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Rosalind Shanks

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REVIEW by Ruth Harris

"A DELICIOUS EFFERVESCENCE OF THE MIND"

(devised and presented by Gabriel Woolf with Rosalind Shanks at the Arts Centre Theatre, University of Warwick, on Wednesday, March 6th 1985)

"A delicious effervescence of the mind"? It is not a quality that one immediately associates with George Eliot, whose name and countenance promise more of the sturdier attributes and less of the "fizz". Yet in a brilliant recital by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks, many sparkling bubbles of wit sprang to life. Her love of jokes was recalled from books she laughed over in childhood, and the lively amusement she gleaned from the foibles of folk emerged from the perhaps unlikely pages of "Janet's Repentance". Bartle Massey from Adam Bede was not unexpected, but less predictable was the quick, dry humour that appeared in the dialogue between the worthy Felix Holt and the understandably irritated Esther. The dramatisation of characters from Middlemarch was also delightfully vivid: the bumbling prose of Mr. Brooke, the pedantry of Mr. Casaubon, the naïve earnestness of Dorothea, and the gentle malice of Celia were immediately brought to life for us on the stage. So too were Grandcourt and Gwendolen, in a dialogue wittily pregnant with pauses for unspoken thoughts.

It became clear that George Eliot could hold her own against the more commonly accepted humorists of her day. But humour has many faces, and the changes were skilfully rung on authors as varied as Dickens and Thomas Hood, Lewis Carroll and Oliver Wendell Holmes. We laughed as we listened to the plight of Bertie Stanhope when he trapped the

skirt of the formidable Mrs. Proudie, whose "Unhand it, sir!" rang splendidly through the theatre. We were entertained by the unexpected, by W.S. Gilbert's address "To The Terrestrial Globe" ("Roll on, thou ball, roll on!") and by Arthur Hugh Clough's amusingly irreverent poem, "The Latest Decalogue" ("Thou shalt have one God only; who / Would be at the expense of two?") Apart from "Vanity Fair", I had never realised before how funny Thackeray could be until I heard an excellent rendering of "The Disillusionment of Fitzboodle". Here and elsewhere, a relish for unusual words and names was evident in the programme, perhaps nowhere more delightfully realised than in "An Indian Poem" by Edward Lear. Wholly new to me was "the river with meloobious sound" where "The cummerbund is come!" Here, the Indian accent added immeasurably to the poem, and in the same way different accents and tones of voice brought to life Anstey's "Burglar Bill" from "Mr. Punch's Young Reciter." Special instructions given to the nervous reciter made us laugh: the piece was said to be difficult, to "bristle with as many points as a porcupine", and yet to be particularly suitable for "students of the softer sex". Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks shared the humour of this, the instructions ("hushed voice here" or "business here with your fan") amusingly interrupting a poem that was already hilariously funny. I shall not lightly forget Burglar Bill won over by the sickly little girl and "clasping tenderly a damson - tartlet to his burly breast."

It was - including the tarts - a rich feast. We were entertained also by excerpts from Jerome K. Jerome's "Three Men on the Bummel", from Tennyson's "Will Waterproof's "Lyrical Monologue", from Dickens's "Mrs. Gamp, among the Hamatoor's a-play-acting", and from Oscar Wilde's "Phrases and Philosophies

for the Use of the Young." As we listened, we realised afresh what entertaining companions these writers must have been – not least George Henry Lewes, who added his own "delicious effervescence of the mind" in an excellent joke that brought the house down at the end.

What fun the Victorians were! How morbidly solemn so many of our modern writers seem to be when we contrast them with our lively ancestors whose zest for life was so rich! We ourselves were lucky to listen to such gifted reciters whose rapport with each other and with their audience indicated that they were enjoying themselves as much as we were. Could one possibly ask more? Our glowing faces, freshened by laughter, provided the answer.

