

# LONDON EYE

## Tess of the d'Urbervilles, a review



We were lucky enough to see a superb adaptation of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* at the Judi Dench Playhouse (Questors Theatre) in London in May this year. This was a new adaptation of *Tess* by Mike Langridge and Caroline Bleakley, a great piece of theatrical storytelling, with a mesmerising performance by Ella Hooper radiant and touching in the lead role. She effortlessly carried the play with affecting naturalness and illuminated the stage. And the cast were all individually excellent, but together formed a wonderful cohesive team, doubling up in many other roles (including animals!)



May Dance, where Tess and Angel first meet

Turning Hardy's great work into a stage show is no mean feat and Mike Langridge and Caroline Bleakley must be congratulated for creating a highly sensitive and inventive production which was true to Hardy's novel (150,000 words) from which much of the dialogue was taken. The set was simple but used imaginatively, and the audience was quickly transported to rural Wessex. Overall the atmosphere in this generally dark and foreboding story was spot on.



Presenting the Hens to old Mrs d'Urberville



Dance of the Dairymaids

And the ideas were so imaginative: Old Mrs d'Urberville's precious hens, carried in by the servant and Tess, were cushions with red crosses sewn on the corner. And I will never forget Tess and her brother sitting side by side on the steps to the left of the stage, holding long reins which led to the hands of an actor, a yard or two in front and at floor level, playing old Prince their horse. He was walking laboriously on the spot, with a worn-out expression on his face, while clopping noises were made by another member of the cast (with their feet I think) off to the side. Within seconds the audience had accepted that this was not a man, but an old horse. The mail cart on the right side of the stage was similarly devised but with more speedy hoof sounds and the collision and death of Prince happened, totally believably, without either 'cart' moving.

Another of my favourite scenes was the ensemble of farm workers silently working in the fields, as coordinated in movement as a well-experienced line-dancing team (bend forward, swing scythe, slice off unwanted material, toss to side, one step forward, repeat). And of course the milkmaids dance with their stools.....I could go on. The choreography - devised by the company and interwoven throughout - was seamless, and a testimony to how well all these actors worked together. It gave the show a lovely sense of pace and rhythm.

In *Tess*, of course, Hardy deals with issues as relevant today as they were in 19th century rural Wessex; inequality, sexual abuse, injustice, hypocrisy and double standards. And this production has engaged today's audience as thoroughly as a contemporary story; the 2 hours 35 minutes whizzed by, and we travelled across landscapes and seasons, as well as exploring the human rites of passage with symbolism, clever lighting and imaginative use of minimal props. Ella Hooper as Tess was on stage for most of the scenes and absolutely inhabits this character. We feel her anger, betrayal and total despair and she is totally captivating throughout this tragic love story.



Alec, Tess and a Strawberry

Angel carries Tess over the Flood

Sometimes characters passed the story from one to another; sometimes dialogue was lifted directly from the novel; and sometimes physical theatre became a powerful stage metaphor for storytelling. As an example of the symbolism, we had the death of Tess's child, Sorrow. Tess held the baby, then her mother seemed to take the baby wrapped in its shawl from her and unravelled the cloth to empty air. So much more poignant an expression of a wasted life than a doll.

The cast owned the adaptation, everyone believed in and contributed to Tess's story. And whilst the heart of the piece was the trio of Alec, Angel and Tess the rest of the cast played multiple roles and everybody had a big bit of the action as individuals (Tess's parents, Angel's parents, dairymaids, horses etc) and as a member of the ensemble. Finally, the cast stood erect in a semi-circle around Tess as a totally believable Stonehenge!

Mike Langridge and Caroline Bleakley are both experienced actors, playwrights, directors and in Mike's case designer, and they collaborated to adapt and direct this *Tess*. They have obviously learnt their craft by their experience of working on other literature/stage adaptations (*Nicholas Nickleby* and *Great Expectations*), and their *Tess* was masterly.

The Judi Dench Playhouse at Questors Theatre in Ealing, West London, is the ideal size for such an intimate production. When we went, almost all of the 350 seats were sat on, until we rose to give the cast a standing ovation. This production is certainly worthy of any West End theatre, and it looks as if this might happen.

Review by Vivien Geddes  
 Photos by Jane Arnold Foster



# Interview with Mike Langridge and Caroline Bleakley

by Mike Nixon and Vivien Geddes

## Extract from the programme notes:

The most important task of any adaptation is to tell the story and to be true and honest to the original work. We took Hardy's text and looked at all the dialogue and the significant scenes and what was it that made the story engaging, exciting and dramatic. Caroline, as a professional film editor, then mapped a storyboard of how the narrative progressed through these scenes and what was relevant and would make an engaging and exciting stage play.

To honour Hardy's concept of "fate" and the "immortals" in the book, we have the Company as a Chorus to take on this role. The device of a Chorus is enshrined in Greek theatre and epic plays that drive themselves inexorably towards tragedy. In this play our Chorus also becomes the conscience of Tess and share in her emotional journey.



Tess and her siblings on the Durbeyfield Ship

## Why 'Tess'?

*Tess* is just as relevant now as when Hardy wrote it, with the attitude towards women, and the social and sexual morality of today (as in #MeToo, themes of abuse in the *Archers* and other soaps etc). In creating a new version for the stage we wanted to stress the highly relevant and significant themes that impact on Tess that would be recognised by a modern audience - sexual abuse, abandonment, injustice, hypocrisy, inequality, cruelty and manipulation.

### **Can you describe the process of adapting Hardy's book for the stage?**

We started by looking at all the dialogue and lifted a lot of it directly from the page more or less intact. We wanted to honour Hardy's narrative, to keep it all: class, religion, alcoholism, as he wrote it. Where it was not possible, or inaccessible to a modern audience, we wrote it in Hardy's style. There were other sections though (narrative references to geology, architecture, the seasonal variations of the country and the flora and fauna) which wouldn't easily translate well to a piece of theatre, and so we had to edit and adapt these to be more visual. Hardy wrote in an 'episodic' way, and we were able to get a lot of the plot and show the passage of time, change of season etc visually as we changed scenes.

The process of writing the first draft took almost a year, after which we arrived at a script ready for editing and refining. At this point we started rehearsals and the actors themselves contributed so much. The use of the trap-door 'hole in the ground' to bury first Prince the horse, then baby Sorrow, and then Tess, came from the cast, and was pivotal. The baby's body turning into nothing in Tess's mother's arms was another 'wow' moment which evolved in rehearsals.

We decided to convey Hardy's concept of fate, or inevitability, not through narrative but by using the actors like 'gods' in a Greek tragedy (for example when Tess and Alec were seated on stools and the other actors arranged their hands into position: they had no choice). We used a similar device in the confession scene where the actors placed the chairs differently in the 4 scenes representing Angel's reaction change from 'shock', to 'why?' to 'resignation' and to 'this is what we will do'.



Burying Sorrow

### **So the show was constantly evolving in rehearsals?**

Yes, not so much the dialogue but the movement and choreography, the order of the scenes, and various cuts and changes were made where it didn't quite work. The first 3 weeks of

rehearsal were used to learn how to connect with each other. This was a truly collaborative production, and the actors came up with many of the ideas as rehearsals progressed.... ideas came from inside the cast rather than being imposed on them.

**Are there any other scenes or observations which you would like to highlight?**

Yes,—as the cast got into the characters, we decided that some of Hardy’s psychological and philosophical points which emerged needed emphasising.

For example, you know when Tess berates her mother for sending her to visit the d’Urbervilles without having warned her about men “Why didn’t you tell me?”. We spent a lot of time on that moment. This is when Tess starts to mother her mother, as she mothers her younger siblings. We wanted to get across that role reversal, that shift into adulthood.

Also, our initial impressions of the two men “Alec=bad guy, Angel= good guy” shift: They are in fact interchangeable, both are damaged. We get an early hint that all is not quite right with Angel: although the word had not been used in Hardy’s time, Angel was actually stalking Tess on the Heath. And he never quite redeems himself to become pure “good guy”.

And we also decided to portray Liza-Lu (Tess’s sister whom she encouraged Angel to marry after her death) in a stronger, more feminist light. We gave her free will. At the end of the play, rather than having the two of them walk off hand in hand as in the book, we had Angel put his hand on Liza-Lu’s shoulder as if to lead her into her new life with him. But she removed his hand, preferring to stand alone and make up her own mind about him. We think that Hardy would have approved.