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## Adam Bede

Geoffrey Beevers

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***Adam Bede*, adapted and directed by Geoffrey Beevers  
Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond (16 February 2005-12 March 2005)**

*Adam Bede* is not easily adaptable to the stage. Its structure is essentially narrative rather than dramatic, and much of its interest consists in the probing of moral issues and analysis of motive. A straightforward retelling of the plot without any sort of commentary (as often happens with television adaptations) would leave it an empty shell. Geoffrey Beevers is well aware of this and is concerned to preserve as much of George Eliot's own voice as he can. One way of doing this would have been to include a 'voice over' explaining, commenting and interpreting (as was done for example in the TV serial of *Brideshead Revisited*). Perhaps this would have worked best, but Beevers elected to place the commentary in the mouths of the characters themselves, so that they are constantly stepping in and out of their roles and addressing us directly. One gets used to this, but it is still often disconcerting. To have Hetty, for instance, with the rope still round her neck, tell us that 'Hetty was not pardoned but only had her sentence commuted to transportation' stops us in our tracks. Who exactly is talking to us? The most effective scenes are those where this sort of thing is not necessary, where the dialogue can be transposed 'straight' from page to stage, as in the confrontations between Adam and Arthur or Dinah's last interview with Hetty.

The result is that anyone unfamiliar with the novel will get a perfectly adequate idea of its main themes and some notion of its literary status. In some ways – heretical as it may sound to say this – it actually obscures some of the shortcomings of the original (this was, after all, Eliot's first novel). Many readers, for instance, are alienated by her relentless insistence on the moral perfection of Adam and Dinah, so that we almost long to hear something to their discredit; and conversely warm to Hetty and Arthur, who may be vain, selfish and irresponsible but at least have weaknesses that we can understand and emotions with which we can sympathize. On the stage this contrast does not come across at all. Inevitably the sense of a close-knit rural community in its natural and agricultural setting is absent, and it was probably a mistake to represent physically Hetty's hopeless journey to Windsor and back. But the evening's merits are enough to silence criticism. This is due in large measure to the quality of the acting. Faced with a large cast of characters, the small company has had to resort to the doubling of parts, carried out effortlessly with quite virtuosic expertise. Seth Bede has only to don a red coat, stand up straight and assume a gentleman's voice to become Arthur Donnithorne.

**Ian Sutton**