



DICKENS ON BROADWAY: The cast of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Photo: Joan Marcus



## *Theater Review*

# *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

**Charles Dickens story is a gorgeously wrapped holiday package**

### **THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD**

**Book, music & lyrics by Rupert Holmes**

**Choreography by Warren Carlyle**

**Directed by Scott Ellis**

**Through February 10, 2013**

**Studio 54**

**254 West 54th Street**

**(212-719-1300), [www.RoundaboutTheatre.org](http://www.RoundaboutTheatre.org)**

**By David NouNou**

A theatrical piece that tries very hard to entertain and amuse during this holiday season, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is based on the unfinished novel of the same name by Charles Dickens (he died before it was completed). Rupert Holmes musicalized it by setting it at the London Music Hall Royale in 1895, with music hall actors performing this adaptation to the point where Dickens left off. The second act consists mainly as filler in which the audience decides who killed Edwin Drood. As stated earlier, the show tries to entertain, but does it succeed? I would say in a most cases, yes.

The three factors that are absolutely sublime about *Edwin Drood* are the beautiful scenery by Anna Louizos; each set is like a holiday greeting card (her set designs have become a marvel to behold; she is one of the few designers left who actually anchors a show with her sets). The sets are brilliantly lit by Brian Nason, who captures every mood, be it day or night, with his beautiful lighting palate. The costumes by William Ivey Long are just delectable. These three factors never cease to delight throughout the whole evening. Also, it is a plus having the show play at Studio 54 since it is the perfect venue; it doesn't have a wide stage, so everything is centralized and visually perfect.

The story at best is minimal: Edwin Drood (Stephanie J. Block), nephew of John Jasper (Spencer Plachy, at the Friday night performance I attended; Will Chase was out). Edwin is engaged to Rosa Bud (Betsy Wolfe). Rosa is a musical student of Jasper's, who is fanatically in love with her. On Christmas Eve, Edwin goes out in a dreadful storm and subsequently is found dead. The rest of the characters are not really essential to this review, and to write about them would just be confusing. Their purpose is ultimately for

the audience to decide on who the killer is.

Rupert Holmes was the precursor to Kathy Lee Gifford and her now-infamous Broadway musical, *Scandalous*. Like Ms. Gifford, Mr. Holmes not only wrote the book and the lyrics, but he did her one better: He also wrote the music, all the way back in 1985. Like her, being a singular visionary, in the theatre milieu, is an odd choice, entrusting so much responsibility to one person, considering his claim to fame was the insipid 1979 pop phenomenon "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)." However, unlike Ms. Gifford, he actually wrote a clever book, infused with genuine fun. The score at best is negligible and forgettable. There is one exceptional song, "Both Sides of the Coin," not for any memorable melody or beauty but for its cleverness and rapidity, sung by Jasper and the Chairman/M.C. (Jim Norton).

The best performance of the evening has to be Jim Norton as the Chairman. He evokes the memory of another brilliant character who first originated this role, the late George Rose, who won his second Tony Award for this show, and Mr. Norton is equally deserving. Being the narrator, not only does he center the show but also moves it along. Miss Block, as Edwin in a thankless role, does have a voice that is a constant delight. The role of John Jasper is an obvious part (the villain) and Mr. Plachy does it justice. Gregg Edelman, as the dotty Reverend Crisparkle, is a constant delight.

This brings me to the incomparable Chita Rivera as The Princess Puffer, the lady who runs an opium den due to her mysterious hidden past. Ms. Rivera is a theatre legend. She and Angela Lansbury are the last of the Golden Age of Broadway from the 1950s and 1960s, and to have her in any show would be an honor. However, it pains me to say that this is one of the *very* few times that she is miscast. Being cast as the Cockney owner of an opium den in a London music hall in 1895 is an impossible feat, even for a lady of her formidable talents.

Of the supporting cast, who are really more comedic characters and do not add much to the plot other than entertainment, I would be amiss not to mention the Dickensian characters, many of whom are giving exceptional and delightful performances: Betsy Wolfe as Rosa Bud is just lovely. As the twins from Ceylon (don't ask), Jessie Mueller as Helen Landless nails it at every turn; and Andy Karl, as Neville Landless, is hammy to perfection. Robert Creighton, as the drunken Durdles, and Peter Benson as Bazzard the actor who never gets his due, are amusing.

Considering the material, kudos to Scott Ellis, for his fast-paced, constantly moving direction of his troupe, and putting this albeit thin present into a beautifully wrapped package.

***Edited by Scott Harrah***

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