

British Theatre Guide

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

The Woman in White

Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, lyrics by David Zippel, book by Charlotte Jones
Palace Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue
(2004)

Andrew Lloyd Webber never clouds a good story with too many tunes.

True to the precedents of *Evita*, *Phantom Of The Opera*, and *Aspects Of Love*, his musical account of Wilkie Collins's Gothic Victorian thriller *The Woman In White* unfolds at the Palace Theatre to a minimum of musical diversion.

On the other hand, there is visual distraction in the form of modern day magic lantern scenic effects. Much projection of images, both back and front, using an otherwise bare cyclorama cut to ensure that doors of drawing rooms and parish churches open in the right places!

Initially, this is a great idea by director Trevor Nunn. No clumsy fittings, minimal props and any scene you want from a Cumberland railway cutting to an estate in Hampshire. "The audience will love it," they must have said - and for forty minutes indeed we do!

But the magic of the modern lantern palls at the first sense of dizziness, not helped by the poor raking of stalls at D'Oyly Carte's old Royal English Opera theatre. This means we all find ourselves behind someone of rugby playing proportions and must weave left and right to view the stage.

Meanwhile, the Collins 19th century tale, much curtailed from its original forty weekly episodes, weaves its magic through the floating images, washed by stirring waves of a rich Lloyd Webber soundtrack. I could hardly name that tune - but it is all pleasant enough. And the composer knows how to stir us into the applause that must be part of the score!

Easy viewing and easier listening - the tried and proved recipe for a long run; particularly since Lloyd Webber owns the theatre. Disappointing, however, for a promising cast who must have hoped for rather more when they reported for first rehearsal.

Only Michael Crawford, who balloons his figure for the role of Fosco, both literally and metaphorically fulfils himself. No mere *tour de make-up* this but a detailed, old school study of the stage villain. Crawford does not steal the show: it belongs to him.

Of the rest, Martin Crewes (Hartright) sinks into a slough of heroic syrup, while no fewer than three leading ladies, Angela Christian (The Woman), Maria Friedman (Marian) and Jill Paice (Laura), are mere shadows in the theatrical mist. And Edward Petherbridge is permitted only fleeting moments of fine histrionics as the ageing Mr Fairlie.

Costumes, when they can be seen, are excellent. It would be nice to say that also of William Dudley's production and video design, if only it remained in one place long enough!

That said, *The Woman In White* is likely to be at The Palace for some time. What the local operatics will make of it when eventually it does reach the Civic Hall is another matter.

Reviewer: [Kevin Catchpole](#)