

British Theatre Guide

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Mr Puntila and His Man Matti

Bertolt Brecht, translated by Peter Arnott

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

(2007)

Almost two years after going dark for a £14m redevelopment, Coventry's Belgrade Theatre is open again.

A stunning extension has been added to the original 1950s grade II listed building, giving the theatre an imposing exterior which blends the newer sections with the more traditional features.

The Belgrade is now trying to re-establish itself as a major producing theatre. Its inaugural season features popular touring works alongside new, challenging productions with an international feel.

Artistic director Hamish Glen wants to create something unique which can't be seen elsewhere. That's why he's chosen for his first offering a comedy which is also one of Brecht's social criticism plays.

How many other theatres would have taken a chance by staging *Mr Puntila And His Man Matti* at any time during a season, let alone as the first performance in nearly two years? Not many, I would argue.

On the night I attended there was a reasonably sized audience boosted by coach parties of students who must have been studying Brecht as part of their syllabus.

They were presented with a Finnish folk tale rewritten by a German Marxist and translated into English by a Glaswegian.

The problem with *Mr Puntila And His Man Matti* in my opinion is for a play that's marketed as a comedy, there's not enough humour in Peter Arnott's script. There are a few belly laughs - mostly when a roaring drunk Puntila is hurling foul-mouthed abuse at those around him - and some clever physical comedy. Apart from that, the jocularity is very mild indeed.

Mr Puntila And His Man Matti tells the story of a landowner who is extremely generous and fun-loving when drunk but turns into a brutal skinflint when sober. When he's had a few he wants to marry off his daughter Eva to his chauffeur Matti - but with a clear head he's adamant she's going to wed a weedy diplomat.

David Hargreaves gives a towering performance as Puntila. It's a massive part in which he shines from start to finish.

He is totally believable as the drunken version of Puntila, loud, staggering around slightly unsteadily on his feet and with a faint slurring of his words. He's forgetful - he can't even remember leaving his chauffeur outside a bar for two days - yet he's likeable and he's only depressive when he remembers how he'll behave when he's sobered up.

I would have preferred Hargreaves to show more light and shade when portraying the sober Puntila and be more sinister instead of merely raising his voice. But he gets only a couple of scenes in which he isn't under the influence, so it's hardly a major criticism.

Jake Nightingale gives us a laidback Matti who realises he'll never be anything but a servant and his social standing won't change by marrying Eva. Nightingale doesn't seem to me to be at ease with the role; it's only when he shows Eva the sort of life she'll have to suffer if she marries him that he really comes into his own as the overworked, soulless husband.

In her first professional production, Louise Ford is perhaps trying a little too hard as Eva and tends to be over-hysterical whenever she can't get her own way.

Robert Pickavance provides light relief with a brilliant portrayal of the drippy, almost effeminate attaché. He's naturally funny with voice and movement. It's a pity Pickavance doesn't feature in more scenes.

Hamish Glen who directs *Mr Puntila And His Man Matti* is committed to producing exciting, original theatre, yet at almost three hours long this play often lacks excitement. And it certainly doesn't live up to its billing as a classic no matter how you define the word.

In the programme, Peter Arnott says modern English doesn't seem right for *Mr Puntila And His Man Matti*, so he's kept in words such as unco - "peculiar but strangely appealing". That sums up the play perfectly.

"Mr Puntila And His Man Matti" runs until October 6th

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)