**Chris Eldon Lee reviews Hotbuckle Theatre Company’s production of ‘Great Expectations’ which is touring widely.**

It is a measure of the high regard in which Hotbuckle Theatre is held that the good folk of Condover last Saturday night eschewed the penalty shootout of the FA Cup Final and the tumult of the Eurovision Song Contest to turn out in droves to see the company’s latest play in their village hall. ‘Sell Out’ signs were in profusion. We were almost sitting on top of each other. And our great expectations were handsomely exceeded.

Writer/actor/director Adrian Preater clearly has a passion for distilling Dickens...getting deep down to the soul of the story. With just a cast of four, Hotbuckle created a score or more of memorable characters to tell pretty much the whole epic with the minimum of practicalities.

The new boy this tour is Callum Anderson, making his professional stage debut as Pip, the poor orphan, projected, by great luck, towards a better life. There is something of the twinkling, impish, young Michael Palin about Callum. He plays Pip as a country-born public school boy, with impeccable manners and an expression of innocent wonder. Callum has the lion’s share of the tale to tell, slipping from narration to dialogue and back again so easily you barely notice.

Naturally the women in the cast play male characters too and Joanne Purslow is excellently authoritarian and business-like as the solicitor Jaggars; stalking the stage like a heron looking for minnows and barely breaking into emotion even when informing Pip of his new National Lottery scale fortune.

Beth Organ reveals her exceptional versatility, skipping through a number of cheery male characters, with diverse accents, that pop up into Pip’s new life. She is clearly revelling in the variety.

But together, in devastatingly wicked female roles, they are the heartless heart of the show.

Beth merely has a to flick her pigtail to become the cold calculating Estella, determined to capture Pip and beak him. She is cruelly manipulated by Joanna’s chilling portrayal of the jilted Miss Haversham. Joanna’s voice control and predatory mannerisms are those of a haughty wicked queen. Her words form burning ice-roses in the air and she hypnotises Pip like a python eyeing its prey. When she invites Estella to kiss her, there is a natural need to recoil.

These passages are superbly played and particularly arresting.

When it comes, Miss Haversham’s death is a thing of beauty. One of Hotbuckle’s company trademarks is to tourwith the minimum of simple, symbolic pieces of scenery … designed to do everything, as long as your imagination is up to it. In ‘Great Expectations’, four long diamonds of cheesecloth are stretched vertically on stage. Joanna merely has to step behind one of these and quiver it, whilst Adrian plays a red light upon the cloth, and she quite alarmingly bursts into flames. With a backdrop of Beth’s mournfully echoing song, it’s a surprisingly effective piece of stake craft….particularly as I’d spent much of the show wondering how they were going to do it.

The same shrouds double as ghostly apparitions and one even becomes a comedy hat stand for Adrian to try to hang his bowler on. He, of course, is the source of much of the production’s ribald humour, urinating in front of the audience (in the best possible taste), hamming it up like good old melodrama before the magistrate, and donning a frock to portray - for an instant - the coy Miss Skiffins. As Joe the blacksmith, he delivers Dicken’s eternal advice with rustic wit – “live well and die happy” - with an anvil of a face.

But he excels as the desperate, gruff voiced, prisoner-on-the-run Abel Magwitch … his visage metamorphosing when his character’s true kindly nature emerges. It’s a powerful charismatic performance.

This is a full and detailed presentation of a shape-shifting story that features some of Dicken’s deepest and darkest characters. I did find myself wishing I had read it more recently**.** But it isa most compelling and creative production which left a full house full of admiration.

*Future Shropshire performances include Shrewsbury’s Theatre Severn on June 16th and 17th, Pitchford Hall (18th) and Soulton Hall, Wem (19th).*