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REVIEW

By Kathleen Porter

SILAS MARNER - Not Quite a "Common Oil Workin' Man"

Devised and presented by GABRIEL WOOLF,
May 8th/9th, 1986

To compile a programme of Readings about 'the curse of the drinking classes' (Oscar Wilde) which is both satisfying and moving, requires some diligence and industry. This belies Gabriel Woolf's statement, as he introduced himself to his audience, that, apart from two whole weeks in an office, he had spent his life not doing a day's work, in Mr. Lawrence senior's sense of the word. As a matter of fact, we were moved, in a most satisfying way, sometimes to laughter, sometimes to tears, by passages read with such feeling that it was hard to believe that our reader had not himself sustained a callous or two, in the course of applying his hands in the garden, or by climbing on to a chair with hammer at the ready, emulating Uncle Podger.

The consistent theme of work imparted a pleasing unity to the programme, and gave the regular attender at the Annual Readings the distinct impression that something was different this year. The performance was as delightful as ever, and after Silas Marner had demonstrated the solitariness of a nineteenth century weaver's life, and introduced that corollary of work, money, we were carried along, dipping into the minds of authors as various as John Davidson (not known to me), Arthur Hugh Clough, Thomas Hood and Thomas Hardy, and getting a glimpse of women's work at home with Silas Marner and Dolly Winthrop, until we were lacerated by that painful episode in English History, children at work in the mines and factories.

Henry Mayhew, whose pathetic little Watercress Girl's story was sensitively and movingly told, brought the first half to an end with what seemed to be a rousing song-and-dance performed, pas-de-deux, by A Photographic Man and A Cesspool Sewerman. These two lusty labourers gave the lie to the saying that 'if you enjoy it, it ain't work', for, clearly, the workers enjoyed it, the performer enjoyed it and the audience was quite overcome with mirth.

The mood of the second half was more subdued, although the splendid passage from Felix Holt made us smile. The three characters, Felix, Rufus Lyon and his daughter, Esther, were delightfully portrayed, and all the irony observed. As ever, we marvelled at Gabriel Woolf's variety of voices, male and female, and accents, although there were times, in the more sombre pieces, when his voice dropped a little too low and some emphasis was lost. After the poignant piece from Mary Barton by Mrs. Gaskell, the mood lightened and the last reading from Silas Marner struck a note of hope.

A glorious evening ended on a rising tide of hilarity as Jerome K. Jerome's Uncle Podger, the workman to end all work, laid about him with a hammer.

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