

Doctor Syn and The Scarecrow by Chris Lea - Synopsis

This is a musical based on the Dr Syn novels, by Russell Thorndike. It is 1777. Dr Syn is the vicar of Dymchurch by day and leader of the Romney Marsh smugglers, or Marsh Witches, by night. He is a complicated man – a gentle, generous, beloved man of the cloth who, by day, makes himself look older than his 42 years to hide a previous identity - that of Captain Clegg the pirate. His demeanour also takes suspicion away from his current alter ego, that of The Scarecrow. (His appearance purposely modelled on the scarecrow in a nearby field).

As an infamous smuggler leader, with celebrity status, The Scarecrow has enemies in the authorities represented by revenue men and dragoons. A more recent nemesis is Mr Stubbard who, with his press gang, has been brought in to break up the smuggler operation by dragging off as many of the local men folk as possible. Dr Syn as The Scarecrow is aided by his loyal lieutenant Mr Mipps the local sexton (aka Hellspite when in disguise). The two conspire to rid the area of the press gang and proclaim The Scarecrow as the real power of Romney Marsh. Mipps is a complex character: a loveable rogue who acts as a narrator and not without humour. However he is also The Scarecrow's henchman and enforcer.

In the meantime Dr Syn inadvertently makes an impression on Charlotte the 21 year old daughter of his old friend Squire Cobtree. Charlotte instantly guesses Syn's secret past and his present alter ego. She actively pursues Syn romantically, and manages to wedel her way into the smuggler gang, adopting her own disguise and alter ego – Curlew.

The action starts with The Scarecrow escaping capture from the tower of Dover Castle. He appears to jump from his cell window and fly away (over the audience). His disappearance leaves a ruffled Dr Syn tied up in a heap. Syn had apparently been carrying out his regular visits to prisoners when he was attacked by The Scarecrow. Syn in his daily life appears to condemn The Scarecrow and actively seems to assist the authorities in their plans for his capture.

Syn shows his stern side by dealing out harsh justice to traitors and those who would bring about the deaths of his men. He does not kill needlessly though, and avoids violence whenever possible. He also has a softer and sympathetic side, allowing the Scarecrow to be temporarily captured so that a young officer in the dragoons could impress the Lord of Lympne Castle, and thus marry his daughter. He is also seen to teach a wayward smuggler a lesson, but then saves his life, to fulfil a promise.

The plot reaches its climax with The Scarecrow capturing the press gang and making demands on the Navy to allow their return. The musical closes with the release of the impressed Marsh men and the delivery of the press gang in barrels back to the Navy. Syn also accepts that he can have a life with Charlotte, and the pair proclaim their love for each other. Mipps likewise accepts that it is easier to give into the attentions of Mrs Waggetts, the widowed landlady of The Ship Inn.