David Copperfield by Charles Dickens

Adapted by Alastair Cording, Directed by Kevin Shaw, at Oldham Coliseum
Reviewed by Simon Belt and Yvonne Cawley February 2013

This was our first visit to the ***Oldham Coliseum***, despite it being in the back of our mind to go sometime - and what a delightful experience it was! From the convivial and relaxed welcoming reception of box office, ushers and bar staff to the familiar faces from the northern soaps sat next to us in the bar chatting freely with those around. No pretence and a down to earth directness you expect in Oldham, and just being part of an extended family of theatre goers and doers. The brochure references supporters and volunteers and this really does permeate the mood around the foyer and bar.

Notably spacious, the auditorium has really comfy seating, with plenty of leg-room and something also commented on by the people behind us (in the stalls). It transpires that they were installed last year which just adds to the experience, and even just a few rows from the stage we didn't have to crane our necks to look at the stage as is sometimes the case in theatres. The acoustics were great too - just there when they were needed without ever thinking about them, indicating some elegant delivery which doesn't distract from the focus of the stage.

David Copperfield is a wondrous tale of ***triumph over adversity*** as we follow David Copperfield's journey from boy to man - in circumstances not of his own choosing. We encounter a host of diverse and influential characters that shape his life. No matter what trials and tribulations are thrown at young Master Copperfield, he has a fantastic drive, innocence and enthusiasm to overcome, and pushes himself forward and grows ever stronger and more rounded for it. The production clearly compacts a nuanced story for performance on the stage, and is fast-paced because of it, but does capture the transformation very well, and includes great roles for **Uriah Heep**, **P eggotty** and **Steerforth** .

The acting was incredible and each actor portrayed at least two characters (with the exception of ***Jack Wilkinson*** who played a fabulous David Copperfield), all unique, and demonstrated the versatility and diversity of their acting skills, as they transformed before our very eyes into a new character with a whole new voice, style and demeanour. The way they managed to do the costume changes so quickly and efficiently, is surely testament to the costume designers as much as the actors, and such an authentic impact of the period. Everyone, to a man, gave an energetic and heartfelt performance, and you could tell, even without looking at the brochure for previous acting credits, that what you were witnessing was a wealth of acting talent and experience which shone through.

Jack Wilkinson gives us a perfect performance as the main character, **David Copperfield** and delights with his gradual transformation from a young boy into a man. There is no need for flamboyant costume changes or make-up - he depicts perfectly the characteristics of a young boy, thirsting for knowledge and adventure which he obtains from his collection of books. As the play progresses, even though the clothes are basically the same, we see subtle changes in his demeanour and character, the way he stands, talks and becomes more confident. A truly brilliant portrayal.

Joanna Higson brings out the richness of the wise and loving **Agnes**, as well as intriguingly doubling up as **Mother** and **Traddles**. The young *David Copperfield* with his thirst for knowledge and life experiences is drawn to the endearing *Agnes* who offers warmth and a beguillingly tender maturity. *Agnes* sees beyond the pup that David presents himself as, and offers insight that guides him

thoughtfully away from her, only to be drawn back to her as his adventures improve his depth but leave his heart wanting. This relationship was so well handled in its appreciation of the the depth of human personality, and the mystery involved in sparking love.

Kieran Buckeridge played posh boy and bounder **Steerforth**, and in the blink of an eye a tremendous **Uriah Heep**. As *Uria h* , he blended a very 'umble *Frank Spencer* and *Colin Jeavons* (played Mr Shadrack in the 1970s TV Series Billy Liar), in a very funny performance, with just the right amount of hand wringing as his fortune changed, in total contrast to the portrayal of confident and debonair *Steerforth* .

Tim Treslove played **Murdstone**, **Micawber** and **Daniel Peggotty**, which was a wide range indeed, and perhaps one of the most challenging and diverse range of characters, which he delivered with aplomb. From the jovial, honourable, down to earth *Daniel Peggotty* to the strict, controlling and harsh *Murdstone* and then thrown into the mix is *Mr Micawber* , a raucous and verbose character. Today's world of bleeding heart entitlement and timidity, it must take quite an imagination to produce the effect of masterful control oozing from *Murdstone* 's authoritative click of a finger.

Robin Simpson was a funny throwback to the days of warped and sadistic headmasters as **Cre akle** , and also doubles up as the heartening

Ham
& the eccentric and slightly dotty
Mr Dick
. Although the instivnctive reaction to
Creakle
is that of annoyance at unimaginative rote teaching, but with the impact of the character of
Murdstone
, it was a mindful reminder of how self-assured adults used to be.

Rounding out David Copperfield's experiences, ***Isabel Ford*** was delightfully versatile and rounded as **Peggotty**, **Mrs Steerforth** & **Mrs Micawber**
;
Helen Kay
played
Betsey Trotwood
&
Jane Murdstone
, the wicked witch of Murdstone's alter ego, and
Jo Mousley
finished out with
Dora
&
Emily
. It's hard to believe now that there were so many characters, but they were all played so well and seamlessly moved through the scenes that it really was like moving through the various personalities that impact and shape your own character and behaviours.

Alastair Cording should be congratulated for his ingenious adaptation of this classic. The script flowed brilliantly, and although at times dealing with some sad, unfortunate incidents he managed to convey the sadness and distress without being maudlin and brought out a real sense of humour and our desire to get on with whatever life throws at us, no matter how hard.

He managed to condense a 700 page novel into this two hour show without any hint of it being rushed or piecemeal. It was a witty and compact masterpiece.

The set (***Alison Hefferman***), sound (***Lorna Munden***) and lighting (***Jane Barrek***) all worked seamlessly, and we loved the flow and ingenuity of how the actors participated in the scene changes and the wonderful use of a minimal amount of props, the way the lighting ensured the audience focussed on the central characters, slightly dimming those who were manoeuvring the props. For example the central prop of a bed was then transformed into a cart used to transport passengers and baggage, then becoming the Peggoty's house simply by adding a smoking chimney to the loaded cart – fantastic and so inventive. It then masqueraded as Uriah Heep's accountancy workbench and even a ship – brilliant!

Also impressive was the shipwreck scene, where the actors donned capes to portray fishermen and then utilised this to depict the ravaging waves, which then carried Ham as he swam to save a stranded survivor. Excellent and such a wonderful portrayal of a rough, unforgiving sea, you actually felt that those bodies were the rising, crashing waves.