

Alton Fringe Theatre

THE PLAGUE

(After *La Peste* by Albert Camus)

Adapted by Neil Bartlett



March 30th to April 1st, 2023
Amery Hill School Hall, Alton

Cast

Mr Cottard	Joseph de Peyrecave
Mr Grand	Rod Sharp
Ray Rambert	Cath Gerlach
Dr Rieux	Simon Brencher
Jean Tarrou	James Willis

Chorus

Brian Arrowsmith Angela Cross Penny Cushing
Jo Hopkins Helen de Peyrecave Lesley Willis

Musicians

Piano	Patrick Busby
Soprano	Wendy Busby

Production Team

Director	Steve Gerlach
Chorus director	Jo Hopkins
Stage Manager	Lou Moore
Technician	Chris Lang
Front of House/Bar	John & Sue Hubbard and Fringe members
Tickets/Publicity	Steve Gerlach
Poster/Programme	James Willis
Photography	Ian Dumelow

Running time 115 minutes including interval

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Synopsis

An Inquiry.

Five ‘witnesses’ gather to answer questions, give evidence and relive their individual and collective experiences.

The testimony of the witnesses is punctuated by scenes recounting their thoughts, emotions and actions during the time of plague.

From the first signs that something is not right, through the inevitable suffering that ensues, to the isolation of the city and then its eventual liberation, a story unfolds from the memories of those who were there. A doctor, a local government employee, a journalist, a ‘man about town’ and a mentally unstable criminal are thrown together by the catastrophe that befalls the city.

The thoughts and actions of the witnesses during the plague are laid bare for all to see. The witnesses engage in a struggle with the consequences of the plague and their own rationale for existence.

Notes on the play

Neil Bartlett in his introductory notes to the play script writes *“This adaptation - for five actors, on a bare stage - uses the words of the original novel. It is a story full of images of infection, contagion, chaos and emergency - of official platitudes and denial, of private and public despair; and of intolerable suffering. It is also a story full of courage, choice and hope.”* We could be forgiven for thinking that Bartlett was describing the experience we all shared in the past few years. Yet *La Peste* was published in 1947 and Bartlett’s adaptation in 2017.

We at the Fringe hope that we are true to Bartlett’s concept of a minimalist setting which allows the actors to create the ‘images’ in the mind of the audience. There will not be any blood, images of suffering or even rats. Everything we see and hear will be evoked by the actors and the words they speak.

The play does not have a naturalistic script. Whilst there is a notional chronology, the ‘witnesses’ will be going in and out of different time frames in order to ‘re-live’ their story.

It is challenging, but ultimately rewarding for the actors and the audience.



Neil Bartlett

My grateful thanks to all the amazing actors, chorus and Fringe members. My special thanks to Jo Hopkins; it really wouldn't have happened without you. And, as ever, to Cath for your constant support...Thank you.

Steve Gerlach

The Music

The music for this production of *The Plague* is timeless, capturing the essence of each scene and the overall atmosphere of the play.

The first piece before the action commences is Gluck's aria: *Che Farò Senza Euridice*, which along with the piano solo *Mélodie de Gluck* at the end of the play, were performed by an opera company in the original novel by Albert Camus on which this play is based. A short piano solo arrangement of this aria is also played when Rieux says goodbye to his wife at the train station as he feels the pain of separation.

Later in the play, as the news of the official communiqué declaring a state of plague and the closure of the town is announced, we have the aria *Ah Belinda* from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* which reflects the torment of Dido knowing her fate is sealed.

The first half of the play concludes with Chopin's haunting *Prelude in E-Minor* in keeping with the sombre mood at this time.

Later in the second half we have the piano solo by Robert Schumann from his *Scenes of Childhood* which depicts a child falling asleep. This mirrors the point in the play where the child slips into the final sleep of death.

Towards the end of the play, to reflect a more optimistic outlook, we have Richard Strauss's *Morgen* - the lyrics in this aria reflect the hope that a new dawn will bring happier times.

The final piece of music is a piano solo arrangement: *Mélodie de Gluck* which provides a fitting and atmospheric close at the end of the play.

Patrick & Wendy Busby

The Chorus

In *The Plague*, Bartlett makes use of the theatrical device of the Chorus which originates in Greek drama of the 5th century BCE. Then as in modern theatre, it forms a bridge between the main action and the audience.

In Classical drama, the Chorus would have been a group of up to 50 voices speaking in unison whereas now the approach is more flexible, as our production demonstrates with a combination of single and multiple voices in unison or overlapping. The purpose of the Chorus remains the same: to comment on the action and express the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the actors.

The Chorus communicates with the audience, involving them as 'friend' to understand and sympathise. At one point in *The Plague*, they apologise to you, the audience: 'We're sorry we have to talk about this – but we did witness these things.'

Bartlett's original script indicates that the main actors will speak the choruses. However, he sometimes doesn't allocate lines to individuals, thus encouraging experimentation and giving us the freedom to introduce a separate group of actors to form this Chorus. He believes that the Chorus should reflect the personality of individual voices, which is what we hope we have achieved.

Jo Hopkins

Albert Camus - Rebel with a Cause

Since the publication of his novels, *The Outsider* in 1942, and *The Plague* in 1947, Albert Camus' philosophy has inspired generations. His ideas developed and changed, moving from the solitary, 'absurdist', but ultimately life-affirming, Meursault of *The Outsider* to the caring, altruistic rebel with a cause, Rieux.

Nobel prize winning Camus (1913 to 1960) was born in French Algeria to working-class *pieds-noirs*, that is people of French and European descent born in Algeria under French rule, an important heritage for Camus' life, beliefs and work. Brought up in poverty he was an outstanding student, excelling in his studies to become one of France's most influential 20th century writers and thinkers. He was strongly antifascist and anti-totalitarian, so when declared unfit for active war service, he moved to Paris where he was active in the Resistance, working on clandestine newspapers.

Intriguingly, his later philosophy was influenced by his early involvement in football. The team spirit and sense of common



Albert Camus

purpose he found in playing inspired his exploration of themes of solidarity, of the need to resist pessimism, to be *engagé* and take action.

But *The Outsider* and early lyrical essays stressed different values, those of the love of life and nature, and the solitude and absurdity of an empty, meaningless universe, where ultimately the one certainty is life itself. It was by building on this humanist certainty that his later philosophy became clear: the need to revolt against and resist any threat to human life and happiness, be it war, plague, religion, or injustice.

Camus was a humanist, rejecting revolution, but embracing rebellion, revolt and solidarity. Like Rieux he was a rebel with a cause.

Jackie Slack

Bubonic Plague and the Yersin-Roux Serum

Bubonic plague was responsible for the Black Death which devastated Europe in the 14th Century. It has cropped up sporadically ever since, causing an estimated 6 million deaths in India in 1900-1909 and several hundred deaths in Africa since the year 2000.

The causative bacterium, now called *Yersinia pestis*, was described and cultured by Alexandre Yersin during an epidemic in Hong Kong in 1898. Four years later Jean-Paul Simon discovered that it was transferred from infected rats to humans by infected fleas.

The organism travels along lymph ducts from the bite site to the corresponding regional lymph nodes, which for bites on legs would be in the groins. The painful, suppurating lymph nodes are called buboes - hence bubonic plague. Without treatment, septicaemia and death follow in a high proportion of cases.



Yersinia pestis (x10,000)

Treatment with the Yersin-Roux serum, developed in the Pasteur Institute in Paris, became available as early as 1896. This was supplanted by sulphonamides in the 1930's and then, in 1947, by the highly-effective antibiotic streptomycin.

The present play exemplifies the crucial role that human endeavour and fortitude, partnered with science, have played in fighting epidemics of all kinds throughout the ages.

James Willis



The Fringe

Three decades ago, a group of talented amateurs came together during what was then Alton's May Arts Week to perform *Murder in the Cathedral* under the professional direction of Patrick Sandford. Inspired by this experience and led by Tim Guilding, they stayed together to form a new drama group in Alton.

Ever since, they have been challenging themselves and their audiences with a wide variety of dramatic material, including more than 40 plays ranging from Shakespeare to Schiller, from Euripides to Pinter, from Ostrovsky to Lorca, as well as programmes of readings. The characteristically small-scale, intimate productions have attracted a devoted following as numerous members of the group have taken turns at directing and performing.

Memorable highlights have included *Moll Flanders*, *the Musical* in 2009 and Oscar Wilde's *Salome* which received large audiences and an independent four-star review at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Recent productions have included *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, in both of which Tim Guilding, who died in August 2021, took the leading role.

Join us in the Cherry Orchard!

Our next production will be *The Cherry Orchard* in the Studio at Wessex Arts Centre, Alton College, October 26-28.

Casting is still open and anyone wishing to perform, or be otherwise involved, in this classic Chekhov, is warmly invited to get in touch and experience the openness of this friendly group. Contact the Director, Louise Biddiss (louise@dilloway.net) without delay if you are interested.

Website: www.altonfringe.com

Email: altonfringetheatre@gmail.com

Thanks

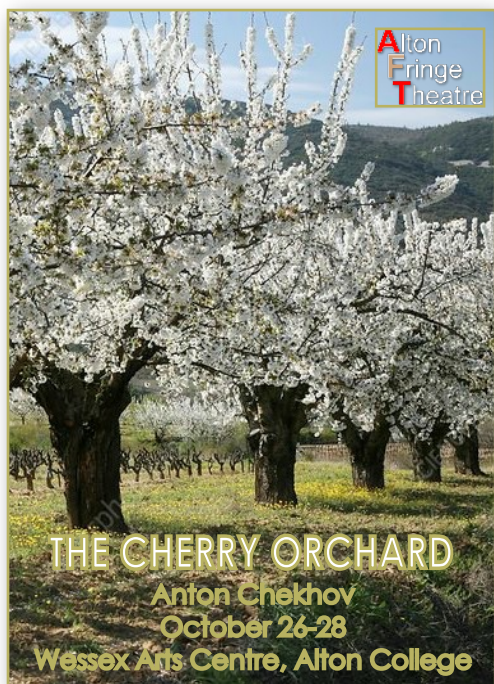
Amery Hill School - The Site Team, Administrators and Mr N Gibbs, Head of Drama *for tech support.*

Mike and Louise Biddiss *for rehearsal support*

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Joanne Champion joannechampionconsultancy.co.uk
for masterminding the rebuilding of altonfringe.com

Our October production



A poster for the production 'EVITA'. The background is a vibrant purple gradient. In the center is a black silhouette of a woman with her arms raised in a dramatic pose. At the bottom, there are silhouettes of several hands raised in the air. The text on the poster includes: 'Alton Operatic & Dramatic Society Presents an amateur production by arrangement with the Really Useful Group', 'EVITA' in large white letters, 'Lyrics by Tim Rice' and 'Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber', 'Originally directed by Harold Prince', 'Alton Assembly Rooms', 'Weds 10th to Sat 13th May 2023 at 7:30pm', 'Saturday matinee at 2:30pm', 'For more information visit our website', 'www.aods.org', 'Tickets available on www.ticketsource.com', and logos for 'AODS' (Alton Operatic & Dramatic Society) and 'noda' (National Operatic & Dramatic Association).

Alton Operatic & Dramatic Society's May production