

THE THEATER MIRROR, New England's LIVE Theater Guide

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"What Happened in Boston, Willie"

Reviews of Current Productions

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"Jack The Ripper"

A Review by Sheila Barth

Although "Jack the Ripper: the Whitechapel Musical" is a new, gutsy two-act play, writers Steve Bergman and Christopher-Michael DiGrazia worked on refining it since the 1990s. Closely adhering to the facts, they eliminated and added new songs and scenes three weeks before its March 28th opening at Boston Playwrights Theatre. Together, they have created a musical nail-biter that keeps theatergoers' attention riveted to the stage, from start to finish.

Both men are fascinated with the 1888, hideous, unsolved serial murders in London. News reporters heralded it as "the crime of the century," spawning incredulous theories about the cloak-and-dagger monster stalking London's streets. He - or she - terrorized the city, brutally mutilating and murdering prostitutes, with the skill of a surgeon.

Bergman and DiGrazia adhere closely to chronicling the murderer's reign of terror, his victims, detectives' ineptitude, and journalists' unbridled joy in sensationalizing this ugly era. But they've also cleverly taken literary license and created an emotionally abused, deranged creature, whose inner torment and killer urges overwhelm him. No, the devil didn't make him do it. This guy is even more shocking.

The playwrights' theory is as plausible as historians', who pointed a fickle finger at Lewis Carroll, Prince Albert Victor (both proved to be unfounded), several prominent physicians, gentlemen, a female dubbed Jill the Ripper, an insane hairdresser, a three-time wife killer, and hundreds more. The case remains unsolved, but its mystery tantalizingly lingers.

FUDGE Founding Artistic Director-Director Joey DeMita, who designed a versatile, creepy set and great Victorian costumes, wisely cast talented, baby-faced Matt Phillipps as Jack the Ripper. Phillipps

mirrors charming, handsome murderers (think Ted Bundy) who easily deceived their victims. And PJ Strachman's lighting casts an eerie tone, drenching the stage in red during killings, then fades to deadly dark. As Jack writhes and screams in mental agony, Strachman shines the spotlight on him, capturing his anguish.

Eric Rehm, Jermaine Golden, and Cristhian Mancinas-Garcia as obnoxious news reporters verbally and musically relish prodding Inspector Frederick Abberline (Michael Levesque), with their relentless questions and searing headlines. While Abberline tries to establish a trail of clues, the mild-mannered detective's sensibility is clouded by his infatuation with pretty prostitute Mary Jane Kelly. Levesque and Hollyann Marshall as sensible, prescient Mary make harmonious music and romance together, while Katie Preisig as defiant prostitute Elizabeth Stride, Lori L'Italien as drunken prostitute Catherine Eddowes, Molly Gervais as prostitute "Polly" Nichols and AnneMarie Alvarez as prostitute Annie Chapman add dramatic and, at times, comedic clout to Bergman's impressive musical score.

Nobody except Abberline has sympathy for these ladies of the night. While the women sing about the "Likes of Us" and they, Jack, and the waitress-barmaid (Kathleen Comber) chant they're "Better Off Dead," the barmaid chides them for their wanton ways, saying they deserve it.

Music Director Ben Oehlkers and band provide wonderful accompaniment throughout the play, and are especially effective in ensemble numbers, defining each woman's plight and doom, including "Now That's Brave Talk," "Here and Now," and their ghostly "Mary's Reminder".

Kyle W. Carlson as Dr. Llewellyn and ensemble members Agatha Babbitt and Benjamin Medeiros nicely round out the cast.

"Jack the Ripper's" hauntingly lovely music and stirring plot are so intriguing, I won't reveal any more. You must see it for yourself, and decide whether it should join the ranks of contemporary horror musicals that have successfully invaded the big White Way.

BOX INFO: Premiere of two-act musical; music, lyrics, orchestrations by Massachusetts award-winning Steve Bergman; book, lyrics by Bergman and Christopher-Michael DiGrazia; appearing with FUDGE Theatre Company, through April 12, at the Boston Playwrights Theatre, 949 Comm. Ave., Boston. Showtimes: April 11, 12, at 8 p.m. Tickets: \$26; students, seniors, \$21. For more information, call 617-945-0773 or visit www.fudgetheatre.com; reservations, call 866-811-4111 or visit www.fudgetheatre.com.

"Jack The Ripper" (till 12 April)

[F.U.D.G.E. THEATRE COMPANY](#)

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