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Great Expectations ☆☆☆

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Rain or Shine, one of the few summer open-air theatre companies remaining active in the winter, is currently on a 10-week hike with this entertaining stage version of Dickens' greatest novel. It is not appearing al fresco, of course, but touring venues ranging from a corn barn to a Women's Institute hall, and from Norfolk in the east to Alderney in the Channel Islands.

The company's style, under actor/director James Reynard, remains very much in summer mode, however, with a cast of five doubling and trebling the book's rich cornucopia of characters. Things are made even more colourful by the bold choice of the appropriately-named Pippa Meekings as Pip. She tackles our hero's progress into manhood with a pleasing lack of bravado.

The seasonal touch comes with the Christmas Eve meeting on Romney Marsh between Pip and the escaped convict Magwitch, played at full throttle by Reynard himself. Unknown to Pip, this terrifying encounter is to shape the rest of his life, although the good-natured blacksmith Joe Gargery (sympathetically played by Rob Keeves), the perpetual bride Miss Havisham (made unusually angry by Jayne Lloyd) and the tantalising Estella, played by a busy Claire Tucker - who also cross-dresses as Herbert Pocket - all emerge as fully rounded characters.

The key scenes are played with ample supplies of energy, if not always subtlety, and the two brief dream sequences involving Miss Havisham are an effective dramatic device.

Verdict: Bringing classical theatre into the heart of local communities proves to be just as worthwhile in winter as in summer