

1985

MILL ON THE FLOSS: The Author's Tone of Voice

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MILL ON THE FLOSS

The Author's Tone of Voice

It is a breathtaking evening at the Fortune Theatre, in the sense that we come to share the actress's evident inhalation of the novel and exhalation of it – all in two hours for us.

It can hardly be described as breathtaking entertainment since "The Mill on the Floss" has, until its tragic end, all the characteristics of its kind least suited, you may think, to theatrical adaptation. So the achievement of Margaret Wolfitt in translating George Eliot's supposedly autobiographical novel to the stage (or to the needs of a solitary performer) is the more remarkable.

For it introduces everyone who seems to matter, manages to keep them nattering to us as spectators and, also, shrewdly, retains the author's tone of voice and sense of humour whenever it can.

If we do not succumb to the performance as to the novel, it is partly because the actress must keep on changing roles (she can juggle with characters so as to keep four people in our minds at once) and also function as narrator.

Of necessity, we are vouchsafed no more than a tactful skimming, an ingenious compression, of this picture of 19th century provincial life among the lower middle classes for a brother and sister like Tom and Maggie. We need not worry if Miss Wolfitt brings Maggie to more sympathetic life than Tom. In the circumstances, he suffers from the cramped

demands of the stage, compared to the novelist's space.

It isn't a story ultimately that seems to profit very much from such compact treatment but, if it sends the playgoer back to the book, Miss Wolfit's labour of love will not have been in vain.

It is no labour to watch it, except when her memory momentarily fails her and the frail thread of the narrative snaps. This is amazingly rare in a generally admirable attempt to squeeze a tragic, touching, funny and ever delicately-told tale of Victorian length on to the stage with only lighting (by David Whitehead) for cues and our rapt attention for encouragement. The director is Richard Digby Day.

Eric Shorter

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