

Theatre Review

MARTIN GUERRE

Apollo Theatre, 1st - 1 2th June

Musicals at their best are like days of the week - they come, they wake us and they make up what we call eras. Furthermore, they make the era in which we exist seem timeless, with an everlasting energy. Martin Guerre last night at The Apollo did just that, it transported us like no musical since Guys and Dolls.

But Martin Guerre as a musical of an era has exceptional power, because it hypes (with self-awareness) a retrospective of halcyon days, but, at the same time, accepts that it is itself a part of an age and it is this that makes the story of Cameron Mackintosh's West End production so profound. Mid-revolution Paris has always offered a colourful palette from which can be painted masterpieces (Brecht and Brook admirably collaged retrospectives to this effect), but this musical does to the era in question what Brando did to cinema. It writhes with energy and tosses and rebukes with innocence, yet always remains keen to emphasise its instinctive appeal through a reluctance to sensationalise. Comparisons to Les Miserables are inevitable, but Martin Guerre has a depth of compassion that is never obvious to define. Perhaps it is cultural insecurity, but there is also a tendency to define an era in a great story. Nonetheless, Martin Guerre achieves some considerable power in its musical tenacity, matched with its boundless energy.

Rooted in the culture of revolution, our hero, Martin Guerre, throws himself into the fray of a post carnival atmosphere, full of bohemian bravado and astounding zeal. However, the people scarpers into their sore throat sobriety once the carnival symphony casts the fatal shadow of revolution and not even the handful of honourable exceptions can lighten the scenes of Paris under siege - even though the city, ablaze with chaos, is almost beautiful. He is lost in the battle and the city becomes a tomb, as the citizens become like the flames of a sinking sun. However, when Guerre returns to reclaim his family and the freedom of his land, it is clear that civil war has made mincemeat out of community trust and the flames can never be rekindled.

Conall Morrison's production (originally performed at Jude Kelly's West Yorkshire Playhouse) offers a sober beginning, but although a spotlight slightly misses the mark, the scene is set with real dank, dark and deliberate atmosphere, which it would be hard to define as anything but surreal. The mood is increasingly reemphasised with a lighting design that demonstrates impressive attention to detail by Howard Harrison (although I was momentarily off-set by the off-set of dead space); and a set so sombre that John Napier must have been in a depression, judging by his usual RSC decoration. However, this all works wonders with a story of love and betrayal, layered with an operatic and ethereal modesty and so, we travel through a lifetime of everlasting profundity with simple, home from home truisms.

This is a very innovative and exciting musical production and although early touring technical problems still exist and the Apollo's proscenium arch stage is not particularly apt for a big sound, a special mention should be made of Stephen Weller, Joanna Riding and Matthew Cammele, as they would have made Gordon Craig proud with their seemingly effortless vocal energy and sheer talent. All in all, if music be the food of life, tour on....

Andi Reiss

