



Be inspired by amateur theatre

<b>Society</b>	Centre Stage
<b>Production</b>	The Hunchback of Notre Dame
<b>Date</b>	13 April 2023
<b>Venue</b>	London Oratory School Theatre
<b>Report by</b>	Matt Bentley

---

## Show Report

### General

To say this show is a challenge would be a gross understatement. The script requires a town square, a rooftop, a cellar, and one of the most iconic buildings in the world, as well as a huge ensemble and some powerful soloists. It also features a much darker, morally ambiguous book than most musicals. On top of this, Centre Stage had to contend with building works, electrical failures and, later in the run, cast illness. Even without all these challenges this would have been a magical production, but overcoming them with such professionalism and dedication should make the production team, and Centre Stage as a whole, burst with pride.

### Direction

Choosing to direct this show requires a clear vision and great deal of creativity. The script veers between slow solo moments and chaotic group sequences, making the pacing uneven with the potential for significant moments of lower energy. Director **James-Lee Campbell** and Assistant Director **Alexis Rose** clearly have a great deal of passion for both this text and this production, and channelled that into a piece that remained entertaining and engaging throughout.

The concept for this production was that of a troupe of performers, initially dressed as monk-like choristers, taking on the various roles to tell the story. This solved a number of potential issues, particularly allowing Quasimodo's physical appearance to be more stylised, through self-applied makeup rather than inherently hideous. This also allowed an excellent moment in the finale, where members of the ensemble did the same, demonstrating the arbitrary distinction made between those who are called monsters and those who do the calling.

This concept also made sense of the script's lack of clarity regarding the identity of the show's narrator(s), which is left open by marking all narrator lines as delivered by "Congregation". By endowing the entire cast with the status of performers of a play within the play, these lines were able to be given to anyone in the cast as needed. This was not without its challenges, however, as dividing the dialogue between so many people required a very complex sound design. It also worked best when the lines were delivered by characters other than those whose characters were directly affected by or involved with the elements of plot being conveyed.

Some of stand-out moments in the show's direction involved the entire 32-strong cast filling the stage which, already limited in space, was made smaller by the dominance of the set. These moments were achieved masterfully, with all the cast in constant movement, demonstrating clear character motivations and an excellent navigation of traffic. There were moments where those audience

members to either side of the auditorium will have missed some key pieces of action due to the complicated blocking, but these were few and far between.

Direction within the set was also very clear and consistent. Due to the way individual elements of the set were used, in combination with the lighting, there was never any doubt as to where a particular scene took place. The rooftop scenes were most effective in this, but the underground sequences and scenes within the cathedral were also used in a clear way by the cast to indicate place.

One area that may benefit from further consideration in the future is more confident visual signposting of the relationships between characters. This script in particular doesn't do a great job of showing these, so it is up to the director to create these indicators. Frollo's entire motivation, for example, rests on his forbidden desire for Esmerelda and the self-loathing he imposes on himself because of it. Greater physicality from him in that regard could have made this a stronger impetus for the action he takes. Similarly, the relationship between Esmerelda and Phoebus isn't written as a traditional arc, so some more visual interactions between them, particularly in the underground scenes, could have helped clarify it.

### Choreography

One of the aces up Centre Stage's sleeve recently has been the dream choreography team of **Peter Stonnell** and **Sara Ramirez**. Here they built on their work in recent shows to create some impressive sequences that were perfect for the production's performance space and cast. The choreography here was visually delightful, giving proficient dancers their moments to shine, while pushing those more focused on singing to achieve more than would be assumed from listening to the score. Performance levels and energy levels were both high, and the dedication of the dancers to the choreography was apparent.

### Musical Direction

Overall, Musical Director **Mark Smith** made excellent work of what is a huge, challenging job. This is a complex score played by a very large orchestra, and the sound produced was wonderful. Harmonies and solos were strong and tuneful. The use of a choir to add volume to the ensemble was very wise, and could have been used to even greater effect – there were moments, such as in *Tavern Song*, where the ensemble's volume and attention to the harmony dropped in favour of focusing on the movement, and despite it not being a choral number, the choir's support may have provided the boost it needed.

### Cast

The cast for this production was enormous, and a huge congratulations should be given to the ensemble. As noted above, every person on that stage had clear intentions and knew what they were doing and why they were there at every point in the show, even if it was just to lurk in the shadows upstairs. Additional storylines were added through ensemble movement which added texture rather than detracting from the main plot, including a same-sex relationship bolder than any live action Disney remake has managed so far. All were looking, sounding and moving fantastically, and each should be commended.

Leading the company was **Stephen Mitchell** as Quasimodo. Stephen demonstrated a clear understanding of the different facets of Quasimodo, from his eloquent internal monologues to his fearful interactions with strangers, and showed this both vocally and physically. Coupled with an outstanding singing voice, this made for a dynamic and sympathetic performance, despite the character's morally ambiguous actions later in the play.

As a side note, congratulations should also be given to **Nick Dore** for stepping into this role at very short notice for the final two performances. Audience feedback and a short clip I have seen indicate this was also an excellent portrayal of Quasimodo.

**Suriyah Rashid's** Esmeralda was also a very accomplished performance, which pulled off the very difficult trick of being both mysterious and engaging at the same time. Esmeralda needs to be self-possessed and aloof as her reputation implies, while also being open enough to form relationships with each of the four lead male roles (albeit four very different relationships). Suriyah embodied this balance perfectly, and brought some excellent vocals and dance ability into the mix at the same time.

Phoebus is another difficult character. He starts as an antagonist, becomes a romantic lead, and then has a bit of a murky, unresolved ending. **Julian Silverman** handled this well, and brought some nice vocal moments to the role. While the transition between guardsman and rebel was excellent, a more clear signposting of his move into martyrdom in the latter part of the show may have added strength to the character.

In the pantheon of Disney villains, Frollo stands out as a twisted and embittered husk, hating himself for the lustful feelings he feels towards Esmeralda, which he considers sinful. **Peter Shatwell**, aided by this version of the book, found some unexpected humanity in the character, which helped shape the story's moral ambiguity. He portrayed the role as an upstanding citizen to as much of an extent as the book would allow. As much as this tied in well with the character's backstory and his desire to keep the hearts and minds of his congregation, it would have been cathartic to see him let loose a little more, particularly during *Hellfire*, and in the production's climactic sequences.

As an excellent singer and physical performer, **Will Garrood** was superbly cast as Clopin. This was a very enjoyable performance, with Will excelling particularly in the moments he took charge of the situation and lead his people. A bit more focus on the character in the early sequences would have highlighted him in preparation for his role in the show's climax, but ultimately the strength of Will's characterisation made up for this.

### Production

This show was a mammoth undertaking. Since the rights were released, many societies have considered staging it, but have decided they didn't have the resources or manpower to do it justice. It is a testament to Producer **Giles Burden** and his team that this was not only a technically superb production, but also an example of a creative team deciding to take on extra risks and challenges, and pulling them off to great effect. To use the most obvious example, this show would still have been fantastic without giant bells swinging above the audience whenever Quasimodo rang them, but their addition added a sense of awe and wonder that absolutely paid off on the challenge of including them.

### Costumes & Makeup

The range and selection of costumes in this production can only be described as luxurious. Full credit should go to the wardrobe team of **Annie Houseago, Kat Cooper, Geri Hutyan** and **Santiago Liendo** for having me convinced this was a hired wardrobe. Everything worked together so well, and looked of period.

These were complemented by a delightful array of masks by **Rosie O'Rourke** and **Kat Cooper** which, as well as giving the ensemble a cohesive look, also served as masks for the ensemble characters participating in the Feast of Fools. At times these also disguised ensemble members lurking in various corners or levels of the set, at which point they seemed to become gargoyle faces.

A minor quibble was the scripted gargoyle characters, who were represented by square neck pieces, but could have been made to look more grotesque and/or statuesque. There were also moments when the ensemble switched quickly between gypsy and townsfolk characters, and a clearer delineation between the costumes of these groups would have avoided the impression that they were chasing after themselves.

### Set & Props

Centre Stage invested in hiring a full set for this production and it absolutely paid off. This was a stunning unit set which filled the stage, and yet clearly transitioned to the various locations required via lighting, backdrops and furniture. A clever set and a clever decision to use it. As mentioned above the use of the bells above the audience was breathtaking.

Props (by Rosie and Kat mentioned above) were equally well done. Esmerelda's map necklace and other hero props were appropriately identifiable and added texture to the story. It would have been advised to do more research into the use of the swords that had been acquired, though – at one point Phoebus pointed a two-handed longsword at Esmeralda while holding it with one hand, although this was rectified in later fight sequences.

### Stage Management

A show with so many moving pieces and so very many cast members requires careful choreography offstage as well as on, particularly hard to do with only a few days in the theatre. **Adam Coppard**, assisted by **Jon Haines**, led an incredibly slick team which appeared to run the show like clockwork. A reminder, though, that crew members should stay in character or keep their expressions neutral when conducting a live scene change (there were moments when some could be seen grinning at each other).

### Lighting

Lighting design by **Mark Walton** beautifully recreated the grandeur of Notre Dame, with moments of sunlight shining through stained glass contrasting with bright rooftop scenes, dank basements, and darker outdoor sequences at ground level. It worked with the story and augmented it so that nothing looked out of place, but everything looked stunning. The work to incorporate elements of the set into the lighting design was particularly excellent.

Although not strictly lighting, one element that needed more rehearsal was the flash pods. These didn't seem to work as effectively as planned and there was a smattering of laughter from the audience whenever they were used.

### Sound

As sound designer for a cast of almost 70 and an orchestra of 14, **Henry Whittaker** had a number of challenges to overcome. The narration being split between so many characters meant switching between a lot of mics in quick succession, and the need to shift between levels for singing, speaking over an orchestra and unaccompanied dialogue, meant the sound design was very complex. At this performance unfortunately it meant many lines weren't heard, even accounting for the fact that Quasimodo's microphone dropped out several times. Overall it felt as if a simplified narration split, a less complex sound design and some better equipment would have helped to give the show the sound quality that the performances deserved.

### Programme & Publicity

This was a lovely programme, excellently designed by **Juan Carlos Perez**, easy to read and full of interesting information. Photographs of the rehearsal process were nicely selected and the uniform headshots by **Adrian Hau** were effective. One element I've mentioned previously is a more readily available cast and crew list, so that the credits can be easily accessed without searching through many pages of biographies and smaller lists of crew and orchestra, but this is a minor quibble. The inclusion of the NODA paragraph means it is eligible for the programme competition.

The show was well publicised with a strong social media presence. The inclusion of a pay-what-you-can preview was a nice way to make the production more accessible, and the updates of ticket availability encouraged bookings. As a result it appeared to be one of the most successful shows in terms of ticket sales I have seen in that venue, with additional seats opened up for most performances.

### Front of House

The front of house team was very pleasant, as I have come to expect from a Centre Stage show. On this occasion they had more than their fair share of challenges to contend with, as the power was out in the venue for one performance and the toilets weren't available. However, they kept the bar running and when the performance was eventually cancelled they handled any audience concerns extremely well.

### Summary

Overall this show was a massive undertaking and Centre Stage pulled it off exceptionally well. All production elements were integrated seamlessly and, aside from a few technical hitches, the audience couldn't have wished for a better interpretation of this modern classic. It was clear that the creative team had taken so much care with every detail, and a number of additional risks paid off to make this a very special show.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matt Bentley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Matt Bentley  
NODA London Regional Representative & Associate Representative District 1  
*City & Central London*