

The central figures of this play, ignoring the late Captain, are his widow Helene and the Pastor. As they put the final touches to the orphanage plans, the religious man both chides his hostess about her past and demands that she leaves insurance of the orphanage to the Almighty. Lesley Sharp as Mrs Alving looks fragile and petite but when angered, becomes a mighty opponent when long suppressed bitterness is eventually released.

The catalyst for much of the action is Mrs Alving's son Oswald, played by Harry Treadaway. He has been living a dissolute artist's life in Paris before returning to be with his loving mother for the tribute to his late father.

Unfortunately, there are far too many skeletons in this family cupboard, with an illness that dare not speak its name uppermost in the minds of mother and son. As Mrs Alving reveals the corrupt behaviour of this sample of the ruling class, even more startling consequences have to be considered when she discovers that Oswald has taken a shine to little Regine.

Ghosts has been very popular of late with productions arriving in Britain at the rate of about one a year. It is unlikely that any has been quite like this one, with harsh modern language capitalised upon by an eccentric Pastor and the sight of Oswald very visibly suffering from a disease that drastically affects both his physical and mental behaviour.

As such, some of the subtlety of the original is sacrificed for a rather more *in-yer-face* style but such is the power of a play that addresses uncompromisingly class and gender issues eventually overcomes any reservations.

Even if you know *Ghosts* well, a trip to the Duchess will still provide a different, possibly shocking new experience and is recommended.

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Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)