

Playwright brings death tale to life

FOUNDING artistic director of The Wessex Actors Company, Michael Barry, was drawn to the real story behind "Dead Woman's Ditch" - an 18th Century crime of passion - when he realised the scene of crime lay but yards from his house.

In writing the tale he tried to make logical and psychological sense out of the bald facts of the story recreating the characters and their lives convincingly for the stage.

This was achieved in a powerful story inhabited by rounded characters presented by Wessex Actors Company touring the South West.

After only 17 days of marriage, charcoal burner John Walford clubbed his wife, simple-minded Jane Shorney, to death. Highly intelligent but ill educated and trapped by his family, John had no prospects. In love with the Miller's daughter and despite the class difference, engaged to be married, fate steps in when marriage to a girl he questionably "gets into trouble" is forced upon him.

The build-up to John's crime of passion and even the judge's tears as he committed John Walford to hang, is sympathetically and truthfully told in stirring style by a talented cast of seven. Mark Freestone as John Walford draws on huge emotional reserves to portray a truly three-dimensional character.

We believe this charcoal smudged worker to be more than a mere man of dirt and dust. He has great dignity, pride and worth. The author's clever writing keeps us firmly on his side.

Nicola Pearlstone successfully

doubling as both John's mother and the sad, simple Jenny, shows off 18 years' experience as an award-winning amateur actress. Although a little young for the over-bearing, ignorant Ann Walford she brings some weight to this character role. But as the simple Jenny she shines, portraying the wretched creature to great effect as she forages like an animal in the woods.

Bryony Growdon is pretty and pert as the love of John Walford's life, Anne Rice; her belief and dashed hopes leading to despair and degradation whilst carrying John's child out of wedlock is delicately portrayed. Bryony's brief appearance as the rough illiterate Ann (simple Jenny's mother) is a canny piece of characterisation.

Richard Randall bent double as William Walford, John's father, and doubling as the parish officer, displayed a wonderful talent for character and dialect, an invaluable and regular WAC actor.

Simon Balcon had energy, and mesmerising eyes. A loveable rogue turned truly nasty as John Walford's so called friend, William Bishop, Simon also shows great verve as he sings with musician/actor Marck Pearlstone. The two link and narrate singing in raw Somerset folk tradition (composed by Marck). Completing the cast and doubling as Judge Kenyon and a cleric, Josh Marriott professionally performs two straightforward roles with belief and simplicity in fine ensemble style. Designers Alan Daniels and Carolyn Free must be congratulated for evocative set and costume. But last word must go to playwright and director Michael Barry for a wonderful piece of story telling. Somerset's Take Art, take this!

Western Gazette

THE true story of a Somerset village murder some 200 years ago is the subject of this new play presented by Wessex Actors' Company, which effectively strips away any romantically fanciful ideas anyone might have had about English country life for the working classes of long ago.....

Michael Barry's play - with musical accompaniment, gives a stark picture of the young man's brutally deprived life at home with his rapacious mother and sick father.

Sherborne actor Mark Freestone gives a sensitive and moving performance as the inarticulate young labourer caught up in a drama that captures the harsh realities of village life.

Original songs help to flesh out this memorable real life tale of innocence betrayed, which is unsentimentally played out in a well constructed piece of drama that deserves continued success on its travels around the West Country.

Western Gazette

Dead Woman's Ditch

The subject matter is perfect for a dramatic retelling, the true story of John Walford... (and) the writing does it justice. Mark Freestone is perfect as the central character. His confusion, desperation, shy love, hurt and helpless sense of duty were the high moments of the show, particularly effective in so intimate a venue. The repressed passion and tension between him and Bryony Growdon as his love Ann Rice are beautifully done. Nicola Pearlstone was particularly moving as the simple Jenny reminiscing about the fox having taken her only friend, a rabbit. Powerful drama.

Fosse Way Magazine

Michael Barry's recreation of charcoal burner John Walford's tragic life and death by the Wessex Actors Company was an unromantic portrait of rural existence in an age when poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and illegitimacy were the order of the day.

The cast embraced their grubby roles with rustic, carnal relish. Hapless Walford clubbed his wife Jenny to death after frustration over his love for Ann Rice drove him to violence.

The dark story contrasted with Marck Pearlstone's saucy jaunty songs that gave a new meaning to carrot-topping tools and celebrated naughtiness in the woods by the raunchily grimy smock wearers.

Western Daily Press

Drama in the Ditch

A piece of Somerset history has been brought dramatically to life with the Wessex Actors Company's production of 'Dead Woman's Ditch'. Michael Barry has written a tight script that captures what life was like for many people living in rural areas 200 years ago.

Mark Freestone, playing the part of John Walford, brought out the complexity of a man whose station in life was predetermined by birth. Bryony Growdon and Nicola Pearlstone - the women John loved and hated in equal measure - are very talented character actresses, so much so that it was difficult in Nicola's case to detect that she was playing two parts in the play. The enjoyment of the play was greatly enhanced by the very gutsy songs written by Marck Pearlstone and performed with great vigour by Simon Balcon who also took a lead part in the play.

The Quantock Messenger

"Thank-you for such a tremendous performance last night at Nether Stowey. Powerful stuff. Totally believable."

"We enjoyed the play so much tonight and thought it was wonderfully acted and a moving tale."

"The play was excellent - story, content and production. A very enjoyable evening."

"How much we enjoyed it... a grim but fascinating slice of rural life 200 years ago and ...a tale well told... an entertaining evening. It was a pleasure to witness the ancient English tradition of the company of strolling players being so impressively continued into the 21st century."

(Audience member e-mails)

A Tradition is revived

...A sad and simple tale of long ago, but the manner of its telling by the Wessex Actors Company raises many interesting questions relevant to us today, not least in matters of human frailty and social injustice.

In Mediaeval times..., troupes of actors would tour the country and set their scenes on the backs of carts..... The Wessex Actors Company are reviving that tradition.

.....In an age when television has done so much to obliterate live drama and so many provincial theatres have closed, the opportunity for small communities to enjoy productions of original plays by professional actors is greatly to be welcomed.

Certainly the audience at this performance was very appreciative as this tragic tale unfolded.

There was the inevitability of a classical Greek tragedy about the way this young man suffered the ultimate penalty from a moment's indiscretion, his own frailty aggravated by the greed and duplicity of those around him.

There was a Grecian touch, too, in the musical interludes that acted as chorus.

The music was composed, directed and played by Marck Pearlstone and sung by Ben Woof, who also played the lingo-like character William Bishop.

Mark Freestone played John Walford with quiet dignity, showing that beneath the rough exterior of a charcoal burner there was an intelligence and a sense of honour. Bryony Growdon gave a convincing performance as Ann Rice, the woman who loves him and hopes to be his wife.

Nicola Pearlstone gave a truly toe-curling performance as mad Jenny, the woman who tricks him into marriage, easily persuading one that she could have led the hero both to seduce and destroy her.

The two young women also succeeded in the difficult task of doubling as other characters' mothers.

The play was written and directed by Michael Barry.

Wiltshire Times

The 2002 tour:

13/3 Assembly Rooms, Glastonbury
23/3 Redgrave Theatre, Bristol
5 + 6/4 Nether Stowey Village Hall
8/4 Warehouse Theatre, Ilminster
11/4 Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis
12/4 Cannington College, Bridgwater
13/4 David Hall Arts Centre, S Petherton
18 Sept: Rondo Theatre, Bath
19 Sept: Weymouth Pavilion
21 Sept: Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis
26 Sept: Tacchi-Morris Arts Centre, Taunton
27 Sept: Kilmersdon Village Hall
28 Sept: Nether Stowey Vill. Hall
8 Oct: Warminster Library
9 Oct: Palace Theatre, Paignton

"Thank-you for a really great evening of theatre"

(Ilminster Warehouse Theatre)

"How much we enjoyed "Dead Woman's Ditch" ... such skilful producing and directing combined with very accomplished acting. We had a thoroughly interesting and absorbing evening."

(Descendant of key friend of central character)

"It was a great performance and I enjoyed it tremendously.... You deserve all the positive publicity you can get because your company are great"

(Press reviewer)

"Many thanks again for a super production"

(Warminster Library)

"Thank-you for a fantastic performance - wonderfully moving"

(Kilmersdon Village Hall)

Gritty Tale of Love and Murder

Performing to a sell-out audience, Dead Woman's Ditch was a resounding success when it came to Warminster earlier this month.

.... Mark Freestone played Walford well, giving a strong performance, helping us to understand his turmoil when he discovers he cannot marry his true love Ann. Ben Woof played William Bishop, a friend but tormentor of Walford. The character worked well, often singing his way through his thoughts, accompanied by Marck Pearlstone on guitar.

An interesting way of narrating, it lightened this otherwise dark and gritty story.

Bryony Growdon played the lost love Ann Rice, believably distraught at her love marrying another woman.

The pregnant bride and Walford's mother were both portrayed well by Nicola Pearlstone. She was convincing as both simple-minded spouse and snappish, controlling mother.

The play conveyed the darkness you would expect from a story based on real, tragic events and finished with a harrowing hanging scene.

The Warminster Journal

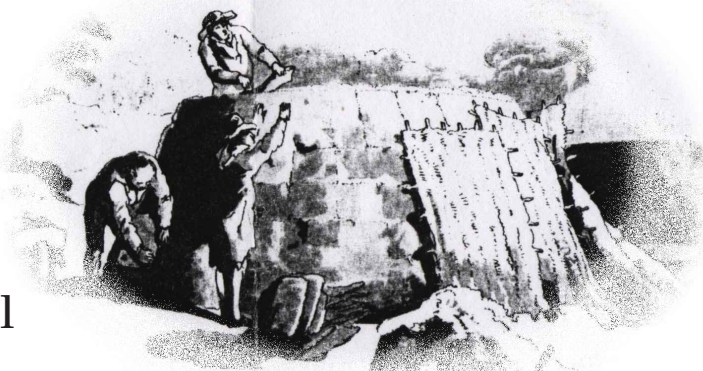
This is a powerful and thought-provoking play and well acted by the cast.

Chard & Ilminster News

Wessex
Actors
Company

present

DEAD WOMAN'S DITCH



by
**Michael
Barry**



A powerful new drama with original music and songs, retelling the real-life Somerset crime of passion of John Walford, hanged for the murder of his wife 200 years ago.

Some feedback from the tour.

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