

The Masque of the Red Death Review
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Back to Basics

Necessity is the mother of invention. Or indeed insanity.

I mean, it is a bit of a crazy idea, really. "Let's put on a Victorian Gothic classic involving a huge, elaborate palace, a mad prince, thousands of villagers, a plague stalking the countryside, a full orchestra oh, and Death - with but 1 actor, a few boxes and some Cindy dolls!" Mmm yes, let's ...

Taking another trip to Birmingham's most miniature theatre, The Old Joint Stock, to see Birmingham-based and even more miniature theatre company The Happiness Patrol's version of Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* I was psychologically prepared for something that was either going to be ludicrous or a bit flipping clever. We all know it's a fine line.

As it happens, Happiness Patrol turn out to be a bit flipping clever. In all fairness, I have seen a couple of Philip Holyman's (writer, director) works before and so shouldn't be surprised that they pulled it off - with ingenuity, intrigue and very little infrastructure.

It occurred to me later, in the bar (place of many great revelations ...) that, in fact, this is a great production not despite the lack of cast, crew, set, big sparkly effects etc, but *because* of. It completely and utterly employs and engages your imagination. It is, essentially, brilliant visual story-telling. Now this, to me, is what theatre has always done best - offered a space for your mind to play, to become involved in a story; an imaginary world that, actually, you help to create - if guided deftly by a strong pen.

And it's pretty clear that Mr Holyman indeed wields an adroit one. His writing is always vivid and eloquent, so coupled with the assured, compelling performance of Gareth Nicholls (creative associate) I was left feeling that that's all you really need. Great writing and a great performance. Job done.

Sadly, there is still a mass exodus of dramatic talent that continually streams away from the regions to London - with the understandable reasoning being the well-established strength of its theatrical infrastructure. Having seen talented, small-scale local companies like The Happiness Patrol, however, I'm tempted to say sod infrastructure. Give me ingenuity and imagination instead, any day.

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