



Harry Mottram

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AXBRIDGE REVIEW

Axbridge Reviews: In blistering heat in Badgworth the story of The Pickwick Club was brought to life with speed, energy and quite a bit of sweat



Cheddar Reservoir at dawn

Theatre Review: Pickwick Papers. School Room Gardens, Badgworth, Somerset

It comes as no surprise that a group of slightly silly old men setting off to Rochester to discover life didn't tickle the fancies of the reading public until the arrival of Sam Weller. The likable cockney professional servant, confidant and protector of Samuel Pickwick injected into Charles Dickens' The Pickwick Papers the one thing the serialised stories were lacking. Wit, humour, character and the reassurance that whatever scrapes Mr Pickwick got into Sam was there to sort it out and show empathy and understanding. Indeed he seems the most mature person in the novel – and in Rain or Shine Theatre's outdoor production of The Pickwick Papers.



Pippa Meekings had the voice, the physicality and the stage presence to bring Sam Weller to life – and indeed the original novel to life – as when Dickens' first introduced Sam into the story it produced a bump in sales. The rest is history as Dickens' was to go on to become a best-selling author. The story of the Pickwick Club is one of continual misunderstandings by the members who seem child like in their unworldliness as they are taken advantage of by the likes of Mr Jingle (Adam Wright), confronted with aggression by a cabbie (Nicholas Taylor) and tied up in knots by predatory lawyers Dodson and Fogg. Hence Sam is their get out of jail fee card – literally true in Mr Pickwick's case.

In blistering heat on the lawn at The School Room Gardens in Badgworth, the **cast of five worked extremely hard to bring the cast of characters to life**. Acting in top hats, waist coats, tailed jackets and breeches as befitted 18th-century gentlemen they may have perspired greatly but they maintained **high energy performances** directed by Jonathan Legg. Samuel Pickwick played by Anthony Young was perfect as the bumbling but well-meaning central character, while Nicholas Taylor as Tupman could have stepped out of one of Hablot Knight Browne 1836 illustrations that accompanied the original text. Snodgrass the aspiring aesthete of the Pickwick Club was played by Adam Wright who had his work cut out doubling as several characters including a **hilarious** portrayal of Mrs Betsy Cluppins. Also, cross dressing was Marshall Lockwood who was the spurned betrothed of Pickwick – his landlady Mrs Martha Bardell and the cause of Pickwick's imprisonment.



Quick costume changes, much slapstick and lots of humour ensured the audience were entertained as the actors switched from one unlikely persona to another. Inevitably a stage adaptation cuts much of the original text – and being outdoors there are other considerations such as the weather conditions. Acting in 30C of heat can't be easy – so **an accomplished production** from Rain or Shine Theatre – or rather Shine and Shine Theatre since the conditions were sweltering. A big shout out to the organisers in Badgworth who marketed the evening ensuring an audience of around 70 theatre goers – and in particular Pippa Meekings as Sam Weller.

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The production is touring the country throughout the summer. For a list of venues and more details visit <https://www.rainorshine.co.uk/>