

British Theatre Guide

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Warnings

Montague Rhodes James
St Pancras Church Crypt
(2010)

This is a promenade performance that mainly consists of a reading by Nick Blackburn (who is also the director) of two stories by M.R. James: *Count Magnus* and *A Warning to the Curious*. James was a classic writer of ghost stories and is known to have read them to his friends at Christmas so this generated expectations of a spooky night.

Entering down steps into a cold bleak cellarage with a couple of weak bare bulbs and a table littered with paper cups and what looks like the detritus from a meal, it does indeed look like you are in for an eerie experience. Oddly, when you are greeted by a young women who introduces herself as Isabelle and offers a cup of tea, you discover you are at a birthday party with balloons and party hats and singing 'Happy Birthday' to a girl called Meg. No sooner has the birthday girl blown out the candle on her cake than an eerie sound track of music and effects starts and you are let through into the rest of the vaults beneath the church.

As you begin to explore the rooms and tunnels, dimly lit by the occasional unshaded lamp, you find at one end a room with another jumbled table. There is a laptop computer open with technical text on the screen. It is surrounded by piles of page proofs, a typescript headed 'Gnomic marking in the Crusader period', little notebooks, and a horror movie DVD. There are a couple of M.R. James paperbacks on a shelf nearby with a tiny cloth doll like those used for black magic, and splayed open, spine up on the ground, lit by a lamp just above it, a hardback of another of his books. It is a reminder of the writer and of his material and now, as a voice is added to the soundscape, you realise that it is probably reading one of his stories.

Wandering further into the side passages you may come across piled funerary memorials, swathes of pebbles lying underfoot over the cobbled ground, bricked up arches, railings with a puppet hanging from them, a plaque naming a family vault, round shafts sloping upwards, a piece of entablature, plaster mouldings and classical roof decoration, bricks tied in bundles, a valley of sand between two wooden seats, a coat laid out on a brick shelf, with another mannikin beside it, and other things in the darker shadows..

Is that sharp squeak a rat? Perhaps only on the soundscape where still the voice goes on, talking about a family - it sounds like the Magnons? It's an even voice, not unattractive but repetitive in its phrasing, more like a mesmeric mantra than a story. It is not until the discovery of the actual reader that it becomes apparent that this is all the story-telling you are going to get, colourless and undramatic. None of it has entered my brain. The reader is almost motionless, head bowed over the book, hands still except for the most minimal movement when it is necessary to turn a page. Catch him when he has finished one book and before the rest and he seems to emit a long and silent howl.

I tried hard to concentrate on the second story, but even with other people in the reader's little room the effort was beyond me. I did pick up that it was set in a seaside town (hence the shingle and the sand you come across) and concerned the excavation of an Anglo-Saxon crown, but the delivery is deliberately boring, its stresses obfuscatory.

The reader is not the only performer. Indeed the odd clothing of some members of the audience suggested more than half of them could be part of the show - had it brought out all the local Goths? Looming as shadows in this location, to some extent they do become performers, but there is also a man who looks as though he could be real or a wraith, like a Dickensian convict. You find him half concealed around corners or in alcoves, leaping swiftly onto a ledge who matches the atmosphere exactly. Another fellow can occasionally be seen reading a book by the single candle that he holds, he may read some of it to you. The puppet has disappeared from its railing and two women are manipulating it, casting the outlines of a face upon its head with bent wire shapes and at one point another woman glides through wearing a white gas mask. Do they match anything in the story being read? I couldn't see how they did, but then I could barely follow its narrative.

This could be an intriguing venue for a promenade show, but there is far too little to the installation part of this show to hold the attention for its 90 minutes and if you want to enjoy M.R. James you would do much better to read it for yourself. He writes for the page not for narration. I'm not saying that it wouldn't work as story-telling, but that requires a totally different technique that would engage the listener and emphasise its mystery and drama. Nick Blackburn offers us exactly the opposite. Since he is his own director this is clearly his intention. The purpose of the birthday party framing eludes me.

It is always intriguing to see places closed off to the world and I've always found crypts and cellars have their own fascination but as a piece of theatre I can't recommend this. If you want to see this crypt that you might do better to catch one of the art exhibitions they hold there - or wait for someone else to exploit its dramatic potential.

Until 13th March 2010

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)