

 **Hard Times** at [Oldham Coliseum Theatre](http://www.coliseum.org.uk/) by Stephen Jeffreys adapted from the novel by Charles Dickens. Reviewed by [John Waterhouse](#) and John Gormally May 2017

The novels of Charles Dickens have an almost timeless appeal. Each new generation continues to relate the sufferings and travails of his protagonists to the injustices and wrongs of their own world. It may also be said that only William Shakespeare can equal Dickens in giving us across his various works such a broad range of characters who remain familiar to us, demonstrating both admirable virtues and all too human failings. How many other writers other than Shakespeare and Dickens have given their names to the actual times they lived in.

The familiarity of Dickens' work does present certain challenges in that with so many big screen, television and theatre adaptations, each new production has to somehow appear new and vibrant whilst keeping to the Dickensian world audiences expect to see. The Oldham Coliseum production of **Hard Times** has met this challenge admirably, fully telling the story of a complex novel with a myriad of characters using imaginative lighting and staging and an excellent cast, each of whom showed great versatility in playing a range of people. The seven actors play a total of 19 different parts but the effect is often of a much larger cast.

**Hard Times** is very ably directed by **Chris Lawson**, in his second production at Oldham Coliseum, using a fine blend of lighting techniques and good background music to create a variety of moods throughout the play. Although the setting is broadly minimalist against impressive two-storey staging, occasional large physical props are used which broaden the overall feel. However, it is the engaging performances which we are drawn to, in particular the heartless bullying of Josiah Bounderby, excellently brought to life by **William Travis** and his spirited wife Louisa (Gradgrind's daughter), played by **Verity Henry**. Then there is the pedantic, fussy Mr Gradgrind, played with feeling by **Cliff Burnett**. **Tom Michael Blyth** gives an endearing portrayal of the tragic and hapless Stephen Blackpool, an uneducated man wanting peace at all costs (to his own detriment), and ultimately says of life 'tis all a muddle. **Isabel Ford** gives a vibrant performance as the determined Mrs Sparsit and **Felicity Houlbrooke** evokes feeling for the Felicity who, like so many others is experiencing hard times. Aside from the oppressors and the oppressed, the darker aspects of the story are relieved by the foppish, pleasure-seeking Mr Harthouse and the delightful circus owner Mr Sleary.

Some may try to draw parallels to Dickens' portrayal of the injustices of nineteenth-century England to today's world of obscenely-rich bankers and hedge-fund managers set against a growing underclass dependent upon food banks but for me, stories like **Hard Times** show how much we have to be grateful for, compared to life in Victorian times. This was a time when there was no free health service or social housing. In fact, doctors were known to employ debt collectors and being out on the street meant exactly that. We catch a glimpse of the start of trade unions in **Hard Times** and try to imagine working conditions with no health and safety laws or any employment rights at all; when Mr Bounderby dismisses an employee on the spot, there is no recourse to any employment tribunal or state assistance whilst you try to find another job! And Stephen Blackpool find himself as a

poor man not being able to get a divorce while the rich could easily buy one.

All in all, writer Stephen Jeffreys did a very good job condensing what is a novel, which Dickens divided into three books, into a 2 and 1 hour long play covering all the essential action points and including all the key characters. An excellent re-telling of a well-known story in a dynamic and imaginative way; a great night of theatre.

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**Hard Times** is on until Saturday 3rd June.