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Geoffrey Beevers

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## GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON

23 November 1997

### THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

by Geoffrey Beevers

I'm sure you all know more about George Eliot than I do, so I thought I'd talk for a few minutes about the difficulties and joys of adapting her work, and especially *Adam Bede* for the stage.

I'd been asked to adapt *Adam Bede* for the Orange Tree theatre in Richmond, Surrey, then a tiny room-theatre above a pub. I didn't know much about George Eliot then. I didn't know that just around the corner from the pub theatre was the beautiful house in Park Shot where she had begun to write *Adam Bede* and where the sound of George Lewes's scratching pen had irritated her as they worked together. I didn't know that it was in the unchanged beauty of Richmond Park, where Carry (my wife) and I often walk together that George Eliot also walked with Lewes. I certainly didn't know how much I would come to appreciate her heart and mind.

It's daunting to compress a five hundred page novel into a twelve foot square space for one evening's entertainment. But I'd always been attracted by the challenge of huge themes in small spaces. As an actor, I'd been in a production of *King Lear* in that tiny room!

An adaptation, of course, can never be a substitute for reading the book – it's hopefully a different kind of work. I knew I must concentrate on the dramatic elements of the story, all the conflicts and relationships between the characters. From the start the question had to be not 'what can we do with this?' but 'what can we do without?' But my aim was to bring the imagination of George Eliot as directly and simply as possible to the imagination of a live audience, through the medium of the actors.

There are hundreds of characters; I eventually decided to build the play around six actors. Four would play the young ones, Hetty, Arthur, Adam and Dinah. As Seth and Arthur don't really meet I decided to double the parts of Arthur and Seth. Two older actors could play Mrs Bede, Mrs Poyser – and Mr Irwine, Mr Poyser and Bartle Massey. The actors doubling up the smaller parts also came to represent the wider community. Doubling has its advantages. Not only is it a pleasure to see actors turning on a sixpence to become different characters – for example at Arthur's twenty-first birthday party, where everybody is present at once! – but it also can express George Eliot's own sense of irony, for example when the actor who plays Arthur also doubles as Hetty's hangman.

I also decided to tell the story with the minimum of furniture and props, just the contents of a country kitchen. So a table could double as a coach or a cart or a scaffold; a bench could become a stile or an ottoman or a bed; the moving of a single chair could establish the difference between the Bede's cottage and Hall Farm. Telling the story clearly had to be paramount, and to maintain the momentum of its powerful plot.

The greatest loss, of course, is the descriptions; you must look in the book for those. The beautiful description of the dairy for example, in the chapter that begins 'The dairy was certainly worth looking at...'. But in a small theatre the dramatic moment is the meeting of Arthur and Hetty, and as Arthur's eyes light on Hetty, the one sentence 'The dairy was certainly worth looking at', has to suffice! It was frustrating sometimes – there are so many descriptions you can't use. In the theatre, Hetty's beauty must stand for itself. But isn't this a masterly description of her in the book:

Hetty's was a springtide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence – the innocence of a young star-browed calf, for example, that, being inclined for a promenade out of bounds, leads you a severe steeple-chase over hedge and ditch, and only comes to a stand in the middle of a bog.

The sentence starts so innocently, almost as one of those 'Silly Lady Novelists' might have begun it, and leads us on to an unromantic stop at the short word 'bog'. Hetty's story in a nutshell.

There are many wonderful sentences about Hetty. What about this: 'Hetty did not understand how anybody could be very fond of middle-aged people...'!

I found myself unable to dispense with this beautifully placed ironic voice; I needed a way of bringing in the author's tone. But I really didn't want to have an old lady making comments from the side of the stage, so I decided to have her thoughts shared between all the actors. Sometimes this was quite objective. For example, when Hetty is looking at herself in the privacy of her bedroom mirror, I had the other actors gather round her in the semi-darkness.

The actor playing Adam says: 'Adam was sure that Hetty's love, wherever she gave it, would be the most precious thing a man could possess on earth'.

The actor playing Mrs Poyser says: 'But one begins to suspect that there is no direct correlation between long eyelashes and depth of soul'.

The actor playing Arthur says: 'Arthur was sure that she was a dear, affectionate, good little thing. He probably imagined himself being virtuously tender to her, because the poor thing is so clingingly fond of him'.

And the actor playing Irwine concludes: 'But people who love downy peaches, are not apt to think of the stone'.

A more direct use of irony was when the actors speak directly about the feelings of the characters they are playing. For example, when Hetty first accepts Adam's proposal of marriage, they kiss. Out of the embrace, Adam turns to the audience to say: 'Adam could hardly believe in the happiness of that moment', and Hetty turns to say: 'Hetty wanted to be caressed. She wanted to feel as if Arthur were with her again'. Then the action continues.

This sharing of the voice of George Eliot also at times helped to give the sense of the whole community, and finally as the play went on, it could be used to give the audience those fresh

insights into love and suffering which are George Eliot's special vision. We arrive at these beautiful words of hers, shared between the cast:

It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it – if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering – the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrows live in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy – the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love.

It's dreadful to think that George Eliot should sometimes be portrayed as a mere 'Victorian moralist' when she was fighting so painfully the moralizing judgements of others.

In April I'm doing a new adaptation at the new Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond. It's *Silas Marner*. His story seems to have parallels with George Eliot's own. Repulsed by the irrationality of 'religions', Silas is forced into despair and isolation from society. He's brought back into touch with it through the growth of a natural human relationship, in his case the child so mysteriously given to him. It was part of George Eliot's sorrow (as it was Nancy's in the book) that she never had a child. But she too felt redeemed by human love, in her case by the love she shared with George Lewes. Her heart and mind were opened up to us in her novels, in an art which leads us into 'sympathy' and charity with all the world.

Well, as Mr Poyser says, 'That's what I mean an' that's what we all mean, an' when a man's said what he means, he'd better stop, for th'ale 'ull be none the better for standin'.'

Let's raise our glasses to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot....