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REVIEW by Rosalind Holt

**ADAM BEDE AT THE ORANGE TREE THEATRE,
RICHMOND, SURREY**

Gaps in appreciation.

The rash boast of many an English teacher - that Middlemarch is the greatest novel in our language - is enough to put most people off literature for life.

City Limits

Dinah Morris ... played ... has a warm humanity which is a distinct improvement on the preachifying original.

The Staines Informer

Some of our best stories are buried in thick tomes, accessible only to literature students who often fail to appreciate their beauty, or to academics.

Surrey Comet

... thankless task ... as Seth Bede, the least satisfactory character in the novel

...

Financial Times

I remember repeatedly falling asleep over the book at university ... [the adaptor] sensibly excludes ... many interminable passages of description and lofty authorial comment; and he has unearthed more humour in the novel than I dreamt was possible ... the plot unfolds with a speed which will astonish and delight those who have dawdled laboriously over Miss [ouch!] Eliot's closely-printed pages ... performance as Adam entirely avoids the priggishness of the character on the printed page ... works similar wonders with the Methodist preacher Dinah.

Daily Telegraph

These comments are from reviews of a recent theatre presentation of Adam Bede. It's strange that middlebrow critics (who surely aim to reflect their readers' taste at least as much as their own) think it necessary to apologise for recommending a version of this Victorian classic. I'm reminded of the undoubtedly true comment that George Eliot's novels were much read between the Wars regardless of the slump in her literary reputation. For the

generations of ordinary readers who have enjoyed and enjoy George Eliot's novels, such old-fashioned and patronising assumptions about common taste raise an eyebrow or a smile. Despite the critics' warnings, shopkeepers in the theatre's locality have had to order extra stock of the novel. I wonder what knowledge and half-knowledge of the book the audiences had had; the elderly folk surrounding me at a matinee knew the plot -seemed long familiar with it.

Reading the reviews posted in the foyer was the one great enjoyment of the afternoon I spent seeing this production.

Written here

The production took place at Richmond in Surrey.

In 1855 George Eliot and George Henry Lewes took lodgings at 8 Park Shot, Richmond, their first settled home. Some houses of the period remain in the street, but the Leweses' lodging is gone. George Eliot began and finished Adam Bede there (a middle part was written on the Continent). Its profits enabled her and Lewes to move in 1859 to Holly Lodge, Southfields, Wandsworth.

Parkshot (as it now is) lies behind Kew Road where since 1971 the Orange Tree Theatre has flourished in a room over the Orange Tree pub. It is raising £750,000 for its own purpose-built small theatre nearly completed nearby.

Playing the novel

An adaptation of Adam Bede by Geoffrey Beevers was played at the Theatre from February 9th to March 10th, and it then went on tour to towns in East Anglia for Eastern Arts for two weeks. This was one of the Orange Tree's most successful productions. It was the first invited to tour. About fifty people a performance were turned away (the pub room holds about two hundred).

Of course, to someone who knows a classic novel well, an adaptation is hardly ever satisfactory. Usual values of adaptation are as an introduction to the work, and as an exercise in stagecraft (or television or radio-craft).

In the latter the Orange Tree production worked well. Six actors played about a dozen named parts plus minor roles, and also spoke some of Eliot's commentary (with interesting uses, such as the vacillating Arthur Donni-

thorne stepping out of his character to comment on himself). Presented in the round with the minimum of props, the playing had freshness, verve, immediacy. It was attractively varied with song and dance.

Unfortunately the casting was not entirely suitable: Adam dishy and blonde; Arthur plain, spluttering, with a habit of wringing his hands; Hetty with pointed features and fuzzy hair instead of being soft and rounded, and pert, lively and flirtatious instead of dim in wits and feeling (although this casting made Adam's infatuation more comprehensible). Only Karen Ascoe as Dinah Morris was so well suited to her part as to add to my idea of the character.

As an introduction, the adaptation was as good as it could reasonably be. At a three-hour pace, the plot inevitably seemed obvious and thread-bare, but it generated some excitement towards the end. There was a commendable emphasis, neatly pointed by interspersed authorial comment, on the book's treatment of the motives and consequences of moral choices. Conversation and speeches were often necessarily coarsened and simplified from the original. For example, Eliot's subtle criticisms of the misogynist attitude of Bartle Massey were quite lost, and each pronouncement of his was played for a laugh; a silent savouring of a continuum of humour is impossible in a theatre. Even more than in the conversation and speeches, and tracing of moral choices, however, the power of the book lies in my view in its descriptions, or rather in the interweaving of all these elements; the lack of the descriptive dimension was felt badly by me.

Conclusion

I'm afraid that my predominant impression was of sitting crowded onto a hard pew in a hot, stuffy room, spending three hours (with an interval) watching a pale version of something I'd far rather read. But it was worth going, to see the reviews.

It's possible the production may reappear at the new theatre.