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The Woman in Black is classic horror

Leon van Nierop

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Leon van Nierop: With the arrival of the long-awaited horror-thriller Paranormal Activity in movie theatres soon, this is a timely and effective production.

The Woman in Black applies classic horror techniques to send a shiver down your spine. What makes it even timelier is its welcome diversion from the sugar-coated array of formulaic entertainment currently on at theatres to cash in on the silly season. This one is an adult and bloodcurdling production that may scare the living daylights out of audiences desperate for an alternative to frivolous laughter.

It concerns a haunted mansion in which a mysterious apparition is glimpsed by a solicitor sorting out the affairs of a Mrs Alice Drablow who died in the Eel Marsh House in England recently. He refuses to acknowledge the existence of ghosts as he observes the moors and marshes surrounding the house that would even give Heathcliff the creeps.

Years after the events, at a Victorian theatre, the older Mr Kipps is still trying to come to terms with what has befallen him during his brief stay. The events are re-enacted by a younger actor which gives the stage play an extra dimension: a play within a play, allowing the audience to observe the horrifying events from a different, more sober perspective and frequently questioning what they are seeing. Did the mysterious woman in black actually exist or was it a figment of an over-active imagination? And both gentlemen contemplate how an audience will respond to the tale.

The success of Moira Blumenthal's production lies in the creepy and eerie atmosphere she creates, employing traditional Gothic techniques: atmospheric lighting, enough mist to cover the entire theatre, a torch blinding the audience, a mysterious locked door, a different and spooky dimension behind the stage, bizarre sound effects from upstairs as well as any horror director's best friend, good old fashioned darkness. And, of course, the sudden appearance of a pale face bathed in a blinding white light somewhere in the darkness beyond.

All these techniques are successfully applied to scare the audience witless, but it is the overpowering and deafening level of thundering sound effects that is the actual piece de resistance. The horrifying shriek of the woman during an unfortunate accident with a horse and cart is what actually jolts the audience into a different level of fear. (And is there any sound effect more scary in the horror genre than a horse and cart in the middle of the night?!)

These stage effects resemble cats jumping out of cupboards in movies or the brutal banging of cymbals in cinema during a quiet moment. These effects are successfully applied to the stage production, although, from this critic's perspective, a more subtle and atmospheric approach could have been just as scary. The sudden appearance of a white face without the accompanying effects that often serve as a warning of what is to come could have the same but more subtle effect. But remembering the original British stage production I saw years ago, the same level of screeching

loudness is applied there too, so, it obviously fulfils its purpose.

This production is slick, scary, entertaining, effective and atmospheric. Eckard Rabe convinces as the older man who is trying to re-imagine the horrors he has survived through the performance and talents of a younger actor.

But in the end the play belongs to the showier part, splendidly brought across by Anton Luitingh. This talented and multi-skilled young actor has the uncanny ability to sense exactly what an audience needs from a performance at different stages in this play and carries it through splendidly. He is one of the most exciting and brilliant young actors on our stage today and makes a welcome return after an overseas absence.

One attends this play to be scared, to have the hairs on your neck standing up and feeling that invigorating rush of adrenaline kick-starting your imagination. The play gives you exactly what you pay for and after a slightly overlong and slow start, sternly grabs you by the neck and rarely lets go. What is also effective is the Edgar Allan Poe-style of formal narration in which a story is retold in a typical dark, Gothic tradition and then re-enacted. This reintroduces the effects of good-old fashioned flowery narration in a stark, emotionless voice that forms the backbone of any good horror story.

Go along for this enjoyable fun ride into terror. But be careful of taking kids younger than 13 or even friends of a nervous disposition. You may just find yourself being haunted by their shrieks for days to come...

The Woman In Black with Eckard Rabe and Anton Luitingh, directed by Moira Blumenthal, at Pieter Toerien's Montecasino Theatre.

*Leon van Nierop is one of South Africa's best-known and most respected film critics. He has reviewed films for 34 years for every medium; from television and radio to magazines, newspapers and the Internet. He has lectured on film criticism for 14 years throughout the country and headed the TUT film school in Pretoria for 4 years. He has also written two books on film analysis, the most recent being *Movies Made Easy* published by van Schaiks. He has also served as judge for several short film and film competitions, is part of the SAFTA jury awarding Golden Horns to the best local film talent, and writes extensively on film for several publications. He also served as professor in film at TUT and also headed that film school for 4 years. He has just completed a stint as presenter, scriptwriter, voice-over artist and co-producer for DEKAT on SABC 3. He has written 23 novels and several TV-series and dramas and is currently working on another novel. He is also a newsreader and continuity presenter for RSG on SABC radio and serves as their major film critic.*

Web site: <http://www.montecasinotheatre.co.za>

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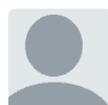
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