

British Theatre Guide

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The Ungodly

Joanna Carrick

Red Rose Chain

Southwark Playhouse Borough, London

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The English Civil War was a time of insecurity for everyone, and the rich were constantly worried that the poor and vulnerable might want their help rather than just going off to die somewhere quietly.

The notorious, self-proclaimed Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins, made a decent sum of money not only claiming witchcraft as an explanation for the insecurity but also disposing of the vulnerable by hanging them as witches.

Joanna Carrick's play *The Ungodly* gives us an imagined glimpse of Hopkins's development from a shy, stuttering young man not particularly easy with women to a confident, dangerous figure in boots ready to track down women he thinks should be hanged.

The first half focuses on the gentle, engaging, domestic romance of Susan and the wealthy farmer Richard, who has been asking her to marry him for years. It's well performed in the round stage space by Nadia Jackson as Susan and Christopher Ashman as Richard. They have a fluent and effective chemistry that grabs our attention. The third character to appear in the early part is Susan's stepbrother, the insecure Matthew Hopkins, who worries about wicked women and God.

Katy Latham's impressive design of costumes and props feels very realistic and authentic, helping to transport us back to the seventeenth century.

The witchhunt takes off in the melodramatic second half, where a fourth character, the eighteen-year-old Rebecca West (Rei Mordu), is bullied by Hopkins into reporting the women, including her mother, who attended some kind of prayer meeting as having had contact with the Devil.

Initially, Susan and Richard are sceptical, but gradually, with Susan's continued loss of babies playing on their minds, they accept Hopkins's view and join in the persecution of the women.

The conversion is never quite complete. At one hanging, Richard turns away from the sight in pity. Susan, demanding to know why he did that, claims she would put the rope around their neck herself.

Unfortunately, the context of these events is not explored. The characters may as well be living on an island for all the sense the play gives us of what is happening in the world. There isn't any explanation as to why beyond religious superstition they should link the deaths of babies and Richard falling off his horse to witchcraft.

The narrowness of the storyline emphasises the melodrama and perhaps encourages the acting at times in the second half to become overheated and much less convincing.

Scapegoats for social problems such as the women and men murdered by such authority figures as Matthew Hopkins don't come out of nowhere. It's not just some spontaneous superstition. The prejudice is stoked up by those in authority.

We no longer really believe there are witches, but even in our time, there are scapegoats who are unfairly treated by society. No one should be surprised, after Sunak and Starmer played a surreal election campaign tennis of pointing to the dangers of boat people, that asylum seekers became a target of the summer riots.

Reviewer: [Keith Mckenna](#)