

AMATEUR THEATRE REVIEW: Great Expectations – Neston Players, Neston Civic Hall.

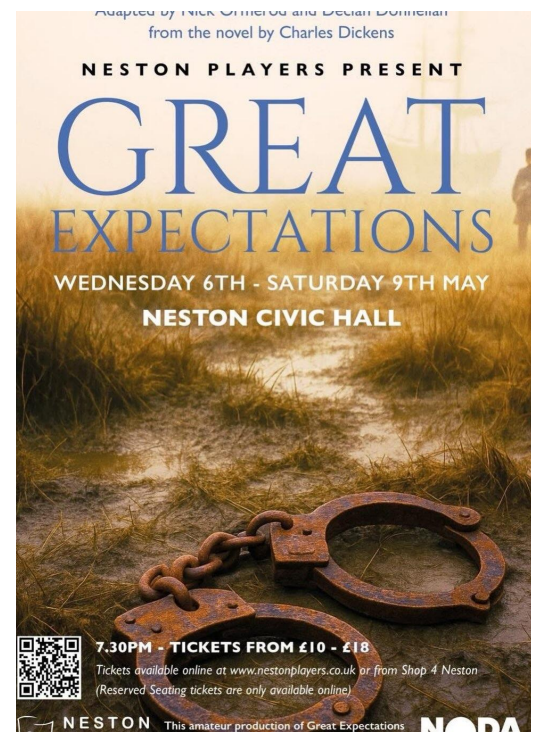
There is something truly magical about watching a well-loved classic be brought to life through imagination, commitment and bold theatrical storytelling. I had the pleasure of watching Neston Players' production of *Great Expectations*, originally written by Charles Dickens and adapted for the stage by Nick Ormerod and Declan Donnellan. Directed by Ruth Cooper and Stuart Rathe, this production was ambitious, emotional and visually striking, taking the audience on Pip's journey through childhood fear, social ambition, heartbreak, guilt and eventual self-awareness.

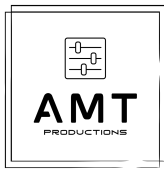
Great Expectations follows the life of Pip, an orphan who encounters the escaped convict Magwitch on the marshes before being drawn into the strange world of Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter Estella. When Pip later receives money from an unknown benefactor, he believes his 'great expectations' will transform him into a gentleman worthy of Estella's love. However, Dickens' story reminds us that wealth and status do not define goodness, and that loyalty, kindness and forgiveness are far greater measures of a person's worth.

Ruth Cooper and Stuart Rathe's direction was confident, imaginative and full of theatrical intelligence. Their use of chorus storytelling was one of the production's greatest strengths. The ensemble rarely left the stage, becoming part of Pip's memories, thoughts and emotional landscape. They narrated, reacted, observed and physically shaped the world around him, allowing the audience to feel as though we were inside Pip's mind. This was particularly effective when key lines were spoken by Pip and echoed by the chorus, such as moments where Estella's name seemed to ring through his thoughts.

The use of physical theatre was excellent throughout. The busy streets of London were created through movement rather than heavy set changes, giving scenes pace and energy. The ensemble running alongside Pip added drama and urgency, while the fight between Pip and Herbert felt lively and well-integrated, with the chorus reacting and becoming part of the moment. The boat scene was another highlight, with physical rowing, darkened lighting and a sense of tension you could cut with a knife.

One of the strongest visual ideas was the mirroring of past and present. The use of younger and older versions of Pip and Estella, playing cards to create reflected images of time, was beautifully effective. It reminded the audience that memory, regret and identity are at the heart of this story. The production did not rely heavily on props, which allowed the audience's imagination to work. When props were used, such as Molly's apron becoming a baby, they carried symbolic importance and stood out all the more.





The moment when Miss Havisham catches fire is one of the novel's most powerful turning points because it completely changes the way Pip and the reader sees her. Earlier in the story, she appears cold, cruel, and almost ghost-like, trapped in the ruins of her past and using Estella to hurt others as revenge for her own suffering. However, when Pip sees her burning and tries to save her, she suddenly becomes human and vulnerable rather than frightening. The fire is a symbol of the destruction caused by years of bitterness, regret, and emotional pain. Pip's instinct to rescue her, despite everything she has done to him, also shows how much he has matured emotionally. Instead of reacting with anger, he responds with compassion and forgiveness, which highlights one of the novel's central ideas: that people can still deserve sympathy even after causing harm.



The fire scene in this production was particularly powerful and emotionally charged. The chorus became the flames that engulfed Miss Havisham, using movement to create danger and chaos. The orange lighting and flickering side lights gave the effect of fire, while Pip's arrival and the controlled lift work as Miss Havisham fell to the ground was excellently executed. It was a moment of real theatrical impact.

Another deeply moving moment comes when Pip reflects, "We need never be ashamed of our tears." This line captures an important lesson about vulnerability and emotional honesty. Throughout the story, Pip often tries to hide his feelings because he believes becoming a gentleman means appearing strong, refined, and unemotional. However, by this point, he begins to understand that suffering, regret, and love are natural parts of being human. This suggests that tears are not a sign of weakness but of compassion and self-awareness. This was beautifully staged and performed, allowing the audience to witness Pip's emotional growth, as he learns to value genuine human connection over pride, status, and social ambition. It was not overplayed, but honestly felt. The

scene reminded us that Pip's journey is not only about ambition, but about learning humility, regret and compassion.

The act two scenes between Miss Havisham, Estella and Pip were among the most powerful in the production. Miss Havisham's line, "The looking glass of what I have done myself," landed with real emotional weight. In this moment, she was forced to see Estella not as a weapon of revenge, but as a reflection of her own damage. The line "I stole her heart away and put ice in its place" was chilling, tragic and beautifully delivered. It revealed the true horror of Miss

Havisham's actions: she had not protected Estella from pain, but imprisoned her within it. These scenes were handled with

sensitivity and depth, allowing the audience to feel sympathy for characters who are deeply flawed but painfully human.



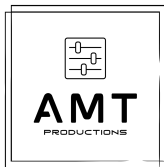
The set design by Martin Barker was simplistic but highly effective. The T-shaped platform extending into the audience created a strong connection between performers and spectators, while the thrust stage made excellent use of the hall space. The old-fashioned chairs and fractured backdrop panels created a world that felt both Victorian and symbolic. The lines across the backdrops looked like broken windows, reflecting broken expectations, damaged memories and fractured lives. The wedding cake never leaving the stage was a constant reminder of Miss Havisham's frozen past.

Lighting design and operation by Simon Ollman and Micah Ollman was subtle, atmospheric and very effective. It is wonderful to see a father and son team working together creatively, and especially lovely to see an inspiring young lighting designer developing a passion for the technical side of theatre. The blue and warm white washes helped distinguish day and night, while the ghostly white spotlight added an eerie quality to Miss Havisham's world. The haze enhanced the atmosphere without overwhelming the action. The lighting often went unnoticed in the best possible way, supporting the storytelling without drawing focus.

Sound design by Andrew Rymer and Michael Palmer was also very strong. The songs added emotion and tension, while the sound effects were well timed, especially the blacksmith's work. No microphones were used, yet the cast projected clearly and every line was heard, which is a credit to both the performers and the direction.

Costumes by Ally Sullivan, with assistance from Nessa Garland and Lisa Dearnley, were traditional, effective and well suited to the period. Miss Havisham's wedding attire, pearls and withered look were beautifully realised, supported by Lisa Dearnley's hair and makeup design. Estella's dresses were elegant, and the added details, such as pearls in her hair and even contact lenses to alter her



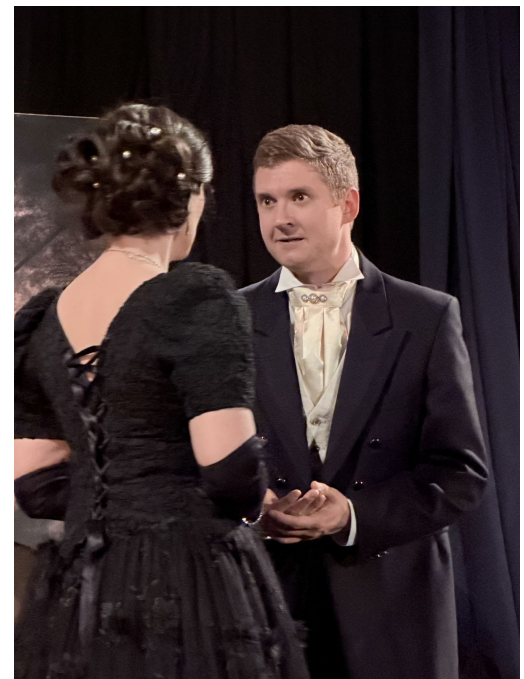


eye colour, showed real commitment to character. Simple additions like coats, hats and pinnies allowed multi-rolling to feel seamless and clear.

Peter Wynne gave a lovely and emotionally sincere performance as Young Pip and Startop. As Young Pip, he captured the fear, innocence and vulnerability of a child suddenly thrown into frightening and unfamiliar circumstances. From his very first moments on stage, Wynne established a believable emotional connection with the audience, allowing us to experience Dickens' world through Pip's



young eyes. His



reactions often spoke louder than dialogue itself, particularly during scenes with Magwitch and within the intimidating atmosphere of Miss Havisham's world. He gave emotion beyond the scripted dialogue, constantly reacting truthfully to the action around him and helping establish the emotional foundations of Pip's journey with natural sincerity.

Wynne also demonstrated strong focus within the ensemble scenes, remaining connected to the storytelling at all times. His physicality worked naturally alongside the chorus storytelling, particularly during moments where the ensemble became extensions of Pip's thoughts and memories. His multi-rolling was handled confidently and clearly, with distinct changes in energy and character that ensured each role felt purposeful within the wider production. For a young performer, he showed impressive stage discipline, commitment and emotional understanding throughout.

Adam Stubbs gave a strong and committed performance as Pip, successfully carrying the emotional journey of the entire production with confidence and clarity. This was an incredibly demanding role with a great deal of dialogue, narration and emotional progression to sustain, yet Stubbs remained grounded and engaging throughout. As an audience member, we always understood where Pip was emotionally, whether through subtle shifts in posture, changes in vocal delivery or his reactions to the ensemble around him.

One of the strongest aspects of his performance was the honesty within Pip's emotional conflict. His movement from innocence to pride, guilt and eventual understanding was believable and carefully controlled, never allowing the character to become unlikeable despite his flaws. His scenes with Joe carried genuine warmth and emotional tension, particularly during moments where Pip's shame over his background became painfully apparent. Equally, his interactions with Estella revealed the longing and insecurity that drove much of Pip's behaviour throughout the story.

Stubbs also worked especially well within the production’s physical theatre style, allowing the chorus and narration to feel like extensions of Pip’s thoughts and memories rather than separate theatrical devices. Particularly moving were the later reflective scenes, including Pip’s emotional realisation that “we need never be ashamed of our tears.” Stubbs approached these moments with restraint and honesty, allowing Pip’s growth into a more compassionate and self-aware man to feel earned and deeply affected.



Mark Prescott delivered a deliberate, commanding and surprisingly moving performance as Magwitch. From his first appearance on the marshes, he created an immediate sense of danger and unpredictability through strong physicality, vocal control and an intense stage presence that captured the audience’s attention instantly. However, what made Prescott’s portrayal particularly

compelling was that he resisted the temptation to play Magwitch simply as a threatening villain. Instead, he revealed the humanity beneath the hardened exterior, allowing the audience to gradually understand the loneliness, desperation and emotional vulnerability that shaped the character.



His physical presence throughout was impressive, particularly in moments of tension where his movements and stillness carried equal weight. Yet beneath this intimidating exterior there was always a

sense of longing and emotional depth, especially in scenes connected to Pip. Prescott carefully showed the growing emotional bond between the two characters, making the later revelation that Magwitch is Pip’s benefactor genuinely affecting rather than simply dramatic.

His delivery of moments such as “I lived rough, that you should live smooth” carried real emotional sincerity and highlighted Dickens’ criticism of class and morality. Prescott’s performance reminded the audience that although society labels Magwitch a criminal, he often demonstrates more compassion, sacrifice and loyalty than many of the so-called respectable characters around him. This layered portrayal ensured Magwitch became not just a frightening figure from Pip’s childhood memories, but one of the most emotionally complex and tragic characters within the production.

Sarah McGinty brought excellent comic timing and energy to Mrs Joe, creating a character that was both intimidating and entertaining to watch. From the moment she entered the stage, she established a commanding presence through strong vocal characterisation, sharp delivery and bold physical choices. Her accent felt natural and well sustained throughout, helping ground the character firmly within Dickens’ working-class world while adding humour to many of her scenes.

McGinty demonstrated a strong instinct for comedy, particularly in her pacing and reactions to those around her. She understood exactly when to allow moments to breathe for audience laughter without ever losing the rhythm of the scene. Importantly, beneath Mrs Joe's harshness and domineering attitude, she also hinted at the exhaustion and frustrations

of a woman burdened by responsibility, which stopped the character from becoming one-dimensional.



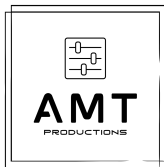
Alongside her principal role, McGinty multi-rolled effectively within the chorus, transitioning seamlessly between narration, ensemble work and supporting characters. She remained fully engaged throughout the production, constantly reacting and contributing to the atmosphere of each scene. Her commitment to the physical theatre style and ensemble storytelling helped maintain the pace and fluidity of the production.

Charles Riley was wonderful as Joe Gargery, bringing warmth, sincerity and emotional honesty to every scene he appeared in. In a production filled with ambition, manipulation and emotional

damage, Riley's Joe became a constant source of goodness and light, grounding the audience whenever the story drifted into darker territory. There was a genuine gentleness to his performance that made the character immediately endearing. When he smiled on stage, you could not help but smile with him, and that natural warmth created some of the production's most heartfelt moments.

Riley approached Joe with subtlety and restraint, never forcing sentimentality yet allowing the audience to fully feel the depth of Joe's loyalty and unconditional love for Pip. His interactions with Pip carried real emotional truth, particularly in moments where Pip's embarrassment and growing social ambition created a painful distance between them. Rather than responding with bitterness, Riley showed Joe's quiet sadness and continued compassion, which made those scenes even more affecting.

His delivery felt natural and sincere throughout, and he captured Joe's humble nature beautifully without reducing the character to simplicity. Instead, Riley revealed Joe's emotional intelligence and inner strength through small reactions, gentle humour and a calm, reassuring presence. This made lines such as "Ever the best of friends, ain't us, Pip?" land with genuine emotional impact. Joe is often considered the moral heart of Great Expectations, and Riley fully embodied that role, reminding the audience that kindness, loyalty and forgiveness are ultimately far greater than wealth or status.



Ticki Clark was delightful as Biddy, bringing warmth, sincerity and emotional gentleness to the production. In a story often filled with ambition, manipulation and emotional conflict, Clark's performance provided a refreshing sense of kindness and honesty. From her first appearance, she brought fun, innocence and brightness to the stage, creating a character that immediately felt genuine and compassionate. Her presence offered a strong contrast to Pip's growing obsession with status and Estella, quietly reminding the audience of the simpler and more sincere life he was slowly turning away from.

What made Clark's portrayal particularly effective was the subtle emotional depth beneath Biddy's cheerful nature. While the character often appeared warm, supportive and optimistic, Clark

allowed small moments of sadness and quiet heartbreak to surface, especially in scenes connected to Pip. Through restrained reactions and thoughtful expressions, she revealed Biddy's understanding of Pip's flaws and the emotional pain caused by his inability to recognise the loyalty and affection already present in his life. These moments were handled with sensitivity and never overplayed, which made them all the more moving.

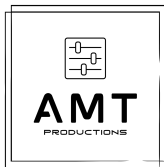
Clark also brought confidence and clarity to the role, maintaining strong stage presence throughout both her principal scenes and ensemble work. She interacted naturally with those around her, helping relationships feel believable and emotionally grounded. Biddy can sometimes fade into the background of Great Expectations, but Clark ensured the character remained memorable and emotionally significant throughout the production.

Rebecca Burke Sharples gave a very entertaining performance as Aunt Pumblechook, bringing confidence, character detail and excellent comic awareness to the role. From her first entrance, she fully embodied the character's inflated sense of status and self-importance through posture, facial expressions and sharp vocal delivery. Her costume was fantastic and immediately helped establish her social standing before she had even spoken, adding to the exaggerated nature of the character beautifully.

One of the strongest aspects of Burke Sharples' performance was her reaction work. The judgemental looks she directed towards the men around her whenever displeased often generated just as much laughter as the dialogue itself. She remained fully engaged with the action around her, constantly adding detail and humour to scenes through subtle expressions and physical choices.

The moment where Aunt Pumblechook was dismissed from the private meeting was especially effective. Rather than overplaying the comedy, Burke Sharples allowed the silence of the moment to speak for itself, with her slow exit and visible indignation communicating everything the audience needed to know about the character's wounded pride. It was a beautifully controlled comic moment that showed strong stage awareness and confidence within the role.





Keith Hill brought a strong comic presence to Wopsle, delivering a performance full of theatrical flair, confidence and excellent timing. His exaggerated delivery, expressive physicality and commitment to the character's melodramatic nature created some genuinely laugh-out-loud moments throughout the production. The white gloves, grand gestures and his wonderfully overplayed "to be or not to be" moment were particularly memorable, generating a strong audience reaction and showing just how engaged the audience had become with the storytelling and humour of the piece.

Hill clearly understood the rhythm of comedy and how to command attention without overwhelming the wider scene. He filled the stage with confidence whenever given focus, leaning fully into the heightened theatricality of Wopsle while still remaining grounded within Dickens' world. His ability to switch between humour and sincerity helped ensure the character never became simply a caricature.

Alongside his principal scenes, Hill also contributed carefully to the chorus work. He remained connected to Pip's emotional journey throughout, often using subtle reactions and observation to support the storytelling even when not speaking. Small details, such as placing his hands behind his back while observing Pip bound on the floor, reinforced the idea that the chorus were not merely narrators but extensions of Pip's memories and experiences.

Martin Riley gave Compeyson a commanding and deeply unsettling presence, creating an antagonist that felt controlled, manipulative and genuinely dangerous. From the moment he appeared on stage, Riley carried himself with confidence and authority, using posture, stillness and carefully measured movement to establish Compeyson's social power and intimidation. What made the performance particularly effective was the contrast between Compeyson's outward respectability and the cruelty simmering beneath the surface, perfectly reflecting Dickens' criticism of class and appearance.

His facial expressions during the stage combat scenes were especially strong. Riley demonstrated an excellent understanding of visual storytelling, often communicating more through a glance or reaction than through dialogue itself. He did not need to say a word for the audience to understand exactly what his character was thinking, and this subtle control made his presence all the more threatening. During moments of confrontation, his expressions carried a cold confidence that heightened the tension and reinforced Compeyson's manipulative nature.

Riley also worked extremely well within the production's physical theatre style, contributing strongly to the atmosphere and ensemble movement throughout. His interactions with Magwitch carried real hostility and history, helping the audience understand the imbalance of power between the two men. Even in quieter moments, there was always a sense of calculation behind his performance, which ensured the audience remained wary whenever he entered the stage.

Emily Ellinson gave a confident and impressive performance as Young Estella, demonstrating maturity and stage presence well beyond her years. From the moment she appeared on stage, she carried herself with clear status and control, perfectly capturing the cold confidence and emotional distance associated with the character. Despite her young age, Ellinson commanded her scenes with real authority, standing confidently alongside more experienced performers.

What made her performance particularly striking was the emotional intelligence behind it. She successfully conveyed Young Estella's sharpness and superiority without losing the sense that the character herself is still a child shaped by Miss Havisham's influence. Her reactions and physicality were carefully controlled throughout, showing excellent awareness within both dialogue scenes and larger ensemble moments.



Ellinson also multi-rolled effectively as young Magwitch during the re-enactment sequence, clearly differentiating the role through changes in movement, posture and energy. Although still very young, she already displays many qualities associated with a promising future within the industry: confidence, discipline, strong stage awareness and natural theatrical instinct. She has genuine talent and is clearly ready to continue taking on new challenges in future productions.

Louise Ellinson brought elegance and emotional complexity to Estella, delivering a performance that was both captivating and deeply layered. From her first entrance, she carried herself with grace and status, immediately establishing Estella's power within the world of the play. Her posture, stillness and carefully controlled delivery reflected the emotional restraint at the centre of the character, while subtle expressions and reactions hinted at the vulnerability hidden beneath the surface. Even while insisting she "had no heart," Ellinson allowed the audience to glimpse the conflict and damage lying underneath Estella's cold exterior.

What made her portrayal particularly effective was her ability to balance strength with fragility. Through lingering looks, restrained emotion and sharp interactions with Pip, she demonstrated

Estella's control over those around her, particularly the men who became captivated by her. Yet there was always an underlying sadness present within the performance, reminding the audience that Estella herself is also a victim of Miss Havisham's manipulation and emotional cruelty. This added real depth and humanity to the role.

The scenes between Ellinson and Jemma Brown's Miss Havisham were especially powerful, particularly during the emotionally charged act two moments where the consequences of Miss Havisham's revenge became painfully clear. Having seen Louise Ellinson perform before, it has been truly inspiring to watch her continue to take on such varied and demanding roles with apparent ease and confidence. She possesses a diverse ability as a performer, adapting herself fully to each character while maintaining emotional truth and strong stage presence throughout.



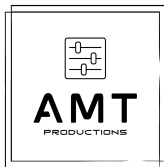
There was also something incredibly special and genuinely moving about seeing Louise and Emily Ellinson perform side by side as the older and younger versions of Estella. The real-life mother and daughter connection brought an added emotional depth and authenticity to the role that could not be manufactured. Their mirrored performances created a beautiful sense of continuity throughout the production, as though the audience were witnessing Estella's life unfolding across time before their eyes.

Beyond the theatrical effectiveness, there was something deeply heartwarming about watching a mother and daughter share the stage together, creating memories that will undoubtedly last far beyond this production. Theatre has a wonderful ability to bring people together, and seeing their evident connection and shared love for performance added an extra layer of warmth and humanity to an already emotional story. It

was a beautiful reminder that community theatre is not only about storytelling, but also about the relationships, experiences and lifelong memories created along the way.

Jemma Brown was excellent as Miss Havisham, delivering a performance filled with experience, control and emotional depth. From her first appearance, she completely embodied the decaying grandeur and haunting stillness of the character, creating a woman trapped within the ruins of her own heartbreak. Brown's physicality was particularly impressive; every movement felt deliberate and weighted, as though Miss Havisham had been frozen in time for years. She drifted across the stage like a ghost haunted by a lifetime of abandonment, creating an eerie fragility that suited the character beautifully.

What made Brown's portrayal especially compelling, however, was the emotional understanding beneath the frightening exterior. It would have been easy to present Miss Havisham simply as bitter



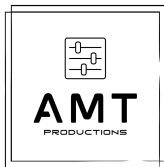
or monstrous, yet Brown revealed the aching loneliness, regret and desperate longing still living underneath the layers of manipulation and cruelty. In scenes with Estella and Pip, there was a constant tension between control and collapse, as though the character was desperately holding herself together while slowly recognising the damage she had caused.

Her delivery of lines such as “The looking glass of what I have done myself” and “I stole her heart away and put ice in its place” carried genuine emotional weight and tragic self-awareness. These moments became some of the strongest within the production because Brown approached them with honesty and restraint rather than melodrama. The audience could feel Miss Havisham’s growing horror as she realised Estella had become a reflection of her own pain and bitterness. Particularly powerful were the act two scenes between Miss Havisham and the older Estella, where Brown allowed flashes of vulnerability to break through the character’s cold exterior, revealing a woman finally confronting the consequences of her revenge.

Visually, she was one of the most striking figures on stage. Her costume, makeup and physical characterisation were beautifully detailed, creating the image of a withered widow preserved amongst decay. The aged bridal gown, pearls and faded elegance made her seem almost like part of the crumbling set itself, while her posture and movement reinforced the sense that Miss Havisham was emotionally imprisoned within Satis House. Brown’s stage presence remained captivating throughout, balancing gothic theatricality with genuine humanity and tragedy.

Simon Garland gave Jiggers professional poise, authority and quiet intimidation, creating a figure who immediately commanded attention whenever he entered the stage. His posture, measured movement and vocal clarity established Jiggers as a man of status and influence within Dickens’ world, while his stillness often spoke louder than unnecessary movement or exaggerated delivery. Garland understood the power of restraint extremely well, allowing the character’s authority to feel natural rather than forced.

Although Jiggers appears for a limited portion of the story, Garland ensured the character left a lasting impression every time he entered the stage. He brought a sense of grandeur and importance to each scene, creating the feeling that Jiggers was constantly observing, calculating and remaining emotionally detached from the chaos surrounding him. His composed delivery and clear diction



allowed every line to land with confidence, reinforcing the character's connection to power, law and control.

Importantly, Garland avoided presenting Jagers as openly villainous. Instead, he portrayed him as a man shaped by the harsh realities of Victorian society and the legal system, someone who survives through emotional distance and professionalism. This subtle approach added depth to the role and complemented the darker themes of the production extremely well.

Carl Howard gave an outstanding performance as Orlick while also contributing exceptionally strongly within the chorus work. From the moment he appeared on stage, Howard possessed a commanding presence that naturally drew the audience's attention. His vocal delivery carried real gravitas, with a strong command of language and clarity that ensured every line landed with purpose and weight. He understood how to use both voice and physicality to create tension, making Orlick feel unpredictable, threatening and emotionally dangerous throughout the production.

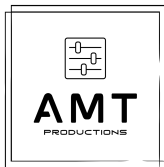


What made Howard's performance particularly impressive was the honesty and believability he brought to the role. His physicality never felt forced or exaggerated; instead, every movement appeared motivated and grounded within the character's emotional state. This made scenes involving conflict and confrontation especially effective, as there was always an underlying sense of danger surrounding him. His reactions and facial expressions added further depth to the character, often communicating emotion and intention before a word had even been spoken.

Alongside his principal role, Howard was also a standout presence within the chorus. In a production so heavily dependent on ensemble storytelling and physical theatre, he remained fully committed throughout, constantly reacting, observing and contributing to the atmosphere of each scene. Even when not the central focus, he gave the audience something meaningful to watch, helping sustain the emotional energy and momentum of the production. It would be an absolute pleasure to see him perform again in future productions, as he clearly possesses both strong theatrical instinct and commanding natural ability on stage.

Pauline Garland was excellent as Wemmick and as one of the production's lead chorus members, demonstrating consistency, focus and commitment throughout the performance. In a production so heavily dependent on ensemble storytelling and narration, Garland became an essential guiding force within the world of the play, helping maintain both the pace and clarity of the storytelling from beginning to end. Her vocal delivery was confident and clearly spoken throughout, ensuring the narration remained engaging and emotionally connected to Pip's journey.

One of Garland's greatest strengths was her constant awareness on stage. She never appeared disengaged from the action, even in moments where she was not the primary focus. Instead, she continually reacted to the scenes unfolding around her, giving the audience something meaningful



to watch at all times. This level of concentration greatly strengthened the immersive quality of the production, particularly within the physical theatre sequences where the chorus became extensions of Pip's memories, emotions and thoughts.

As Wemmick, Garland brought strong character distinction and subtle humour, capturing the contrast between the more formal public persona and the warmth hidden beneath the surface. Her transitions between narration, ensemble work and character scenes were smooth and well controlled, demonstrating strong versatility and discipline as a performer.

Jace Clark brought great youthful charm and energy to Herbert Pocket, creating a character that was instantly likeable and engaging. Their performance provided some much-needed lightness within the darker emotional themes of the production, and the slightly bumbling yet endearing nature they brought to Herbert contrasted beautifully with Pip's often more serious and emotionally conflicted character. Clark captured Herbert's good-hearted personality with natural ease, making the friendship between the two characters feel genuine and believable throughout.

One of the strongest aspects of Clark's performance was the clear sense of enjoyment they brought to the stage. You could tell they were fully embracing the experience of performing, and that enthusiasm became infectious for the audience. Their energy never felt forced or exaggerated; instead, it added warmth and life to each scene they appeared in. This helped create a strong connection not only with Pip but also with the audience, who quickly became invested in Herbert's friendship and loyalty.

Clark also demonstrated excellent chemistry with both the older and younger versions of Pip, helping reinforce the production's themes of memory and emotional reflection. Their interactions felt relaxed and natural, grounding many of the more emotionally intense moments elsewhere in the story. Alongside the humour and charm, Clark also brought sincerity and emotional intelligence to quieter scenes, ensuring Herbert never became simply comic relief.

Kristopher Duffin gave a strong performance as Bentley Drummle, successfully creating a character the audience instinctively disliked from the moment he appeared on stage. Through posture, controlled physicality and attitude, Duffin established Drummle as an effective adversary to Pip, embodying the arrogance, entitlement and unpleasantness that define the character within Dickens'

story. As the audience emotionally invested in Pip's journey, they naturally found themselves turning against Drummle, which is exactly what the role required.



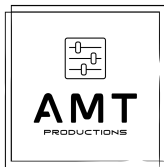
What worked particularly well within his performance was his understanding of status and presence. He carried himself with a deliberate sense of superiority that contrasted strongly against the sincerity and emotional vulnerability shown by other characters. His interactions with Estella and Pip created clear tension, helping strengthen the emotional stakes of the story and reinforcing the audience's frustration towards the character.

Despite portraying an unlikeable figure, Duffin remained believable throughout, never pushing the role into exaggeration. Instead, he trusted the character's natural cruelty and arrogance to speak for themselves, which made the performance more effective. As a young performer, he showed promising confidence, stage awareness and instinct within both dialogue and ensemble work.

Leanne Hardy gave an outstanding performance as Molly while also serving as one of the production's strongest lead chorus members. Throughout the performance, Hardy demonstrated exceptional focus, versatility and awareness, constantly contributing to the storytelling even when she was not the central focus of attention. Her facial expressions were particularly impressive; she had an extraordinary ability to communicate emotion, tension and reaction through subtle looks and physical responses alone, often drawing the audience's eye naturally towards her within larger ensemble scenes.

Her physical comedy and timing were excellent throughout the production. Hardy clearly possessed a strong instinct for rhythm and audience engagement, knowing exactly when to heighten a reaction or allow a moment to land for maximum effect. Importantly, her comedy never distracted from the emotional truth of the production but instead helped enrich the atmosphere and energy of the storytelling. She remained constantly connected to the action around her, helping guide the audience through scenes and transitions with clarity and precision.

As Molly, Hardy delivered some of the production's most emotionally powerful work. Her portrayal carried a deep sense of pain, history and emotional exhaustion, making the character feel layered and believable despite limited stage time. The trial sequence was especially effective, with Hardy using controlled stillness and physical tension to communicate Molly's vulnerability and trauma. Moments involving the symbolic use of the apron as a baby were handled with sensitivity and emotional intelligence, becoming some of the most visually haunting images within the production.



Alongside her principal role, Hardy's contribution to the chorus storytelling was invaluable. In a production built around ensemble work and physical theatre, she consistently helped sustain the emotional atmosphere of scenes through reaction, movement and narration. Her commitment never faltered, and she brought energy, detail and professionalism to every moment she was on stage.

Ann Fleming was a strong and reliable presence within the chorus, contributing greatly to the atmosphere and clarity of the production throughout. In a performance style so dependent on ensemble storytelling, concentration and constant engagement, Fleming consistently remained connected to the action on stage, helping sustain the immersive world of Pip's memories and experiences. Her lines were delivered clearly and confidently, ensuring that the narration and chorus work continued to support the audience's understanding of the story without losing momentum.

One of Fleming's greatest strengths was her attentive stage presence. She was constantly observing, reacting and emotionally responding to the scenes unfolding around her, reinforcing the idea that the chorus were not separate from the story but living through Pip's journey alongside him. Even during quieter moments, she maintained strong focus and purpose, helping ensure the stage always felt alive and active.

Her contribution to the physical theatre and ensemble sequences was also highly effective. Whether helping create the busy streets of London, shaping transitions or supporting more emotionally charged scenes, Fleming worked seamlessly within the company and demonstrated excellent awareness of the wider production.

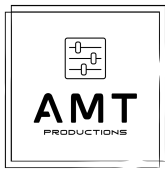
Helen Hague also contributed strongly to the chorus work, demonstrating focus, commitment and awareness throughout the production. In a performance style so reliant on ensemble precision and sustained energy, Hague remained fully present within every scene, helping maintain the immersive atmosphere and emotional rhythm of the storytelling from beginning to end. Her vocal delivery was clear and assured, ensuring that narration and ensemble moments remained easy for the audience to follow even during the production's faster-paced sequences.



One of Hague's strongest qualities was her constant engagement with the action around her. She never allowed her concentration or energy to drop, remaining emotionally connected to the unfolding story at all times. Whether reacting silently within dramatic moments, contributing to the physical theatre sequences or supporting scene transitions, she continually added detail and life to the stage picture.

Hague also worked effectively within the physical staging, helping create the fluid movement and seamless transitions that allowed the production to flow naturally between scenes. In a production where every chorus member played a vital role in shaping the audience's experience, her contribution was both valuable and highly effective.

Lindsey Fooks made a strong impact within her chorus roles, particularly in her performances as the policeman and judge. Throughout the production, she



demonstrated excellent vocal projection, clarity and confidence, ensuring that every line carried purpose and authority. In a large ensemble production where strong communication is essential, Fooks consistently commanded attention whenever she spoke, helping maintain the pace, tension and atmosphere of the storytelling.

As the policeman, she brought urgency and intensity to the role, delivering her lines with clear importance and conviction. Even during moments of heightened pace and pressure, every word remained distinct and fully audible, which added greatly to the realism and tension of the scene. Her performance successfully conveyed the authority of someone carrying out an important duty, helping reinforce the harsh social and legal structures present within Dickens' world.

Her portrayal of the judge was particularly striking. Fooks entered the role with a loud, proud and impactful stage presence that immediately shifted the atmosphere of the scene. There was a cold sense of authority within her delivery, and she wisely avoided adding unnecessary sentimentality or softness to the character. Instead, she presented the judge as a figure representing the unforgiving nature of Victorian justice and social hierarchy. This approach gave the scene real weight and helped underline Dickens' criticism of systems that often lacked compassion or humanity.

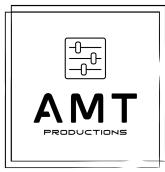
The whole cast worked beautifully as an ensemble, fully embracing the collaborative and physical storytelling style that sat at the heart of this production. In a play so dependent on chorus work, narration and constant stage presence, the company demonstrated impressive focus, discipline and commitment throughout. Every character was clearly defined, whether they had a single line, a lengthy monologue or simply a moment of silent observation. No performer ever felt unnecessary or disconnected from the action; instead, each cast member played an important role in shaping Pip's journey and driving the story forward.



What made the ensemble work particularly effective was the constant sense of shared experience on stage. The chorus did not simply narrate the story, they lived through it alongside Pip, reacting emotionally to events, physically shaping the world around him and helping create the dreamlike atmosphere that defined the production. Even

in moments where attention was focused elsewhere, the cast remained fully engaged, constantly giving the





audience something meaningful to watch. This level of concentration and teamwork greatly strengthened the immersive quality of the performance.

The production also carried a genuine sense of community spirit both on and off the stage. From the welcoming atmosphere front of house to the visible trust and support between performers, there was a warmth and unity within the company that could clearly be felt by the audience. This was beautifully reflected during the final bows, where the entire cast bowed together as one company rather than as isolated individuals. It was a simple but powerful reminder that productions like this are built upon collaboration, generosity and a shared love of theatre. The sense of togetherness at the heart of Neston Players was evident throughout the evening and became one of the production's greatest strengths.

A mention must also go to the quality of the programme, with content by Fleur Smith and Anne Farrall and design by Rebecca Jackson Designs. It was well made, informative and visually appealing, adding to the overall experience of the evening. Front of house staff were welcoming and organised, with committee members creating a friendly and classy atmosphere. Being greeted by a gentleman in a black tuxedo set the tone for a special night at the theatre.

Overall, Neston Players' *Great Expectations* was a powerful, imaginative and emotionally engaging production that captured both the darkness and humanity of Dickens' story. Ruth Cooper and Stuart Rathe's direction was confident and ambitious, shaping the production with a clear understanding of ensemble theatre, visual storytelling and emotional truth. Their trust in the cast, movement and audience imagination allowed the story to unfold with pace and purpose, while still giving the quieter moments the space they needed to breathe.

What came across most strongly was the care and collaboration behind the production. Every performer felt invested in the world being created, and no role felt unimportant. The cast worked with generosity and focus, supporting one another through complex physical sequences, shared narration and emotionally demanding scenes. This gave the production a real sense of unity, as though the whole company were carrying Pip's story together.

This was a production about ambition, regret, love, class and forgiveness, but above all it was about what truly makes a person "great". Neston Players brought that message to life with sincerity, creativity and heart. From the warm welcome front of house team to the dedication of the performers and production team, there was a genuine community spirit running through the entire evening. Every detail reflected the care, passion and hard work of a company united by a shared love of theatre.

Neston Players should be extremely proud of this ambitious and beautifully realised production. It was filled with heart, imagination and artistic confidence, proving once again the incredible standard of work being created within local theatre. Thank you to the cast, creatives, committee members and volunteers for such a warm welcome and a memorable evening. I thoroughly enjoyed experiencing this production and will most certainly be returning to see more of Neston Players' work in the future.

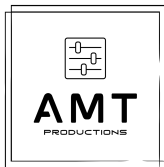


Photography by Colin Heyes

Reviewer: Abigail Bradbury - AMT Productions

Date: 08.05.26

If you want to see Neston Players next production 'Rumours' April 2027. Please follow the link to their website: <https://www.nestonplayers.co.uk/>



RUMOURS

Rumours (The British Version)

by Neil Simon

Performance Dates

2nd-5th December

Neston Civic Hall



NESTON
PLAYERS



AMT
PRODUCTIONS