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Review Silas Marner

Geoffrey Beevers

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Beevers, Geoffrey, "Review Silas Marner" (1998). *The George Eliot Review*. 321.
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Silas Marner
Adapted and directed by Geoffrey Beevers
Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond
9 April - 16 May 1998

Following on from his extremely successful stage adaptation of *Adam Bede*, which won a *Time Out* award in 1991, Geoffrey Beevers chose to bring another George Eliot masterpiece, *Silas Marner*, to the stage at the Orange Tree theatre.

With four stage exit and entry points, this theatre-in-the-round offered a perfect opportunity to create the pace required to move through a tale spanning thirty years in the confines of a two-and-a-half-hour play. The cast took full advantage, with actors narrating from all corners while the scene developed centre stage, giving the audience no time to lose the thread.

Narration was interwoven with action and, with an inspired use of props whereby a simple bench became both the hurdle for Godfrey Cass's horse to meet its fate, and a dressing mirror to reflect the beauty of Nancy Lammeter, the production was full of innovation and surprises. Of particular merit was the imaginative presentation of the children. Skilfully manipulated by their adult 'minders', rag dolls of human proportions convincingly portrayed the young Aaron and Eppie. Their voices and mannerisms created a charming evocation of childhood mischievousness, while the 'Eppie in the coal-hole' scene was, as in the novel, pure magic.

The cast performed to a very high standard under the scrutiny of an audience who could literally reach out and touch them. It was all there: the wonderfully comic scene in the *Rainbow*, Marner's moving response to the possibility of losing his beloved Eppie, and – perhaps one of the most difficult scenes to interpret – Godfrey confessing his past to Nancy. Karen Ascoe captured exactly the expression of controlled, yet heart-rending sadness for her husband's wasted opportunity to have made amends earlier. Her portrayal was superb.

George Eliot's exquisite (and often overlooked) sense of fun was pointed up well in this production, the most memorable example being the blunt Priscilla's off-the-cuff remark to the Miss Gunns: 'For I *am* ugly ... But Law! I don't mind, do you?'

The dialogue was faithful to the novel, as was Geoffrey Beevers's aim. 'I tried only to use George Eliot's own words', he said after the performance. What more could a George Eliot devotee wish for? Particularly when such a sensitive and carefully-constructed adaptation was the outcome.

Margaret Jennings