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FIRST NIGHT

# The Midnight Bell review — an exceptional show up there with Bourne's best

Matthew Bourne's bittersweet dance adaptation of several Patrick Hamilton novels is even more impressive than when it premiered

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Andrew Monaghan and Liam Mower are two of an ensemble of ten in *The Midnight Bell*

JOHAN PERSSON

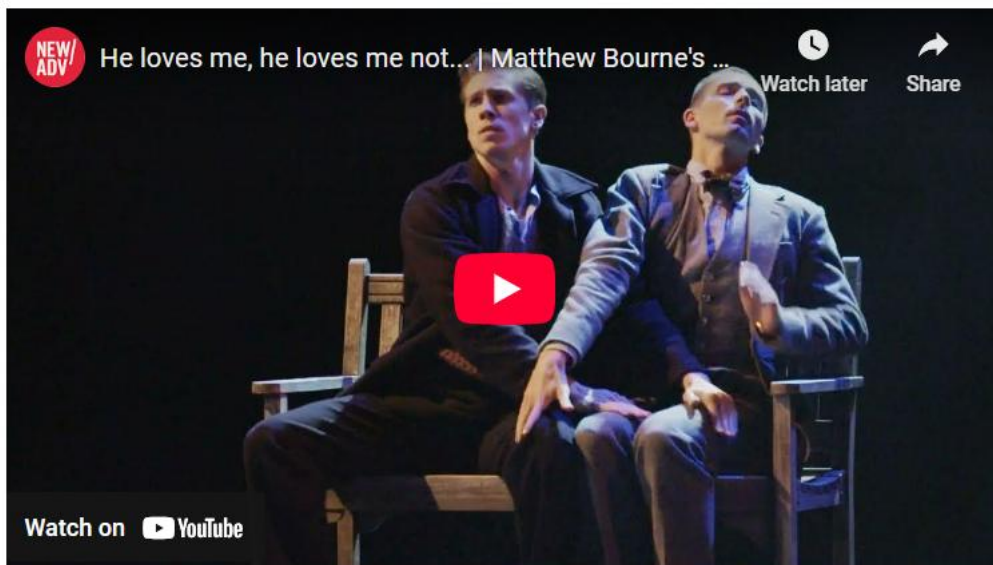
★★★★★

Matthew Bourne created *The Midnight Bell* for and with the members of his company, New Adventures, in 2021. Now revived for a substantial UK tour, including its visit to Sadler's Wells, this kaleidoscopic dance adaptation of several Patrick Hamilton novels is even more impressive than when it premiered.

Bourne himself has said the company assembled for this show is his finest yet. His self-hype is justified. The opening night did indeed showcase a stellar ensemble of ten, several of whom were in the original cast. But I'd go a step further and say that the work as a whole can easily rank with the popular British choreographer and director's best.

Bourne is at heart a showman, an astute crowd-pleaser with a knack for successfully drawing upon culture high or low in fresh, invigorating ways. The evidence is in his reinventions of ballet warhorses (*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, the landmark *Swan Lake*) and classic films (*Edward Scissorhands*, *The Red Shoes*). *The Midnight Bell* is, like those shows, highly entertaining while also delving pretty deeply into the psychology and emotions of a gallery of appealing characters.

Beautifully designed and lit by, respectively, Lez Brotherston and Paule Constable, the staging is drenched in fog and nostalgia. The time is London in the 1930s, and the principal setting the pub after which the production is named. Bourne's ingenious multistrand narrative charts the relationships between the Bell's regulars, a collection of often needy, lonely or disillusioned dreamers, drinkers and chancers, gay or straight, employed or out of work.



The combination of pinpoint characterisations and Bourne's kinetic craft balances their fluidly criss-crossing stories. He keeps stereotypes at bay. At the same time Bourne capitalises on period references, specifically in the use of recordings from the era interspersed with Terry Davies's atmospheric contemporary score. Characters break into song and dance, lip-syncing the lyrics. The effect is charmingly, vaguely camp but also insightful and touching.

We become more invested in the lives of the people onstage as the show unfolds. The second act is even richer than the first, with the cast swirling through a dance set to Rudy Vallée's haunting track *Deep Night*, visiting a cinema and, finally, revolving into the bedroom where their stylised yet painful intimacies are most exposed. It all adds up to a wonderfully bittersweet, exceptional show.

**110min**

**Sadler's Wells, London, to Jun 21; touring to Oct 4, [new-adventures.net](http://new-adventures.net)**