

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

Presents

THE WOMAN IN BLACK a Thriller

by

**Stephen Mallatratt
and Susan Hill**

(a study guide)

Premiere on 5 September, 2019

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 2, 3 and 4 September Performances

Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours

Matinee Performances at 11.30 Hours on Tuesdays and

Fridays beginning 10 September

The English Theatre of Hamburg

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Established in 1976

Dear Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** on 5 September, 2019, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 2, 3 and 4 September. Bookings for this popular thriller have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be obtained at theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk or amazon.com. Teachers interested in being invited to a dress rehearsal of the play on 1 September at 19:30 should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephen Mallatratt (1947-2004) is a British playwright best known for his stage adaptation of Susan Hill's mystery novel **THE WOMAN IN BLACK**. As a teenager he fell in love with acting while attending Orange Hill Grammar School in Edgeware. He was praised for his performances in the school plays, and then later, after graduating from drama school, he pursued an acting career, appearing in theatre, film and stage roles. In addition to his achievement as a playwright, Stephen Mallatratt is well known for his work as a television screenwriter on three popular TV series: **CORONATION STREET**, **THE FORSYTE SAGA** and **ISLAND AT WAR**.

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, in 1942. She became interested in literature at an early age in her school career, culminating in a degree in English at King's College London. Although perhaps best known for her mystery novel **THE WOMAN IN BLACK**, she is a celebrated author of other fiction as well, such as **THE MIST IN THE MIRROR** and **I'M THE KING OF THE CASTLE**. Some of her more recent crime novels include **A QUESTION OF IDENTITY**, **THE BETRAYAL OF TRUST**, **SHADOWS IN THE STREET**, **THE RISK OF DARKNESS** and **THE PURE OF HEART**, all of which follow the adventures of detective Simon Serrailler and have been adapted for ITV.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE WOMAN IN BLACK, by Stephen Mallatratt and Susan Hill, is a chilling stage thriller that has become a classic of the genre and a hit in theatres around the world. It has been running in London since 1989 and is one the city's longest running plays. It was adapted from Susan Hill's best-selling novel of the same title and was recently turned into a Hollywood film starring Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame.

The play follows the basic story of Susan's Hill's novel. It concerns a young solicitor, Arthur Kipps, who travels to a small village in England to attend the funeral of a client, Mrs Alice Drablow, and to settle her estate. At the funeral he spots a strange woman dressed in black hovering in the background. When he inquires about the woman, the villagers deny ever seeing her and seem terrified to talk about her. Eventually, Kipps is told that what he saw was the ghost of a woman who haunts the area where her child was mysteriously killed, and that the child of anyone who sees her also dies. Bewildered by all of this, Kipps travels to the former residence of his deceased client, Mrs Drablow. While sorting through her papers, he experiences terrifying sounds and events in the old house and sees the mysterious Woman in Black again. He finally runs across some old letters that reveal her horrible history. Unfortunately, the experience involving the Woman in Black will tragically affect Kipps's own future.

In the play the basic story is given a unique framework by making it a play within a play and setting the action on the stage of an empty Victorian theatre. Another change is that Author Kipps is now an older man who is still traumatised by the terrifying events he experienced involving the Woman in Black. In order to exorcise the trauma, he has written an account of the experience and hired a young actor to help him dramatise it for the public. On the stage they act out the events of the story in a rehearsal. The young actor plays the younger Kipps, and Kipps himself plays the other roles and narrates the story. Unlike in the novel, a unique twist to the story occurs at the end of the play: Was the woman in the rehearsal an actress hired by Kipps, or the real Woman in Black?

Summary of the play

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

Setting: Various locations on the stage of a small Victorian theatre in London.

Time: The late Victorian Period

ACT I

Arthur Kipps, a middle-aged solicitor, has written a story about the terrifying events he experienced early in his career involving a woman dressed in black. Eventually he hopes to share his story with the public and thereby rid himself of the nightmares he still has resulting from that experience. To this end he has hired a young actor to give him some tips on the art of public performance.

When the play opens, Kipps is on the stage of an empty theatre reading aloud from his story for the young actor. He is frustrated when the actor repeatedly criticizes his performance. They finally decide to rehearse the events of story together with the young actor playing Kipps as a young solicitor, and Kipps himself portraying the other characters as well as narrating the story. Having never acted before in his life, Kipps has trouble at first dealing with the various characters, but he grows in confidence as the rehearsal progresses. From time to time, the men pause while dramatizing the story in order to comment on their progress and make quick costume and scene changes.

The story begins in a London solicitor's office where Kipps, at that time just a junior solicitor, is assigned the task of attending the funeral and settling the estate of a client, Mrs Alice Drablow. He travels on the train to a remote village where the octogenarian lived all her life. During the journey, he learns from a fellow passenger, Mr Samuel Daily, that Mrs Drablow was a widow, who lived alone in an isolated old house outside the village. Upon arriving at their destination, Kipps is driven to his hotel by Mr Daily, who happens to live in the village.

The following morning, Kipps is picked up by Mr Horatio Jerome, another local resident, who has been asked by the London office to accompany the young solicitor to the funeral. At the funeral, Kipps is alarmed when he sees a mysterious woman dressed in black hovering in the background. Concerned by the woman's wasted appearance, he inquires about her. To

his dismay, Mr Jerome and the other villagers seem terrified to speak about her. Jerome informs Kipps that he has arranged for a local man called Keckwick to drive him across the marsh to Mrs Drablow's house. The young solicitor is somewhat taken aback when Keckwick arrives in a pony drawn trap (a two-wheeled carriage) instead of a car to transport him.

Kipps begins looking through Mrs Drablow's papers soon after he arrives at her residence. He feels uneasy by the immensity and isolation of the place. The shrouded furniture gives him an eerie feeling. A sudden, harsh cry from a bird outside startles him. While visiting the small cemetery near the house, he again catches a glimpse of the Woman in Black. She is there among the gravestones for only a second, then quickly disappears.

Frightened by the woman's mysterious appearance, Kipps decides to return to the village on his own that night, rather than wait for Keckwick to come back for him. Outside he can hardly see in the thick fog and darkness. Nevertheless, he continues walking through the marsh, determined to reach the village. He panics when he realizes that he has lost his way, but is soon relieved when he hears the rattle of Keckwick's pony and trap returning to pick him up. Suddenly there is the crashing sound of the trap overturning and sinking in the marshy quicksand. There are human screams, the whinnying of a pony and the cry of a young child. Kipps screams out to Keckwick, but there is only silence. He is terrified and disoriented, but somehow manages to find his way back to the house. To his amazement, he finds Keckwick there waiting to take him back to the village. As he climbs into the trap he is bewildered. If not from Keckwick and his trap, from where did the terrifying sounds on the marsh come from?

ACT II

Once back in the village, Kipps goes to see Mr Jerome, the gentleman who accompanied him to Mrs Drablow's funeral. Still frightened by the inexplicable sounds on the marsh and the appearances of the Woman in Black, he asks Mr Jerome to find someone to stay with him in Mrs Drablow's house. Deeply disturbed by the request, Jerome claims that none of the local residents would ever set foot in the house because of the terrifying rumours they have

heard about the place. Kipps later makes the same request of Mr Daily, the friendly passenger he encountered on the train to the village. Daily is more sympathetic and gives his dog Spider to the young man as a companion. (The dog never actually appears, but is imaginary.)

After returning to Mrs Drablow's house with Spider, Kipps discovers a packet of letters among her correspondence. The letters are sixty years old and are between Mrs Drablow and an unmarried young woman, Jennet Humfrye, who was pregnant at the time. Jennet was sent away to Scotland to have the baby. Afterwards, she was pressured by her family and the rest of society to give up her newborn son for adoption. While continuing to read the letters, Kipps hears the troubled voice of a young woman coming from somewhere in the house. At first she is defiant, insisting that she will kill both herself and her son before ever letting him go. Then her tone changes as she realises that she is helpless in the situation. She hates the world for committing this injustice against her. With a broken heart, she finally asks Mr and Mrs Drablow to adopt her son and care for him as their own.

In the silence that follows, Kipps struggles to pull himself together. Then he and Spider hear strange sounds coming from behind a door in the interior of the house. As they approach the door, it opens slowly on its own. Inside the room, an empty rocking chair is rocking backwards and forwards on its own. The room appears to have been a nursery. There are half-century-old toys about the room, and in a chest of drawers Kipps discovers clothes in the style of sixty years ago for a small boy. From outside the house Kipps hears the same terrifying sounds of the pony and trap as he heard before on the marsh. There is also the child's scream of anguish, followed by silence.

Kipps then hears the sound of someone whistling outside. He opens the front door to investigate. Spider rushes out of the house and across the marsh. Kipps pursues the dog and discovers the animal yelping and sinking in quicksand. With great effort he is able to pull the dog to firmer ground. Exhausted, he lies down to recover. When he looks up, the Woman in Black is standing over him. He screams, and she vanishes.

Mr Daily finds Kipps and Spider on the marsh and takes them back to his home in the village.

There he relates to Kipps the tragic history of Jennet Humfrye, who later became the Woman in Black. She was Mrs Drablow's younger sister. After allowing the Drablows to adopt her son, she was so distressed that she insisted on living with them in order to be near the child. She secretly planned to run away with her son, but was unable to do so before he was killed in the horrible accident on the marsh. From that day on, Jennet began to grow mad with grief, anger and the desire for vengeance for her loss. She eventually died of a dreadful disease which made her look so wasted that everyone in the village shunned her. Immediately after Jennet's death, the Woman in Black began haunting the area. Since then, anyone who has seen her loses a child, either in an accident or after an illness.

Having finished his work at Mrs Drablow's house, Kipps returns to London. He weds his long time fiancée Stella, who gives birth to a son, Joseph, a year later. When Joseph is old enough, the parents take him to an amusement park. One of the attractions there is a ride on a pony and trap, which Stella and Joseph take advantage of. As Kipps stands to the side and watches them, he spots the Woman in Black standing nearby. She is staring at the pony and trap. Shouts from the driver are heard, followed by cries of terror from Stella and the child, then a horrifying crash. Joseph is hurled from the trap against a tree and killed instantly. Stella dies a few months later of her injuries. The Woman in Black has again inflicted vengeance for the loss of her child and the wrong that was done to her.

The rehearsal is now over. Kipps thanks the young actor for helping him dramatise his story of the Woman in Black. He wonders if showing it to an audience will really rid him of nightmares he experienced. The young actor wants to know the name of the actress who played the Woman in Black during their rehearsal. Kipps is deeply shaken by the request, insisting that no one else was present in the theatre. The young actor is bewildered. Was it then the real Woman in Black he saw?

OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What is Kipps's profession?
2. Why does he travel to a remote village in England?
3. What does Kipps see at Mrs Drablow's funeral that alarms him?
4. How is he transported to Mrs Drablow's house?
5. Why is Kipps frightened to stay alone in Mrs Drablow's house?
6. Who becomes his companion in the house?
7. Why was Jennet forced to give her son up for adoption?
8. What was the familial relationship between Jennet and Mrs Drablow?
9. Who was killed in the terrible accident on the marsh?
10. Who is killed later at the amusement park?
11. Why does the Woman in Black want to inflict vengeance on the world?

INTERPRETATIVE EXERCISE

1. Describe Jennet's situation as an unmarried mother during the Victorian period in which she lived. How was she treated by society and what was she forced to do? Do you think that justifies her taking vengeance on the world as the Woman in Black? How does her situation compare with that of unmarried mothers today?
2. Fear is one of the dominant elements of a good thriller. Describe some of the events in the play that terrorize Kipps and thus frighten an audience as well.