

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Adapted by Mark Healy from the novel by Thomas Hardy
Ilminster Entertainments Society – Thursday 6th July 2017

THE PLAY

I'm rather ashamed to admit that I have never read the novel, but I remember the film with great affection (having been hopelessly in love with Julie Christie in my late teens!), and I am impressed to see how effectively and faithfully Mark Healy has adapted the book, judging from the Sparknotes precis of the original, which I have just read. I really like his suggestion that the action should be fluid, without blackouts and cumbersome set changes, and that the style should be as naturalistic as possible in the telling of the story. And what a great story it is - I was rapt by the script!

The text gives roles, potentially, to at least 25 people, but lends itself to doubling, and I shall be interested to see what you do in this respect. There are quite a number of settings - ranging from Oak's hut at the start, through to various parts of Weatherbury Farm, the Malthouse, Casterbridge barracks, the church, Boldwood's Farm, the Workhouse, the shoreline, and finally of course the churchyard. Clearly you will need a fairly non-specific multipurpose set, and keeping the flow going will be quite a challenge. Lots of opportunities for music and I am hoping that you will play this live on stage.

I think this is an adventurous choice, but I think it will lend itself very well to a 'community-theatre' style treatment, and I can imagine it will be enormous fun to be part of. I am really looking forward to seeing what you make of it.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

The stage was set very simply when we entered the auditorium, with a single chair lit focally on the rectangular shallow black rostrum up R, backed by a beautifully painted cyclorama sky. This open aspect was continued over on the R of the stage, with the legs painted similarly and moving towards leafiness downstage. I thought it was stunning - very evocative somehow of rolling Dorsetshire countryside. This was to be Mrs Hurt's farm initially and then Weatherbury Farm for the rest of the play, and it worked really well.

On the other side of the stage, by contrast, was a more domestic but again fairly non-specific setting which became, by turns, all the other places needed - Gabriel Oak's simple dwelling, jutting out into the acting area and painted as lovely warm honey-coloured stone, and with the addition of a table and benches becoming The Malthouse Inn, with outside steps leading up to a very effective upstairs room at the barracks, Boldwood's farmhouse etc. The legs stage L were painted to represent timber buildings with a very neat fold-out haywain, and also a fold-out bush for Boldwood to hide behind! Lastly, down L, was a lovely period grindstone wheel - fabulous! I was really impressed with such imaginative use of the space and with the quality of the set painting; I note Chris Ackerman is credited in the programme as "Artist" - bravo!

Lighting by Brian Perkins was quite demanding I would think, because so many different parts of the stage were used, needing focal lighting, and on a couple of occasions I got the impression that the actors needed to come forward a bit to find their light - Troy in particular needed to be aware of this, midstage R. In general I thought it was very well used to compliment the 'look' of the piece, and I thought the two projections (the flickering fire in the hayrick, and the waves crashing in on the shoreline) were extremely effective. The night scenes too were very ably lit. There were a lot more blackouts than I had anticipated though - this may well have been a directorial decision, and in fact none lasted too long, but I think I would have looked to try and use crossfade a bit more, so as to enhance the sense of 'flow'.

As well as his projections, I see that Peter Schofield was also responsible for the sound, which for me was a standout feature of this production. There were an enormous number of SFX - pouring rain, crackling flames, crashing waves, ominous rumbles of thunder, shotgun reports, birdsong and sheep bleating, hymn-singing and all, and he seemed to have created a sort of 'soundscape' which added greatly, though in many instances probably subliminally, to our enjoyment, with levels beautifully controlled. There were lots of occasions when I really couldn't tell whether the voices offstage were live or recorded, but with Peter's level of skill I think almost certainly recorded, along with much of the music - although on a couple of occasions this was also played live on stage; very clever!

Props were excellent, but I would have expected no less from Louise Adams and Rachel Lawrence! That grindstone (essential of course for the scene between Gabriel and Bathsheba) was a wonderful find, as was Gabriel's scythe, the multitude of pewter tankards (few if any of which were 'shown' by the actors to be full, sadly), the cod shotgun (perfectly adequate in low light), and the several 'clay-look' pipes. I was impressed to see that piles of coins were used on payday, though I thought the cashbox looked a bit modern, and that Troy's 19th C newspaper was credible. Good work.

Costumes too, in the hands of Kate White, were well up to Ilminster's usual high standards and gave a good impression of 'mid-Victorian' without going to excessive expense. I noted three appropriate changes for Bathsheba, some of which must have been lightning-quick! And I was pleased to see minor characters appropriately dressed for each of their roles. Troy's uniform was perfectly acceptable, though let down a little by his hat... It was good to see Gabriel dressing with more care as he gained management status, but he remained in shirtsleeves. Was this to link him with his working-man's roots, I wondered, or perhaps because you couldn't possibly find a frock-coat to fit!

Hair and Make-up were well handled. I was impressed with Troy's homegrown moustache and sideburns - very much looked the part. Having assumed initially that Bathsheba was wearing a wig, I realised later that the period-effect was achieved by pinning; bravo! As far as I could tell everyone else wore their hair naturally, though in Phil Wells's case with a bucket load of white make-up in it... Make-up too was used quite subtly; most impressively to give Fanny an exhausted anaemic look, but also to give Poorgrass his blushes. Nice work. All-in-all I felt presentation values were very high, as we have come to expect of course - well done!

Direction

With 14 people covering 25 roles, inclusive casting, broad accents, live music, folk-songs and country dancing, and 40 different scenes, this production was clearly a massive undertaking, and yet the effect seemed very simple and clear, with a strong sense of community theatre, and I think this is a tribute to your design and your direction, Anna. The whole piece flowed nicely, with good pace, and excellent use of the acting area, and the story came across well.

I thought the doubling was effective, and never distracting, and was very pleased that you had kept the roles of both Temperance and Soberance and particularly that you hadn't doubled Fanny Robin with Temperance. This was pretty crucial in my view because we were to become so emotionally involved with poor Fanny.

The casting worked pretty well in my view and it was good to see such a wide range of ages on stage. The only character obviously not age-appropriate was William Boldwood, but only because the script hadn't been changed to suit; the description of Phil Hunt as being "about 40" caused much mirth amongst audience members sitting around me, but the concept of Boldwood being an elderly bachelor worked perfectly well as far as I was concerned and I would have simply changed the line to "in his 60s".

I didn't find any of the country accents jarred. They did however make it more difficult to hear what was being said in quite a few instances, and I felt that more time was needed working with Bathsheba and Sgt Troy in particular on their delivery of lines - of which more in the Acting section.

I could well understand why you had decided against the "physical stylisation" passages suggested by Mark Healy. He cites as an example the scene early in part 2 which he titled 'Bathsheba decides' and which reads as though he was envisaging a piece of contemporary dance, but there is also the dream sequence which opens the play in his adaptation. I had imagined this latter perhaps being performed by two dancers when I read the script, and have seen something similar done to very good effect in *Our Town*. Using the same dancer for Bathsheba and two more males to represent Troy and Boldwood would have been appropriate then for the 'decision piece', but of course you do need access to dancers! Movement of this sort by non-dancers, no matter how well they act, can look pretty clunky and uncomfortable... The very powerful 'Death in the Workhouse' scene, which you had warned me in advance that you were cutting, would presumably have been done in the same non-verbal style. Unfortunately what you replaced it with didn't convey much emotion and I didn't understand what, and particularly who, we were supposed to be focussing on. You did however get some very nice 'chorus' movement in - during the dipping of the sheep upstage, and later with the mimed scything in the Haymaking scene which I admired and enjoyed.

There were many highlights in this production, and for me the ensemble pieces stand out strongly because they were so well managed: the fire at Weatherbury at which Gabriel proves his mettle, the scene Mark Healy calls 'mistress and men' in which we are introduced to all the farm-workers, the shearing supper and in particular Bathsheba's song, the storm during which we see Bathsheba and Gabriel pulling together, and of course Boldwood's party and its tragic conclusion. But I also much admired so many

detailed scenes - the sexual tension generated between Bathsheba and Troy in their first meeting and later in the hollow amidst the ferns (wow, what a way to finish part 1!), the realisation that their hasty marriage was a terrible mistake, the heart-rending reappearance of Fanny, the creation of the shore-line and the very neat way you indicated Troy's intended suicide by drowning, Boldwood's desperate but unrequited love, and finally of course the much-anticipated reconciliation between our hero and our heroine (if not total capitulation on her part!). Very good work.

Acting

The cast appeared well-rehearsed and worked together very effectively as a team. Though I see you have credited Maddie Lowe with 'Continuity' in the programme, I wasn't aware of any prompts on the night I came, the second night of the run. Incidentally it was great to see such a full house midweek for a piece of classic drama, done in a community-theatre style - Thomas Hardy is very much up Ilminster's street, clearly!

Bathsheba Everdene - Rosie Clark

A very mature performance I thought. You looked so right for the role and your understanding of this admirable, if flawed, character shone forth; I was completely convinced by her determination to live her life as she saw fit, rather than along conventional lines, even though it was clear to us that she was making terrible decisions at almost every turn! The different relationships you established for her with her three male suitors was both interesting and well-conveyed. Very good stage presence and a tuneful singing voice, which was lovely. What let this performance down however was your vocal delivery, which wasn't nearly as natural and spontaneous as your physicalisation, and this is an area where I feel you will need to do a fair amount of work in order to make the very most of your undoubted potential as an actress.

Gabriel Oak - George Montague

This was such a strong performance, both emotionally and physically, and I admired it very much. Your great height, your deep voice and your long, slow graceful stride suited the character so well, because it seemed to give him an innate confidence and even a sort of nobility. Of course Gabriel is somewhat idealised, but Hardy recognised his readership's need for a quiet hero - a rock on whom Bathsheba could and would eventually rebuild her life. I thought you showed great theatre skills in this portrayal - a credible accent and a voice which was calm and measured and always audible, but avoided becoming sentimental at any stage. In addition you were always listening and responding appropriately, and demonstrating excellent 'presence' on stage. You sang well and you even tootled a bit on the recorder! Most impressive - very well done.

William Boldwood - Philip Hunt

Clearly Hardy had envisioned Boldwood as being in his early 40s but I think playing him as a much older man, and presumably long-past thinking of himself as marriageable, was perfectly reasonable. In fact I thought it gave the character more depth and even more reason for his desperate, almost obsessional, desire to wed Bathsheba once she had casually lit the flame in him - how she must have regretted that silly "marry me" on the Valentine card! I really liked your portrayal, Phil; you made him very real and I'm sure we

all felt for him, even though he was hopelessly misguided. Very natural delivery of the lines, which were all perfectly audible, and although at times I worried that they weren't entirely secure, you didn't take a prompt. His final sacrifice, to save the woman he loved from her unworthy husband, was really rather moving - especially since he clearly intended to kill himself afterwards. That moment, when he turned the gun on himself, provoked a titter on the night I came and I really can't work out why, unless it was because Gabriel plucked it from his grasp so fluidly. A fine performance in my opinion - bravo.

Sgt Frank Troy - Jonathan Peckover

I know Anna despaired of being able to cast Sgt Troy, having had no one suitable at the auditions, so your being willing and able to take on the role must have seemed like theatrical magic - especially since you were so suited to it! I'm so pleased to read, in the programme, that you have added acting to your suite of creative skills. It must have been good fun playing a thoroughly bad egg, who didn't even have the excuse of psychopathy... his remorse over the dreadful way he had treated Fanny showed that he had at least some conscience. You did it well, but I think you needed more help with audibility and clarity; you had a tendency to speak too quickly which made it quite difficult to hear what Troy was saying sometimes. You physicalised the role very credibly (though be careful of a tendency to repetitive gesturing), and I was impressed by the swordplay in the scene at the end of part 1 (and Rosie's amazing faith in your skill...). You really made us believe the character - so much so that I felt very uncomfortable when he turned up at Boldwood's party, and threatened to re-establish his hold over Bathsheba. A good job Boldwood was there to blow him away, I thought. Well done!

Mrs Hurst/Maryann Money - Jo Neagle

I thought you managed to differentiate these two roles well, Jo - Mrs Hurst, Bathsheba's aunt, was clearly a landowner and you were convincing as such, and then you switched and seemed to be having great fun playing Bathsheba's servant Maryann - a jolly soul! Good work.

Joseph Poorgrass/Lawyer Banks/ Merchant - Philip Wells

I didn't read Poorgrass as a humorous character but you made him one, Phil, and it worked really well - the walk with slightly bent knees, the hat jammed onto his head with hair cascading down each side of his face, the yokel manner... A very small role in terms of lines but you made a big impression by physicalising it so memorably. There was something vaguely Shakespearian about the way the scenes involving the farmworkers added levity and relieved some of the tension developing in the main plot. I thought his relationship with Jan Coggan lifted the mood at Weatherbury very successfully, and I enjoyed this performance a lot.

Jan Coggan/Vicar - Mike Lanigan

Your years of experience shone out, and you made Jan Coggan good fun and very watchable. Nice work as the Vicar too. Thank you.

Fanny Robin - Anna Griffiths

I thought this was exceptionally good, Anna. I could entirely believe in her youthful optimistic relationship with Frank in her first two scenes with him - at the barracks and then at Mrs Twill's and was appalled at his rejection of her when she turned up late,

having been waiting at the wrong church, but her appearance at the Turnpike in part 2 was utterly shocking - a tribute to your make-up and your very effective acting. Bravo.

Liddy Smallbury - Katy Little

I was amazed to read, Katy, that this was your first role on stage; you gave the impression of being relaxed and very much at home on the boards, and I enjoyed your honest, cheerful portrayal of Liddy. Well done - I'm sure you have lots of fun ahead of you with this fascinating hobby of ours.

Henry Fray/Shepherd/Merchant - John Ralph

Good to hear that you have returned to acting, John - and the role of 'Henery' was a nice gentle way of putting your toe back in the water. I look forward to seeing more of you in future productions at the Warehouse.

Bailiff Pennyways/Soldier/Matthew Moon - Michael Wills

How nice to have such a good variety of roles, Michael! I thought you were suitably unpleasant as Pennyways in that early scene, rather charming as Matthew Moon after an almost instantaneous change of character in the wings, and amusing as Frank Troy's sidekick in uniform. You looked as though you were enjoying yourself!

Temperance & Soberance - Emily Dixon and Emily Dugdale

I suspect you two Emilys might be a bit fed up with being considered together, but these two characters worked so well as a pigeon pair and I very much enjoyed your youthful, energetic performances.

Farmer/Merchant - David Levi

Sadly you missed out on getting onto the Cast Biographies page, Dave, but it was good to see you taking a couple of very small roles, as well as being a quietly efficient Stage Manager in costume, and a member of the set design and construction team.

SUMMARY

On balance I thought this was a very successful production, which gave the large and talented team at Ilminster lots of interesting challenges, and which was greatly appreciated by your capacity audience. I enjoyed it very much!

Thank you so much for inviting me to adjudicate. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

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