



THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD

Warehouse Theatre ★★★

Midway through this rarely seen musical adaptation of Charles Dickens' fifteenth and final novel, in which orphaned Edwin Drood goes missing presumed dead just when he's about to cancel his marriage plans to his childhood sweetheart Rosa Bud, I began to wonder if the only way of solving the crime was for the audience to join hands, hold a séance and summon the author from his resting place in Dickens heaven to reveal precisely how he intended the plot to thicken when he suddenly died on 9 June 1870 leaving half of the serialised novel unfinished. Did John Jasper, the lad's Jekyll and Hyde-like uncle and local choirmaster who frequents opium dens when not giving Rosa piano lessons, bump off Edwin? Could Edwin's rival in romance, Neville Landless, be the guilty party? And what part did kindly old Reverend Crisparkle play in the vanishing of Edwin?

Fortunately, it turned out that Dickens' darkest of mysteries was easily solvable by the final curtain. Rupert Holmes' musical (winner of a handful of Tony Awards when it premiered on Broadway in 1985 with a cast led by Betty Buckley, but a total turkey when it subsequently opened in London's West End with Lulu and Ernie Wise) is a kind of Dickensian Cluedo set in the Victorian Music Hall Royale complete with a traditional gavel-wielding chairman and lots of melodramatic on-stage thespianism – a show within a show in which the audience gets to vote on whodunnit and how the denouement will unfold in one of several pre-rehearsed multiple endings.

After she had sung "The Wages of Sin" I was convinced that East End drug dealer-turned-sleuth Princess Puffer was the obvious culprit and that she'd bumped Edwin off in the Reverend's conservatory with some Victorian lead piping, but soon found myself outvoted *X-Factor*-style by the majority plumping for inoffensive old Crisparkle himself, who as far as I was concerned wouldn't have said boo to a Christmas goose.

Holmes' score is surprisingly melodious, though thankfully his peculiar Americanisation of bygone British music hall culture has been given a much-needed cheeky wink by director Ted Craig and his ensemble of actor-musicians, led by Stefan Bednarczyk's urbane Chairman (he also doubles as Crisparkle) and Kate Feldschreiber looking boyish in trousers as the doomed Drood.

Designer Cleo Pettitt's intimate proscenium arch setting also conjures up the lost world of barnstorming performers where no turn was unstoned by the interactive audience.

So who killed Edwin Drood? Whatever Dickens may have intended before he laid down his prolific pen forever, there's no mystery about this deftly executed musical version of his last book: it's fun to watch and appeals to the Miss Marple in all of us.

Roger Foss