

Director's thoughts afterwards

The Venue:

The Maltings was well liked as a venue by the audiences and by the cast. But it was quite hard work. 55 chairs had to be brought down from the chair store upstairs in the lift (they found a way of getting two trolley loads at a time in on the last evening) These we added to 80 older brown, wooden chairs – giving us 120 seats for audience, 13 for the cast along the back of the stage, 3 for the narrators (which they hardly used in the end) and a few over.

The backdrop was a lot of work for Mike and Ruth, done in six panels, it was fixed with adhesive Velcro across an array of upright panels that Stephen Dolley had for some event at the church. These all-but covered the two central windows.



The Lighting all had to be improvised. We used the Maltings' board with six flood lights roped up underneath the central beam, about in line with the front row of chairs. Then we had two 500-watt halogen floods. These were controlled on two dimmers also hired from SoundTech – near Godalming., who also provided good cables and adaptors. This all seemed Heath Robinson but actually worked extremely well providing the pool of light I wanted in the middle of the room.



Getting a three-night run would be difficult in the Maltings because the whole place is taken over by a youth club every Friday evening. And there is a general problem that the Centennial room is used for other things every day, so has to be

cleared after each performance. They let us leave the lights up (wires hitched up out of childrens' reach) and the backdrop – although the latter had been pushed along the wall when we got there on the Thursday afternoon.

All the windows can be blacked out which is excellent, and ventilation was OK (cool March weather) with the doors into the corridor open.

The acoustics were excellent and the narrators at the ends of the room could be heard by everyone. We did not use any microphones.

Our sound system was our two Denon speakers from our kitchen rested up on the far ends of the two outer beams over the stage, wires run back along the beams with the lighting cables and brought down, supported out of the way by a microphone stand we found in the storeroom. I used my usual combination of Sony Minidisc deck and my Kenwood amplifier, both from Ebay. I wonder whether this may be the last time we use minidisc – I can see that using solid state – perhaps MP3 – may be the way forward, although I am still distrustful of the sound quality available – probably through ignorance. Anyway, the system we used worked well, giving good Welsh Male singing before and after and a selection of understated sound effects, mainly off the web, but some recorded specially, like the bells of St Laurence, Peter Ashworth's organ playing, also St Lawrence, and stones rapping on our porch window, and milk bottles clattering outside the back door.

Because it is a religious building it was amazingly free from the sticky web of regulations enmeshing amateur performances everywhere else – there were not even illuminated exit signs so we could begin and end in *complete* darkness. This was absolutely wonderful and felt like a return to ten or twenty years ago. (We will have to be careful how much we talk about this or the Health and Safety fascists will descend and remedy their omission)

(The main Saxon room has a dead acoustic and voice amplification would have been essential – and would have ruined our conception of the play.).

Conception

Working with three narrators was excellent and broke up what can be quite long stretches of monologue (not everyone can be as riveting as Richard Burton, although Richard, Christine and Penny did extremely well, especially in the opening and closing sections when they did it from memory. Their styles were wonderfully contrasting, Richard resonant and atmospheric, Christine exciting and animated, Penny still and crystal clear. Starting and ending with the same picture – the three narrators and Captain Cat alone on stage, everyone off, and complete darkness for one sentence, was very effective.

A lot of our staging was dictated by Fred Sharples' immobility due to his recent leg fracture. So there was no question of putting the cast along the back up on roster blocks. Performing from Steve Marsden's four blocks, to create a 4' X 8' mini-stage 1' high, worked extremely well. People could move from their seats and around on the performance area very easily and inconspicuously. The roof beams are anyway very low in the room and up on the roster blocks they have you are not far from hitting them. A play which was less complete without a visual element might be more problematic in this space, because nor is there any possibility of raising any of the seating.

Getting a good Polly Garter and a good Eli Jenkins was fundamental and we hit the jackpot in both. Allyson was absolutely stunning.

James Willis