

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Tristan and Yseult

Carl Grose and Anna Maria Murphy  
Kneehigh Theatre/National Theatre  
Quays Theatre, The Lowry, Salford Quays  
To 12 November 2005

Kneehigh Theatre's latest production is billed as Cornwall's oldest love story - according to the programme it can be traced back five thousand years - but the company performs it in its own unique style. As usual in a Kneehigh production, the story is presented by a chorus of childlike storytellers from the midst of which the characters eventually appear; this time they are a crowd of lovespotters, dressed in anoraks, balaclavas and thick-rimmed glasses. From before the audience arrives, the lovespotters wander around the theatre, observing the audience through binoculars.

The story tells of how King Mark of Kernow (Cornwall) is helped to defeat an invasion from King Morholt of Ireland by Tristan. Tristan is sent to bring back Morholt's sister Yseult to be Mark's bride to complete Morholt's humiliation, but first Tristan falls for her on the voyage back and then Mark falls for her in earnest on her arrival in Kernow. The fatal triangle is cleverly woven in with the story of our narrator's, Whitehands, own story and her link with Tristan. All of this is told through a script that has some beautifully poetic moments and is mostly in rhyming verse. It is difficult to say whether the script could stand alone apart from Kneehigh's production, as play and production are entwined so completely and effectively that it is not easy to separate them.

Bill Mitchell's set is the Club of The Unloved, in which the lovespotters enact the story of Tristan and Yseult. It appears to be made up of bits that could have been lying around an empty theatre, with a row of old theatre seats at the side, a sail made from a piece of red velvet curtain and a network of metal catwalks and staircases leading around the stage and to all levels of the auditorium. In the centre is a circular platform with a step running around it where most of the main action is performed and a number of ropes and pulleys to hoist up various objects and even people. The set is perfect for Kneehigh's style, giving the actors plenty of places to run about and explore and things to play with.

This is a real ensemble piece, with a cast that works really well together. Every performer - including the musicians - plays a lovespotter when not playing a character, and most play musical instruments at some point. Having said this, there are also some wonderful individual performances. Tristan Sturrock and Éva Magyar give very physical and passionate performances as the title characters. Craig Johnson is the strong but tormented King Mark, and Giles King is his wonderfully creepy, scheming sidekick, Frocin. Craig Johnson creates two great characters: at first he is the sadistic Morholt who takes great pleasure in taking over other kingdoms and their peoples; later he is Yseult's maidservant, Brangian. As the latter character, he initially plays on the inevitable comedy of a large man playing a feminine woman, but when the character has to undertake a supreme act of sacrifice for her mistress, he manages to elicit heartrending sympathy from the audience. The whole story is held together by Amanda Lawrence as Whitehands, who holds the audience's attention at all times with her slow, controlled storytelling.

Kneehigh has created another fascinating production in the same style that they have used for past productions, which shows many clues about the company's early work in children's theatre but uses these same techniques for something very definitely for adults. The production takes us from silly knockabout comedy to heartbreaking sadness, and occasionally stops the plot for some explanation or some silliness without losing the attention of the audience. The audience on the press night ranged from a large number of older school and college parties right up to middle class, middle-aged (and upwards) spectators and all seemed to be fascinated by the production and gave it a rapturous reception at the end. As with past productions by Kneehigh, *Tristan and Yseult* is exciting, innovative and very entertaining.

*"Tristan & Yseult" runs until 12 November 2005*

Philip Fisher reviewed this production at the [National Theatre](#) and J.D. Atkinson did so at the [West Yorkshire Playhouse](#)

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)