

British Theatre Guide

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Witness for the Prosecution

Agatha Christie

Theatre Mill

Guildhall Council Chambers, York

17 June–12 July 2015

Agatha Christie's 1953 play may have an excellent and long pedigree, including a 1957 film starring Charles Laughton, Marlene Dietrich and Tyrone Power, but I came to this production unaware of its twists and intricacies. Samuel Wood's production, in the atmospheric and well-employed setting of York's Guildhall, quickly drew me in and kept me gripped throughout.

As in Theatre Mill's previous productions, a lot of effort has been spent in creating a front-of-house experience that befits the period and non-theatre setting. But the true heart of the evening is to be found in the story and the performances, which do not fail to thrill and entertain.

Leonard Vole (Niall Costigan) stands accused of having murdered a helpless and rich 'old'(-ish) lady of his close acquaintance, and he turns to solicitor Mayhew (Adam Elms) and barrister Sir Wilfrid Roberts QC (Gordon Kane) to defend him in the face of what seems like mounting evidence against. The first act takes place in the chambers of this pair, and we get to hear evidence from Vole under Mayhew and Roberts's questioning, before the action moves to open court and we are cast as the jury in the case.

Those fearing that this may involve responsibility for Vole's life or death may be relieved that, despite the immersive setting, there is minimal audience involvement, unlike a previous show in the same setting, Flanagan Collective's [Sherlock Holmes: A Working Hypothesis](#).

The cast do, however, play off the audience in a masterly way, particularly once the trial is in session. Clive Moore, as prosecution counsel Mr Myers QC, gives a joyous performance which remains on just the likeable side of boorish, revelling in the theatrics of the courtroom, and delivering complex arguments with ease and conviction.

His opposite number, Kane, pulls off an equally compelling turn in the role of counsel for the defence. He has more of the heavy-lifting to do, scarcely off-stage once he appears, and Kane delivers a masterful performance of subtlety and wit—at times posing the piercing question, at others just as perplexed as the rest of us piecing the puzzle together.

In fact, as Mayhew at one point observes, the story boils down to something of a duel of wits between Roberts and Vole's wife Romaine (Rachel Logan). From Logan's first appearance, she is magnificent: striking and odd, watchful and upright. She plays the ambiguities and enigmas of the part to a tee in a performance that is a joy to watch.

I can't say much about the developments of the piece without giving away its many twists, but suffice it to say that these are superbly handled, and in Christie's expert text new revelations and depths appear at just the right moments.

I'm not a particular fan of the whodunit genre, but found myself drawn into the testimony of the witnesses as though their lives really did depend upon my judgement. The play is relatively well-peppered with laughs, too, and I frequently found myself chuckling at the ironies and chicanes of the characters' manoeuvrings.

The now-dated three-act structure does provide an overlong first half and a brief albeit satisfying final part, but short of reinstating the practice of two intervals I'm not sure what the production could do to rectify this. Perhaps some of secretary Greta's (Lowenna Melrose) physical comedic business at the opening could be excised, but it is a well-seeded and pleasingly wrong-footing way into the piece as it stands. Melrose is lumbered with most of the clichés of the 1950s secretary, but acquits herself well and provides a humorous contrast to the rest of the cast.

Natalie Roe's costume and set design is impeccable, and the lighting by Andy Pilliner subtly supports and shifts the already sumptuous setting of the Guildhall.

I'm not sure how I felt about the gender politics of the piece, which seems to cast women as either brainless, Machiavellian or victims—or some combination thereof—to say nothing of the (we assume) heavily ironic attitude to 'foreigners'. But the strength of the performances throughout the cast and the wit of the plot itself are recommendation enough for what is not merely a period piece but an involving and deftly executed thriller.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)