

## Theater: Hovey's Woman in Black' makes for a good ghost story

By David Brooks Andrews/Daily News correspondent

GHS

Posted Jan 17, 2007 @ 07:03 PM

Waltham — *WHAT: "The Woman in Black"*

*WHEN: Through Jan. 27*

*WHERE: Hovey Players, 9 Spring St., Waltham*

*COST: \$15*

*INFO: 781-893-9171, www.hoveyplayers.com*

Fans of good ghost stories fall into two categories. Those who get so caught up in the suspense that they can barely keep from screaming. And those who take pleasure in the way the story is constructed and told.

Which ever type you are - or perhaps some combination of the two - you should find pleasure in the Hovey Players' production of "The Woman in Black," adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from Susan Hill's novel.

A production of the show has become a tourist destination in London, where it opened in June 1989, making it the second longest running play there since Agatha Christie's "Mousetrap." It occasionally pops up in regional and community theaters on this side of the pond, but it never has taken hold in quite the same way here.

The play features Arthur Kipps, an early 20th-century Englishman, who wants to exorcise memories of a ghost he encountered years earlier and thinks he finally can do so by telling his experience to his family. He hires an actor to coach him. This is the theatrical framework that Mallatratt built around Hill's novel.

Soon the two men begin acting out the story, with occasional breaks to return to the theatrical framework. Kipps is a London solicitor (attorney) who travels by train in the middle of winter to the bleak Yorkshire coast to wrap up the estate of Alice Drablow, recently deceased at age 87. The closer he draws to her town of Crythin Griffin, the more he encounters people who shrink at her very name.

He doesn't believe in ghosts and is quite willing to take a cart and pony over the oft-flooded causeway to the island where Mrs. Drablow's Eel Marsh House stands alone with its own private graveyard.

This is a classic ghost story with all of the traditional elements designed to create fear in us - a lonely, remote setting, characters terrified by something they've encountered and a protagonist who's confident that there's nothing to fear. The story also contains beautiful descriptions of the endless marshes with sea mist swirling over them and a pea-soup fog that totally isolates the island at times.

Chuck Schwager does a lovely job of bringing color to the story as he plays various weather-beaten characters whom Kipps encounters on his ill-fated journey. He could afford to be a little more precise with their accents, although it's tough for an American actor to handle such a wide range of English accents. As it is, we certainly feel as if we're encountering a handful of villagers who know something they can't quite bring themselves to say.

His miming of handling the reins and whip of a pony cart - actually a theater trunk, with him sitting on one end and Randy Marquis as Kipps standing at the other end - is wonderfully evocative.

Schwager has a very believable sense of frustration at the beginning of the evening when he also plays Mr. Kipps in an empty London theater struggling with the delivery of his story. Although this theatrical framework adds complexity, it's a little clunky and contributes to the first act feeling a bit slow. It could be handled more deftly, with Schwager, for instance, not overplaying Kipps's amateur reading style quite so much.

Randy Marquis has the opposite kind of challenge as he plays the actor hired by Kipps as well as Kipps himself during the journey and visit to Crythin Griffin. Both of his characters are considerably more generic.

Once Kipps is frightened, Marquis comes to life, but prior to that his characters would benefit from more emotional specificity. His English accent at the beginning of the play is so cliched that it blocks emotional life from coming through. Fortunately, this problem feels less intrusive as the play progresses. He does a nice job of miming the handling of a dog that's invisible to us and of being frightened and desperate.

Eden Land as the title character appears when we're least expecting her, and Cinda Lavelly's spare set contains some shrouded objects that makes us wonder whether we're seeing her or not.

Director Kristin Hughes may not have been able to help her actors work through all of the play's challenges, but she has created an engaging show that builds a powerful sense of suspense. It makes for an entertaining, edge-of-your-seat evening.

