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## Book Review: The Mills on the Floss

J.C. Trewin

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## THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

At the Fortune Theatre, London

"George Eliot" seems to be fashionable at the moment. I gather that Silas Marner is planned for television. Now Margaret Wolfit, Sir Donald's actress daughter, has managed to get her single-handed stage version of The Mill On The Floss into two hours.

For some it is the most immediately appealing of all the books; and it is good to see its problems yield to so direct an approach.

Margaret Wolfit has the right kind of modesty. She does not approach her protean task as if she were launching a battleship, but talks her way quietly into the narrative, establishing everyone firmly without superfluous histrionics, and keeping the line clear and straight.

It is a lot to ask; still she answers it in both drama and performance. We are never at odds with the tale of that sister and brother, Tom and Maggie Tulliver, that ends in the famous tragedy on the flooded river.

The actress's speaking lifts the scene from the text without loss; The house was rightly still in those closing moments. "The boat reappeared — but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted."

Robert Speight used to speak of the book — and he wrote of it in his Eliot monograph — as "a masterpiece of memory." One felt this at the Fortune

and recognised, too, the symbolic quality, throughout the novel, of the river itself.

I cannot say that I have ever been an uncritical Eliot admirer; but certain passages never fail to take the heart. Here the audience plainly knew its author and were grateful to Margaret Wolfit for a night that will linger in the mind for its absolute honesty.

Richard Digby Day has directed and there is an evocative back-cloth by Mark Negin.

J.C. Trewin