The Woman in Black
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespearean Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

Copyright © 2009, Utah Shakespearean Festival. Please feel free to download and print The Study Guide, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of the Utah Shakespearean Festival.

For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespearean Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

Cover illustration by Philip W. Hermansen
The Woman in Black

Contents

Information on the Playwrights
Creators of The Woman in Black 4

Information on the Play
Synopsis 6
Characters 7

Scholarly Articles on the Play
The Woman in Black—Frightfully Imaginative 8
Stephen Mallatratt and Susan Hill: Creators of The Woman in Black

By Lynette Horner

Scarborough, England is a picturesque destination located on the northeast coast of Yorkshire. This seaside resort boasts sweeping ocean views against dramatic cliffs, a castle—and the Stephen Joseph Theatre, one of the most influential seedbeds of new writers for the theatre. It also provided the backdrop for the collaboration of Stephen Mallatratt and Susan Hill and the birth of one of the longest running stage plays in theatre history, The Woman in Black.

Stephen Mallatratt’s road to Scarborough began in post World War II North London where he was born and raised. He began his love affair with the theatre as a child after attending theatrical productions at the Watford Palace Theatre. Throughout his youth he gained experience in local amateur theatrical companies. After leaving school he took a brief detour working in construction, always keeping an eye on his dream of training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. At the age of twenty-one he realized that dream. Upon the completion of his studies he joined the acting company at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough.

Mallatratt appeared in leading roles in many of the plays produced at the Stephen Joseph Theatre and would continue to act throughout his career. But, more importantly, the Stephen Joseph Theatre provided the climate that germinated a discovery that Mallatratt was also a gifted playwright. Of his abilities, his friend and colleague, Peter Wilson wrote,

“We first met when I directed his play Comic Cuts in the late 1980s. He told me that Comic Cuts had been written at white heat (like so much at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in those days) because a new play of that name had been advertised and cast before the theatre discovered that the script hadn’t been written. So Stephen had to take the title and the cast and write a new play of his own to occupy the slot . . . Nothing had prepared me for the radiant accuracy of the farcical engine that Stephen had created, or the vivid speech patterns peppered through the script” (www.thewomaninblack.com/cast/Stephen.php, 2 April 2009).

Mallatratt contributed nearly a dozen plays to the Stephen Joseph Theatre's repertoire including The Woman in Black, an adaptation of Susan Hill's gothic chiller by the same name.

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough in 1942. She credits her mother for nurturing her love of the theatre as she took young Susan to almost every production of the Scarborough Repertory Theatre. Susan recounted that she probably didn't understand a great deal, but loved the sights and smells of the theatre experience. As a young teenager, Susan attended many productions at the experimental theatre-in-the-round, the Stephen Joseph Theatre, until her family moved from Scarborough when she was sixteen years old.

She published her first novel before she entered King’s College in London. As a budding writer, she was taken under the wing of the novelists Pamela Hansford Johnson and her husband C.P. Snow. As she orbited their circle she was brought into contact with such notable writers as W.H Auden and T.S. Eliot. She is the recipient of the Summerset Maugham Award for her novel I'm King of the Castle and the Whitbread Award for her novel The Bird of Night.

Susan's memories of her youth in Scarborough provide the thinly disguised backdrop for several of her early novels. In 1983, Hill's ghost novel The Woman in Black was published.
Mallatratt read it and envisioned how it could be adapted for the stage using very little by way of scenery and props, and number of actors for that matter. His vision relied on the most chilling aspects of the play to be created by the audience’s imagination.

Of their collaboration and unexpected success of *The Woman in Black*, Susan Hill wrote:

“The play of my ghost novel *The Woman in Black* owes everything to Stephen. He read it, saw how it could be adapted, and did so brilliantly . . . and the rest is theatre history.

“It works. He knew it would work and I didn’t believe him. What a fool. As soon as I saw it, in the tiny studio in the old Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, I knew that I had been a fool not to trust in Stephen.

“We all owe him a debt we can’t repay . . . we? We are the dozens . . . hundreds, indeed, of people who have been kept in work and an income and a reputation, for some eighteen years, because of his genius in seeing what could be done with a book that otherwise would have sunk quietly out of sight” (www.susan-hill.com, 2 April 2009).

Both Stephen Mallatratt and Susan Hill were surprised by the success of *The Woman in Black*. Susan tells of how she and Stephen would “often have a laugh about the play we thought would run in Scarborough for six weeks and which went on into the West End for fifteen years. It always seemed funny somehow” (www.susan-hill.com, 2 April 2009).

In addition to his stage career, Mallatratt’s acting credits include a role in the acclaimed movie, *Chariots of Fire*, and on British television as the vet John Stokes in *Emmerdale*. He appeared twice in the British serial *Coronation Street*, for which he was also a member of the writing team and produced 115 scripts. Like *The Woman in Black*, Stephen Mallatratt is noted for his exceptional ability to adapt other works to theatre and film. Among his later works were the 2002 adaptation of the *Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy.

In 2004, Mallatratt scripted *Island and War* depicting the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands during World War II, and in which he also played a small role as the vicar.

In 2004, Stephan Mallatratt was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and died in November of that year. Tributes from friends and colleagues described him as gentle, reliable, principled, loyal, and sometimes melancholy. Among the crown jewels of English theatre, playwright and actor Stephen Mallatratt may appear a minor gem. But, if success is measured by the ability to create a work that continues to make history as one of the longest running productions in London’s West End, then Stephen Mallatratt and his work have to be considered prize gems.
Synopsis: The Woman in Black

Kipps and the Actor are rehearsing in an empty Victorian theatre. The Actor works to train Kipps to effectively tell his haunting story of events from years ago, so as to rid him of the persistent nightmares he has been having. The two become immersed in the strange tale of Mrs. Drablow and her Eel Marsh House.

The storytelling begins as Kipps is sent to handle the estate of the deceased Mrs. Drablow. He makes the trip to her funeral in a bleak and lonely part of England. Throughout his travels he meets others who evade his questions about Mrs. Drablow. His several encounters seem to yield very few specifics about her and her estate.

At the funeral, Kipps alone observes a strange young, ghastly-looking woman who is wearing all black. Mr. Jerome, the colleague accompanying Kipps to the funeral, did not see the woman in black and reacts powerfully when Kipps mentions her.

The next morning, Mr. Keckwick takes Kipps to Mrs. Drablow’s eerie house. The only way to the house is over a narrow causeway during low tide’s shallow water: it becomes impassable otherwise. As Kipps investigates the house and the surrounding property, he again sees the woman in black, but is unable to follow her. His apprehension and fear grow.

As he cautiously explores the inside of the house, he uncovers a large number of documents and information he must sift through in order to settle Mrs. Drablow’s affairs. His efforts reveal secrets and unexplainable events. Who is this woman in black? Why are the townspeople so hesitant to answer his questions? What happens to haunt Kipps years later? As Kipps and the Actor struggle to tell the story and exorcise both their demons, we learn the chilling answer to these questions—and more.
Characters: The Woman in Black

Kipps: The middle-aged solicitor of Mrs. Drablow's estate, Kipps hires an actor help him tell his story of Mrs. Drablow in order to rid himself of persistent nightmares.

Actor: A young man hired by Kipps to help tell his story.

Woman in Black: A mysterious, ghastly young woman, does she exist in life, or just as part of Kipps's nightmares?
The Woman in Black—Frightfully Imaginative

By David G. Anderson

Curiously, the Utah Shakespearean Festival fall season has almost always provided us with a flair for and taste of the Halloween dramatic. Perhaps it started unintentionally, but knowing our beloved founder Fred C. Adams, the coincidence seems too unreal. The year 2003 saw Little Shop of Horrors. The 2004 season was by far the best Halloween season ever, with Macbeth, Blithe Spirit, and the cryptic, eerie nature of Eli in Spitfire Grill. Another thrilling play that kept with the spirit of the season was Pippin, with the bizarre, chilling efforts of the cast trying to persuade Pippin, the lead actor, to do himself in. In 2007 we had The Mousetrap, and last year, Gaslight. Perhaps the most spine-chilling has been saved for now. This year’s production of The Woman in Black might induce the most goose-bumps of all.

The association of Halloween with its haunted houses, ghosts, graveyards, mayhem, and death fits nicely within the framework of The Woman in Black. The play is set in the nineteenth century, and death and horrors are ubiquitous: the damp English fog, an island cut off from the mainland by a marsh, the eerie, aptly-named Eel Marsh House, locals barely breathing a word of dark secrets surrounding the ghost of a mother who lost a child on the causeway, and the deranged revenge she seeks upon other inhabitants of the island.

The Woman in Black is a ghost story—a play-within-a-play. It is creepy, old fashioned storytelling at its best; the kind often told around a campfire. An interesting phenomena associated with terrifying campfire ghost stories is the more macabre and imaginative they are, the closer everyone inches toward the center of the fire. This play relies on that most important element of any wonderful ghost story, or for that matter the theatre, imagination. Unlike most of today’s films and television, this story gives the audience credit for employing a practical imagination. Imagination, after all, delivers the proclivity of inching toward the seat’s edge, much as those around the campfire inch closer to the fire. Stephen Mallatrat, who made the adaptation to stage from Susan Hill’s novel affirms, “The fear is not on a visual or a visceral level, but an imaginative one” (1987).

“I think that ghost stories have to have a point beyond frightening. It’s all very well to be frightened but there has to be a point” (Susan Hill, The Woman In Black, Introduction). Audiences are forced to confront basic feelings regarding their fears. What is it in our imagination that triggers the emotion of fear? What is the reaction, and do we all fear alike? Is there a necromantic avoidance or desire within us? “Ghost stories . . . tell us things that lie hidden within all of us. . . . They also frighten us delightfully, give shape, form and substance to our darkest and most primitive and child-like fears and imaginings, and perhaps most importantly of all they entertain” (ibid).

The background story features the normally unaffected, junior solicitor, Arthur Kipps. He has been sent by his firm to a place located in a remote part of England to settle the affairs of a deceased client. This place is accessible only by Nine Lives Causeway during low tide. Eel Marsh House was owned by Alice Drablow, a name which stuns even the locals into silence. It is surrounded by bogs and contains secrets for which Kipps had hardly bargained. Something awful has taken place there, and strange dreadful things begin happening to the young Arthur Kipps. Most peculiar is the haunting appearances of the woman in black with a pale, emaciated face and appetite for malevolence.

The action takes place in, surprise, the very theatre in which we are sitting, making the audience co-conspirators. Kipps hires an unnamed actor to help retell, recall, and revisit the
unexpected horrors he experienced thirty years earlier, ostensibly with the hope of exorcising those events from his life. The hired actor portrays Kipps, while Kipps himself plays several other characters and acts as narrator. The play-within-the-play functions as extended flashbacks that retell the journey. In reenacting the scenes, the actor brings the past to life with seemingly séance-like results and terrifying consequences. The question surrounding Kipps is if the man is prescient, knowing full well the results, or if his efforts are of an occluded nature.

The decision by Stephen Mallatratt to move the action inside an empty Victorian theatre was the vital adaptation from book to stage. Mallatratt explains, “as soon as the idea came of admitting that we were on a stage, all other problems solved themselves. The imagination does everything in this play” (Interview, 1987, emphasis added). The opening scene takes the form of an uneasy reading of the script’s beginning lines written by the inexperienced solicitor, while the professional actor criticizes. This cleverly written scene prompts the audience members to use their imagination and is key to the theatrical experience. This version of the play-within-the-play depends upon absence rather than presence, and thus upon performativity. What the audience experiences is a metaphysical version of the adaptation process.

Utilizing the theatre to stage the story of *The Woman in Black* is brilliant, not only because it solves certain logistical problems, but it also allows the theatre itself to become a character of the play. The spectral association of the theatre with the preternatural is a natural. This striking instance of the intersection between ghost story and theatre virtually appropriates the imagination. Stories of haunted theatres are second only to haunted houses. “Theatre, we know, is larger than life—a place where imagination is nurtured and stretched, and where superstition abounds . . . where every effort is made to attain the conductive air of ‘magic’ conjured up by the ‘live’ performance. This receptive atmosphere opens the door to the past . . . and to the spirit world” (Roy Harley, *Theatre Ghosts*, p 27-28).

Commenting on playwrights and ghosts, Sigmund Freud remarked, “We adapt our judgment to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard spirits and ghosts as though their existence had the same validity as our own has in the material reality” (*The Uncanny*, standard edition, 1957). *The Woman in Black* is a classic ghost story, metaphysically portrayed within the framework of thrilling theatrical storytelling, and allows all to succeed in a most believable way. “The play itself reveals itself as a sinister comment on the whole nature of storytelling” (Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 1989).

The imagination can be a wonderful and powerful tool, but it can also be debilitating and cumbersome. It is essential to good theatre. A fairly rigid, albeit entertaining, requirement of attendees is to suspend reality. Associated with the imagination is the power of suggestion. Film greats of the past such as Alfred Hitchcock terrified us simply by suggesting the sinister. The need to visually exploit was unnecessary. “Darkness is a powerful ally of terror, something glimpsed in the corner is far more frightening than if it’s fully observed” (Mallatratt). Our imaginations are too powerful a tool to leave rusting and unsharpened. The theatre provides us with the impetus to exercise this wonderful device. The thump in the night, the creak behind the door, the muffled scream, the eerie glows, the dark and spooky graveyard; all can have mesmerizing and terrifying effects on an audience as tension mounts. *The Woman in Black* is replete with all of the above. Add to these the swift undercurrents of a murder mystery, and the inexorable vortex completely submerges us, the willing accomplices, to an attempted exorcism of ghostly pasts—but then we are back to the plausibility of horror—ah, but perhaps it is best to leave the latter unspoken when ghosts are out and about. It is after all nearing All Hollows Eve.