

British Theatre Guide

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The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The Young Vic and The Old Vic Tunnels

Old Vic Tunnels

4–13 January 2013

The idea of attending a 50-minute long poetry recital could be seen as something of a turn off. The abiding image of hairy individuals in sandals reading unintelligible rot cannot help but spring to mind.

While in theory the opening sentence is a fair way to describe someone presenting *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, co-produced by The Young Vic and The Old Vic Tunnels and The Young Vic in a found space underneath the arches of Waterloo Station, it would be to undersell a special theatrical experience.

The other unexpected but very welcome aspect of what is sold as The Fiona Shaw Show is the significant contributions made by others to her exceedingly good and emotive performance.

Director, Phyllida Lloyd has pulled out all of the stops to animate the poetry, greatly helped by Miss Shaw's naturally effervescent personality. In addition, dancer Daniel Hay-Gordon is fully involved, getting pushed and pulled around like an infinitely malleable piece of Play-Doh in the team's efforts to convey maximum meaning and pathos.

Both actors manage to take on each of the main parts at some point in the performance: the Mariner, the wedding guest to whom his tale is related and even the fated and fateful bird hangs like a weight on the old man's shoulders.

The venue is helpful, since the Old Vic Tunnels echo pleasingly and provide an acoustic that sounds miked even though they aren't.

There are also helpful dark corners, enhanced by the lighting of Jean Kalman and Mike Dunning, which is also used for some fascinating and rather moving shadow play.

The carefully chosen props (of which the silent Hay-Gordon could well be classed as a representative) all make a contribution, including a long pole, bucket and tall ship each of which was surprisingly significant.

Ultimately, this evening lives or dies on the recitation. Fiona Shaw—recently seen starring in what could be viewed as a kind of complementary work, [Scenes from an Execution](#) at the National—has a strong, clear voice and chews on the meaty language with hungry relish. Some of the most memorable phrases in the English canon come from this poem, perhaps the most poignant "water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink".

This vocal talent, together with the physicality demonstrated by both performers means that even poetry-shy punters should be excited by what is on offer—moved by the ghastly tale of a sailor who

kills an innocent albatross and suffers terribly as a result.

Whether you are obliged to read this poem for an exam or merely want to understand it a little better, this interpretation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* proves to be not only educational but entertaining too.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)