

British Theatre Guide

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Matthew Bourne's *The Midnight Bell*

Devised and directed by Matthew Bourne, choreography Matthew Bourne and Company
New Adventures
Sadler's Wells
4–9 October 2021

Matthew Bourne's latest piece of musical / dance theatre will undoubtedly increase interest in Patrick Hamilton's work on which it is based—and a good thing, too. There's more than the well-known *Rope* or *Gaslight* or *Hangover Square* to explore in his loosely autobiographical London novels much admired by Graham Greene.

Taking initial inspiration from *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (1935), a trilogy of *The Midnight Bell*, *The Siege of Pleasure* and *The Plains of Cement*, Bourne weaves his own tapestry, taking bits from here and there, of thirties London—though Lez Brotherston's slick sliding set design (darkly lit by Paule Constable) is positively Dickensian (as was Hamilton to a degree). And I also think of Arthur Pita's *Little Match Girl*... (Pita and Bourne are in the audience.) All those windows glowing against a chimney-filled louring sky: a pop-up picture book—until we hit the sepia brown pub scene. And, of course, everyone smokes...

Intertwining tales of loneliness, unrequited love, penury, women on the game, men, too, in the in-between war years—this is not the high class Mayfair set, but its impoverished equivalent, the local pub, where they come seeking company. And there's that wrenching last orders bell. Dance club, members club in neon, this is seedy Soho, where no questions are asked... one-night stands, dodgy rooming houses and hotels. And to underline the cinematic influence, Bourne has them at the cinema watching this lot perform their sorry tales—Bourne tongue-in-cheek 'meta'.

The programme, fortunately, names and characterises the ten roles. Without the programme, it's impossible to realise that a bearded, brown-suited Richard Winsor (a wonderful [Dorian](#) and Swan in former productions) is a schizophrenic (George Harvey Bone) from his performance, except for one tiny moment when he writhes on the floor. I'd like more from him.

It takes the first longer act (not without some *longueurs*) to present them: Bob the pub waiter (Paris Fitzpatrick solos very good) loved by Ella the barmaid (Bryony Harrison), who in turn is loved by the creepy Mr Eccles (Reece Causton), "a regular customer". Bob chases after Jenny, the blonde prostitute (Bryony Wood), but she can only offer him sex not love. George also lusts after her. And the "out-of-work actress" Netta (Daisy May Kemp) drifts around on the periphery.

Then there's Miss Roach (Michela Meazza superb as usual—looking like the Duchess of Windsor—or is it just me?) the lonely spinster swindled by Ernest Gorse, "the cad" (Glenn Graham on fine smooth form), though she does turn the tables on him in the final act—yes!

But the deepest and best-realised episode is the burgeoning love affair between Liam Mower's Albert, "a West-End Chorus Boy" and Andrew Monaghan's Frank, "a new customer". I take him for

rough trade, but there's a twist in the tale, which makes me think of many illicit loves that dare not speak their names. You can bring your own references.

The best scenes for me are the overlapping, juxtaposed scenes in the bedroom and the ensemble scenes, very cleverly staged. The lamp-lit bench episodes remind me of Bourne's [Swan Lake](#)—Liam Mower sitting there as the Prince, and here as Albert. Railings, telephone kiosk top, soundscape (Paul Groothuis) of dogs, church bells, footsteps...

And above all, Terry Davies's rich resonant cinematic score with its sense of time passing augmented by classic songs, lip-synched and mimed by the cast: "What Is This Thing Called Love", "The Man I love", "The Nearness of You", "Maybe It's Because I love You Too Much", "Solitude", and more, evocative in the best possible way. It'll be these that will enchant the audiences—dreamy nostalgic sing-along songs.

The second half with its disco glitter-ball casting its spinning lights over the auditorium, four couples dancing to a big band sound, is about love, our need and search for it. The waiter moves on; the prostitute is back under the lamppost. Only one couple seems to have any promise of some sort of rapport if not happiness. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but that's the cinema for you.

But where does the Lyons Tea Room (a touch of *Brief Encounter*?) fit in? More respectable and sweeter with its teacups and cakes than the drowning one's sorrows pub, and a good excuse for some dexterous stagecraft, perhaps... I love the exuberant pianist.

Bourne is known for tinkering with his productions—and *The Midnight Bell* still has an embryonic quality to it. But all his signifiers are nicely in place. A natural storyteller with a love of musicals and cinema, Bourne brings his familiar signature tropes to this new production, which has toured the provinces before, and will do so after its brief London sojourn, till 27 November. Bourne's huge fan base will see it run and run.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)