

British Theatre Guide

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The Midnight Bell

Sir Matthew Bourne choreography inspired by novelist Patrick Hamilton

New Adventures

The Lyric, Theatre Royal Plymouth

21–26 July 2025

A 1930s seedy London pub and its diverse clientele is a rather bleak setting for Sir Matthew Bourne's latest foray subtitled "Intoxicated tales from darkest Soho".

A take on Patrick Hamilton's collection of stories, *The Midnight Bell* is hardly a bundle of laughs as relationships are trialed, consummated and abandoned. Hamilton is to gritty underbelly realism what his contemporary Noël Coward is to upper-class cocktails and frivolity.

Inspired by the alcoholic behaviours and gin-soaked fantasies of Hamilton's works, Bourne's mash-up of several novels and new stories springs from the isolation of lockdown and shifting relationships.

The choreography is in the character development: the mesmerising wind of bodies knocking back the whisky and lighting fags, taking tea in Lyons teashop or catching a film, coinciding, exploring relationships and retreating; fumbling, fulfilling, being disappointed and succeeding—albeit momentarily. More Frantic Assembly physical theatre than BRB—hypnotic and with much detail easily missed in the plethora of intertwined stories.

It is all very *EastEnders*: sweet barmaid Ella (Ashley Shaw), too nice to say no to stuffy suitor Mr Eccles (Reece Causton), hankers after waiter Bob (Dominic North) who only has eyes for prostitute Jenny (Ashley Shaw); meanwhile, right sleazy cad Ernest Gorse (Glenn Graham) rips off prim, lonely spinster Miss Roach (Michela Meazza) taking her money, her necklace and her virginity. Lovelorn schizophrenic George Harvey Bone (Danny Reubens) is obsessed with chic, out-of-work actress flirty Netta (Liam Mower), while newcomer-with-a-secret Frank (Andy Monaghan) and chorus line Albert (Liam Mower) explore an illegal connection with some particularly palpable, emotional pas de deux.

Precision timing allows individual vignettes to develop in the same space.

Never one to disappoint, Lez Brotherston's set is a triumph: frosted glass pub windows and swing door, suspended neon signs, iron railings, lamppost and hints of fixtures such as red phone box arch and Bakelite receiver with chimneys and roofs against Paule Constable's brooding and atmospheric skies counting the hours from dawn to dusk, midnight to morning.

Avoiding a pastiche 1930s score, Bourne's collaboration with Terry Davies fulfils the wish list of atmosphere and reflection of the inner life of the characters: loneliness, furtive relationships, erotic obsession, drunken oblivion and bittersweet longing with a blend of original music and classics. Gershwin ("The Man I Love"), Irving Berlin ("Maybe It's Because I Love You Too Much"), Cole Porter ("What Is this Thing Called Love"), Duke Ellington ("Solitude"), Dubbin & Burke ("Dancing

With Tears In My Eyes") and others have their place, although the (impressively spot-on) lip-synching is somewhat distracting.

An interesting almost two hours (including interval).

Reviewer: [Karen Bussell](#)