



[The Master and Margarita](#) , [Unity Theatre](#)

Reviewed by [Georgina Kirk](#) October 2013

It was with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation that I approached **Lodestar**'s dramatisation of *The Master and Margarita*

, one of my favourite books of all time. I live in Manchester and had planned to see this production at The Lowry but it was pulled from the schedule there and I had to schlep over to Liverpool (a great excuse to spend some time in a city I always enjoy visiting but it put more pressure on the play to be worth it).

Mikhail Bulgakov's cult novel is a satire on Stalinist Russia, with its stifling bureaucracy, its vanity and pettiness, its greed and profiteering, its hypocrisy, its institutional atheism and its propensity to lock up dissenters in lunatic asylums. But it's so much more than that. It's also a love story, an adventure and an exploration of Good and Evil, encompassing theology, philosophy and psychology, infused with magic realism and containing excerpts from a novel within the novel, in which we read the Master's reinterpretation of the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ. And, unlikely as it may sound, it's often very funny.

I was intrigued, therefore, to discover how all this could possibly be conveyed on stage. I was apprehensive about the potentially yawning gap between the adapter's vision and my own and I was further concerned by the blurb's promise of "video, puppetry, magic, animation and performance", which signalled to me the triumph of form over substance.

Well, I needn't have worried. From the very first moment, when actor and director **Max Rubin** stepped out of the wings, I recognised him immediately as

Professor Woland

and knew the book I've loved for over two decades was in safe hands. This excellent man was responsible for adapting the novel for the theatre and bringing to life the essence of Bulgakov's masterpiece in a most imaginative and creative way. The phantasmagorical nature of the text found itself projected (literally) on to the walls of the blank-slate set, allowing instant scene changes and interaction with characters not physically on stage.

Professor Woland is, in fact, the Devil. He and his bizarre entourage arrive in Moscow and proceed to cut a swathe through the corruption and duplicity endemic in that society. Of all the novel's characters who didn't make the theatrical cut, I missed Azazello, the fanged henchman. His activities are assigned to the remaining members of Satan's retinue, Koroviev and Behemoth, and the story works just as well; the adapter was right, there is neither space nor need to lift every individual from the page. Koroviev, the jovial, check-clad German assistant to the Prince of Darkness, is marvelously portrayed in this production by **Simon Hedger**, who brings verve and spark to both this part and his other main one as the doctor at the psychiatric institution.

Behemoth

is a giant cat, a role carried off remarkably effectively by **Hannah Gover**

A tomcat played by a female actor is one thing, men being played by women is another. The eight-strong cast of the Lodestar Theatre Company was struggling to cover the plethora of male characters and decided to dress women as men as necessary and brazen it out. In most plays this would be a disaster but in the distorted, magical world of *The Master and Margarita*, rather than undermining credibility it serves to accentuate the weirdness.

With everyone playing a variety of parts, the scene changing often and radically, and some challenging semi-illusions being thrown in, the cast and stage-hands are to be commended at the very least for the feat of logistics they manage so smoothly, with elaborate costumes and props always in position at the proper time. Original music, composed by **David Ben Shannon**, complements the action perfectly. This production is slick, thoroughly rehearsed, beautifully thought-out and stage-managed.

Max Rubin as Woland has the power and presence one would expect of the Devil and the strand of the narrative that revolves around him is the aspect of the play that works best. **Olivia Meguer**

gives a strong performance as Margarita but the force of the love between her and the Master didn't quite reach me. Ironically, despite being based on Bulgakov himself, the Master is a nebulous part, difficult for the actor to imbue with much colour.

Joseph England

did an adequate job but, for me, where he excelled was as

Caiaphas

, almost a cameo and yet made memorable by the human complexity he emanated.

Casting decisions were no doubt based on practical concerns rather than anything more lyrical, but I found it fitting that **Jack Quarton**, who played the poet ***Ivan Bezdomny***, also played ***Matthew the Levite***

. Both characters are instrumental in tying together strands of the story and serve a kind of

parallel function as witnesses to, if not quite protagonists in, pivotal events.

The scenes set in ancient Jerusalem, which so affected me when I first read the book, are less compelling than those in Moscow and I think this was mainly because so much had to be cut (they were the obvious scenes to condense, since they are separate from the 20th-century story lines). Nevertheless, the Biblical elements had to be there and I felt we were given just enough of a glimpse into the Master's view of it all to show what a fascinating spin he put on it.

The final point I must mention is the magic. As an amateur magician myself, I was delighted by the conjuring tricks performed by the Devil and his entourage. Understated but professionally executed, these effects are a bit of fun but they also reinforce the image of the Professor of Black Magic and his assistants.

For anyone interested in its themes, this is a play well worth seeing. I wondered at first how easy it would be for my companion to follow, since he hadn't read the book, but I soon decided the script was so well devised that everything was explained as clearly as it could be, given the often chaotic situations. And, in fact, my friend understood what was going on just as well as I did.

Even for a matinée performance, the **Unity Theatre** was packed and everyone we heard commenting on the way out was enthusiastically positive. My fear that
The Master and Margarita

might be a bit niche for a mainstream audience proved completely unfounded.

It was an ambitious project, to put it mildly, to turn this great book, so of its time and place and yet so transcendent of both, into a two-hour play. But Lodestar has done Bulgakov proud and what you'll experience here is a physical and metaphorical demonstration of the novel's immortal line "Manuscripts don't burn".

Additionally Sarah Bartlett reviews [The Master and Margarita](#) novel ahead of a Salon discussion on it in December.