

Hartford Stage, Hartford, CT

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Jeffrey Hatcher, based on the novel “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” by Robert Louis Steversm . Directed by Melia Bensussen. .

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Who IS this Edward Hyde?”

It’s a strange case, indeed, when a historic piece of theater is torn apart and rebuilt as something it was never meant to be, but that is what is now on view at Hartford Stage with their new production of this classic tale. In 1887 actor Richard Mansfield commissions a theatrical version of 1886 book and since then actors as varied as Spencer Tracy, Fredric March and John Barrymore have reveled in the act of open view character change as Jekyll, through his medical miracle morphs into his baser self, Hyde. Nothing to gloriously melodramatic happens in Hartford, however for Bensussen and Hatcher’s production has both entities on stage at the same time still themselves with their only connection an emotional one.



Nathan Darrow and Nayib Felix; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

In another, even more irritating, error of judgement Jekyll is a handsome white man and his darker self, Hyde, is played by a handsome black man. This tells the audience that white is as good as while can be and a black heart belongs to a black man. Both are attractive but the black man is the only truly evil presence on stage. I found this to be a base and low concept that insults people in more ways than one. Nathan Darrow’s Dr. Jekyll is deeply troubled and wishes to put an end to his experiment but Nayib Felix’s Hyde resists all attempts to control his evil peronality.

While this is definitely a part of Stevenson's story it is played awkwardly and at one point in this there are five Hydes on stage confronting the only Jekyll; the odd are clearly against him,

The actors are wonderful and they play the tensions with terrific fervor. Darrow's doctor is deeply troubled but has little understanding of what Hyde is. With the aid of a detective, played by Felix also, I think, he learns about Hyde's murderous indiscretions. (The program does not clearly identify all of the many characters played by this talented company of six players.) The only female character in this play is Elizabeth Jelkes, played by Sarah Chalfie. Another actress, Jennifer Rae Bareilles, plays Mr. Poole whose appearances are stranger than strange. Like everyone but the two principals, she appears as many people throughout the show.

It is interesting to note that three days after the Mansfield version of the play opened in London the first Jack, the Ripper murder took place. I doubt that this edition of the story will produce such a horrifying coincidence but I will keep my ears peeled just in case.



Nayib Felix and Sarah Chalfie; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Melia Bensussan's production is fascinating to watch. On a complex set designed by Sara Brown many mystifying things occur. The basically dark period costumes were created by An-lin Dauber. The dark, moody and occasionally startling lighting design came from the mind of Evan C. Anderson. Jane Shaw produced the original music and sound design for the play.

Most theatrical and film adaptations of the book added women to what was otherwise a men-only vision of 19th century London. This play is no different. The character of Elizabeth, who sincerely loves Hyde in spite of his cruelty seems unique and it is an intriguing aspect of the story here. Sarah Chalfie's presentation of her is very interesting and very different from our contemporary women. That Chalfie plays her so well and so believably is a tribute to the acting skills of this formidable actress.

I didn't rush to see this play. I am glad to have seen it, but it is not one that I would highly suggest you see. There is good acting and some exciting production elements here but the final sense of the play is that stereotypes have been used to make points that need to be avoided, that the eternal struggle between good and evil is no longer defined, that actors are denied the major opportunity to explore both sides of their characters. What should be exciting and vital theater has been left sobbing on the stage floor as the death of Dr. Jekyll turns into nothing more important than the suicide of a stupid man.

+ 10/26/2024 +

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde runs through November 3 at Hartford Stage, Church Streetm Hartford, Connecticut, For information and tickets go to boxoffice@hartfordstage.org or call 860-527-5151.

