

REVIEW: The Mayor of Casterbridge'

On tour in South West England, Spring, 2005

Reviewed by A.D. Cummins, Friday, 20th May at Quantock Lodge, Somerset.

A thorough script by Philip Goulding of one of Hardy's most enduring novels, this professional production from Wessex Actors occupies a good two & a half hours upon the stage and rewards attentive audiences with a remarkable standard of performance.

Beleagured Michael Henchard is played with convincing gravity by Christopher Walker who more than competently carries the burden of the demanding, main role, captivating the audience with his every appearance in this fast-moving drama, with its many rustic characters. Chris is ably supported by five actors who all demonstrate extraordinary versatility in populating the tiny stage with individuals who might be found in a thriving market town in nineteenth century Dorsetshire.

As Henchard's hard-done-by wife, Angela Bell earns our sympathy but she also provides comic relief when playing 'Mother Cuxsom' and is wonderfully humorous as parlourmaid to the 'man-hunting', Lucetta Templeman. Louise Leavy moves elegantly and speaks beautifully as Lucetta, allowing fickle duplicity to glide like a sly undertow beneath the smooth flow of her surface charm, very different from her other roles as a small town gossip and a seller of 'fortified' furrity.

In exquisite contrast is Elizabeth-Jane, Mrs Henchard's faithful and caring daughter, poignantly portrayed through emotional highs and lows by delightfully disarming Paula Denning, recent winner of the Best Actress trophy in Somerset's 'Phoebe Rees Awards for Drama. Paula conveys tremendous swings of mood between hope, despair, happiness and patient fortitude, yet also she fits in a fine performance as gauche town gossip (Nance Mockridge), dispensing with all signs of a sensitive or compassionate nature.

Elizabeth-Jane is courted and discarded, yet undoubtedly loved by Farfrae, whose wisdom in business withstands all tests. But he falls for the flattering attentions of Lucetta. Barnstaple-bred Stuart Brennan successfully filled this role, complete with a consistent 'Scotland' brogue. Stuart, a graduate in Media Studies, is already a seasoned film-maker, as actor, director and writer. Farfrae's part in Henchard's downfall is honourable and Stuart maintains the self-confident stature of Farfrae, whose integrity must, for dramatic effect, show up the foibles by which pig-headed Henchard destroys himself.

Stuart also dons a Constable's uniform and plays a Commissioner of Oaths to help the story reach a satisfying conclusion. To that end, the multiple talents of Adrian Lynch, assist in various guises. Most significant of these as the dubious Joshua Jopp, who means well but must redress his misfortunes however he can. Adrian also enjoys high-spirited inebriation as Coney, youthful exuberance as Abel Whittle, and respectable sobriety as Lawyer Joyce.

Several songs interrupt the action wherein the voices of Adrian Lynch and Paula Denning are especially haunting and enchanting. With the vocal depth of Chris Walker, the clarity of Angela and the sweetness of Louise, atmosphere is added to the historic authenticity suggested by the excellent costumes.

Perhaps the piece would benefit if put onto a larger stage with more elaborate scenery and a larger cast but costs would then make it far less accessible to local communities and it is to the credit of Director, Michael Barry and his assistants, that Wessex Actors Company continues to offer such valuable service throughout Hardy Country.

Somerset County Gazette

.....a marathon performance on a very clever set that allows scenes to merge seamlessly, and with six very accomplished actors playing a total of 18 parts.... It was a tour de force by a talented company - don't miss their next visit.

Lyme Regis News



THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

A new stage version of Thomas Hardy's novel

by Philip Goulding



Wood- engraving by Peter Reddick from Thomas Hardy, Mayor of Casterbridge, 1968 (c) The Folio Society, London

The powerful and moving story of a proud and self- destructive man - and the three women in his life.

Responses to....

The Wessex Actors Company's 2005 tour

27/4	Preview – The Place, Taunton
29/4	Dumbleton Village Hall
30/4	Wharf Theatre, Tavistock
3/5	Weymouth Pavilion
4/5	Tacchi-Morris Arts Centre, Taunton
5/5	Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis
6/5	Rondo Theatre, Bath
10/5	Grange School, Christchurch
11/5	Bere Regis Village Hall
14/5	Arc Theatre Trowbridge
18/5	Corn Exchange, Dorchester
19/5	The Space, Stroud
20/5	Quantock Lodge, Over Stowey
21/5	Puddletown Village Hall
25/5	Barrington Theatre, Ferndown
2/6	Digby Hall, Sherborne Festival
3+4/6	Fyne Court, Taunton

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Founder Michael Barry has tirelessly toured The Wessex Actors Company regionally for 12 years. The experienced Barry has directed 80 plays, 22 with WAC.

One of WAC's aims is to encourage indigenous talent while contributing to the region's cultural profile and this production is no exception, with local aspiring, professional actors cast in Philip Goulding's narrative adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Using a touring set with three levels from rostra to floor and basic lighting, Barry directs his ensemble cast - playing 18 characters - with an intelligent simplicity that ensures a great Dorset story is told with atmospheric clarity.

The well-cast Chris Walker plays Henchard's roller coaster journey with instinct for the character's self-destructive, yet generous impulsivity. Louise Leavy portrays a delicately refined Lucetta Templeman, switching between roles as diverse as little boy to coarse country landlady with talented ease. Angela Bell is as comfortable with the wronged Susan Henchard as two country bumpkins. WAC's youngest player Paula Denning, a fresh-faced Elizabeth-Jane, has a sweet untrained singing voice while Adrian Lynch fine-tunes a colourful collection of characters from simple bumpkin Abel Whittle and cultured Lawyer Joyce through to the long lost father, Richard Newsom.

Stuart Brennan has a talent for accents and cuts a dash as an utterly believable Farfrae.

Jane McKell -The Stage

We thought the *Mayor of Casterbridge* production at Stroud was outstanding. The stage production, direction and management were of a very high order and the casting was universally good and word perfect. However we have to mention Christopher Walker specifically as the excellent lead. Being on the stage throughout, the play needed a really strong Henchard and we thought that he brought out the complexities of the fated character marvellously."

"Thank you to the whole cast for a really memorable evening. Please come again."

"We wish to pass on our congratulations to the actors and support staff on an excellent performance which we thoroughly enjoyed. We are regular theatregoers at a variety of venues around the country and this particular performance will be well remembered by ourselves for its quality for a long time to come."

"Just a short note to let you know how much I enjoyed the production last night. I thought it was beautifully acted and captured Thomas Hardy's writing and Dorset as one imagined it to be at that time. Thank you very much."

"I enjoyed watching the (performance) greatly last night. Congratulations on making the leap from page to stage with seemingly effortless ease. I must also congratulate your fine local actors who attacked this huge piece with every attention to detail."

The Mayor Of Casterbridge, Wessex Actors Company, Dorchester Corn Exchange and touring

AUDIENCE and cast alike were honoured to be in Dorchester's Corn Exchange for this performance of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as part of Wessex Actors Company's tour.... The main characters come through with some distinction. The capable Paula Denning captures the honesty and sweet nature of young Elizabeth-Jane and Louise Leavy conveys Lucetta's mixture of steeliness and vulnerability in her poised and polished performance. Christopher Walker is a forceful Henchard, blunt and unmannered, and Angela Bell evokes sympathy for poor Susan, the unwanted wife burdened by her big secret even beyond the grave. Stuart Brennan is a likable Donald Farfrae with a gentle Scottish accent and makes a good foil to blustering Henchard - their brawling fight is a compelling scene. Adrian Lynch mops up a handful of roles including sailor Newsom and a nicely refined Lawyer Joyce. Hardy's great novel stretches Wessex Actors Company - but it is worth the effort to release the powerful story on our West Country stages.

Blackmore Vale Magazine

"I really enjoyed your production of *MoC* at the w/e. And thanks again for doing a very good production of my adaptation."

Philip Goulding (author)

"Most exhilarating performance.... we all admired your presentation... We are very grateful for a memorable evening"

(Bere Regis organiser)

"How much I enjoyed the performance... I only wish I could have seen it before my O level! Congratulations!"

"A brilliant evening's entertainment. Thank-you".

"I am still in awe of your wonderful work last evening. Many, many congratulations on all the dedicated hard work which all went so smoothly - such an inspiration to other actors, producers and grateful audiences. Certainly Stroud has never seen the like nor most other venues large or small."

"Congratulations once again on the quality of the tour. A powerful drama well-acted can be a formidable combination - and it was."

"Excellent production. Superb Acting. And, of course, sympathetic and sensitive direction. Well done all of you. So glad that you were playing to a full house"

"We would like to say how much we enjoyed the presentation. The acting and costumes were superb and we shall watch for your future performances. Congratulations, here's to the future!!"

"The best Henchard I've seen on stage or screen - ever!"

(verbal quote from elderly member of Thomas Hardy Society)

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Due to a lot of rain in the afternoon, the performance was held indoors and to a full house, I might add.

...this adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel could be their best production yet.

Just 6 actors... held us for 3 hours and twisted our emotions just as Hardy wanted. I was near the front and could see the 'tears of joy' and 'the tears of sadness' - all in the space of a few minutes as the story moved along at a fast pace, for the action covers many years.

The simple, static stage provided the locations for a dozen or more scenes with each actor taking several parts all with accents coarse & refined as required, mainly Dorset but Scottish as well. What versatility. (The Mayor was 'let off' taking more than one part on account of his being on stage almost all the time and he fitted the part perfectly—or he made it his own, I am not sure which, but the result was close to perfection.)....

The simple 'rural' music and songs added another dimension to our enjoyment by

fitting nicely into the action and these half dozen actors can sing as well as act!

It is this simplicity & versatility that allows the audience to engage their imagination ... but, at the same time, allowing this adaptation to influence your interpretation. This is the joy of 'rural theatre'. The intimacy and proximity of the action is bound to 'involve' you, especially when presented so powerfully as by this group.

I have taken a couple of comments from the programme.

"The Wessex Actors Company totally transfixed the audience from start to finish. The acting was superb"

"Michael Barry's sympathetic, uncluttered direction continues to give value...leaving the starring role to Thomas Hardy and his narrative"

Both of these were as a result of their production of 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' in 2001

All I can say is that **they have done it again!** If you missed it, the loss is yours.

(Quantock Messenger)