

Under Milk Wood
Performance by The Alton Fringe
29th March 2006

Review by Claire Chappell

“To begin at the beginning: it is spring, moonless night in the small town” - nestled in the Hampshire hills, the good men and women of Alton gather, seated in the new Maltings, waiting in anticipation. For tonight is Alton Fringe’s latest production. It can only be “Under Milk Wood” by Dylan Thomas.

Lesser theatre companies might steer clear of such an ambitious undertaking. The complete text has a running time of over one and three quarter hours, there are more than 72 talking parts, made famous by the late great Richard Burton, and it’s Welsh!

With strong, charismatic, and often multiple, performances from the whole cast, and gently persuasive direction, the audience quickly and seamlessly enters a small Welsh seaside town. Filled with unique characters and complex relationships Milk Wood could be anywhere and nowhere!

Dylan’s distinctive and musical script was beautifully directed by James Willis. Often very funny, sometimes hauntingly dark, the production had both a light bubbling softness and a dramatic depth and clarity. James adapted The Fringe’s simple sets and engrossing direction to a new venue, Alton Maltings – and never lost sight of the purity of a Fringe production. Actors were dressed in black. The few sound effects included children’s babble and ticking clocks, presented brilliantly by the cast.

Performing such a complicated, snappy, poetic script to a full house (on both nights), in a new venue is a daunting experience. All the Fringe players were exceptional. James took the slightly unusual and ambitious step of providing three narrators. It paid off. Penny Cushing’s steady portrayal, perfectly complemented Christine McDerment’s more flamboyant manner and bridging narration was Richard Fowler’s consistently deep melodic tones; “listen” he said - and we did!

Dylan’s visual and evocative language can be easy to parody. The cast took great steps to ensure their performances neither swamped nor belittled the familiar tones. Rs were rolled and vowels softened but only if a realistic portrayal was guaranteed.

Bringing a resonance and gravitas to the role, Fred Sharple's lament to Alison De Ledesma's lost Rosie Probert was achingly sad. Ann Scott and Chris Chappell proved themselves versatile and engaging by playing characters which ranged in complexity, personality and age!

One of the new recruits to The Fringe, Claire Matthews was naturally effortless in her fine portrayal of the love-lorn Myfanwy Price. With natural comic timing, and charismatic humour Tim Guilding and Gavin Meikle brought wit to the soulful script.

The long-suffering Mrs Organ Morgan's banter with her musically-obsessed husband Organ was perfectly portrayed by Lesley Willis and Brian Jones (whose softly-lilting accent was made for the role). Morris Hopkins ghostly Mr Ogmore was perfectly chastised with comic humour and subtle pathos.

Catherine Gerlach's rendition as Mae Rose-Cottage, neatly engaged the audience by directing her conversation with her goats to those sitting closest. Mike Biddis recalling his tales from the night before was both accurate and funny in his portrayal of the drunk but lovable Cherry Owen.

And a rare talent, both actor and singer, Allyson Halls' portrayal of Polly Garter was hauntingly poignant in her moving rendition of love lost.

Dylan's main themes of love, death and life came together with one strong and charismatic voice in a musical choir for the Sunset Poem.

The only direction Thomas gave to the actors in the original New York production was "love the words". The cast of The Alton Fringe were passionate in the accuracy and presentation of a beautiful and evocative script. In the words of one of the audience "make sure you give them a first rate review – they deserve it!"

