



Raleigh

BWW Reviews: Bringing Hardy to Life: JUDE THE OBSCURE at Burning Coal Theatre Company

by

Larissa Mount

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New work is exciting – it is the lifeblood of the arts community. I am honored by every opportunity I get to see new work opening itself up to the world for the very first time.

I was particularly honored to see Burning Coal Theatre Company's world premiere of *Jude the Obscure* because it is based on my very favorite book. I never thought anyone would want to adapt Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* for

the stage, and especially not into a musical, because while it is my favorite book, it is also the most depressing (and honest) book ever written. In fact, after the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy did not write any more novels, due in part to the public's negative reaction to the book.

Jude the Obscure, divided into two separate plays (Part I and Part II). The story tells of an ill-fated young man who hopes of being a scholar. Deceived into marriage, Jude must make some difficult decisions. He eventually falls in love with his cousin, a love which is further complicated by his marriage and hers. Despite the characters' intelligence, the story is a tragically and fatalistically honest one about the life of the poor in late 19th Century England. Part I and Part II are running in repertory.

I am enthusiastic about the show, and after seeing both parts, I am confident that the show has real promise. Of the creative elements of the show, Ian Finley's book was the strongest component. The book could even potentially stand on its own – it was well-written, true to the source material, and moved at an appropriate pace. Hardy's work is dense and complex, and I admire Finley's ability to translate such a work onto the stage, without losing the critical themes and emotional undercurrents. The musical numbers were adequately woven into the show. The hallmark of the score was "As You Like," sung by the two contrasting couples: Jude and Arabella, Sue and Phillotson. That number fulfilled the purpose of songs in a

musical: to take the audience somewhere that you can't go with text alone.

The set, designed by G. Warren Stiles, was an intelligent and eye-catching use of a small space. Although there were no major set changes, per se, the set itself translated easily from one scene to the next, from rural to urban and back again.

The ensemble cast brought Hardy's made-up British cities and towns to life. Stephen LeTrent was solid and passionate in the title role. Jude is a complex man, and LeTrent carried the role well. I admire his ability to carry such a role for two entire plays. The gamut of emotions required between Part I and Part II is vast and taxing, but LeTrent handled it all in stride. Alice Rothman-Hicks, despite a British accent which needs some work, understands the character of Sue Bridehead and did her justice. For me, however, the stars of this show were Liz Beckham and Josh Martin as Arabella Donn and Young Jude/Little Father Time, respectively. As the devious Arabella, Beckham captured the spirit of the character perfectly. Her portrayal was so dynamic and multi-faceted that I even found myself rooting for Arabella at times, something which never happened when I read the novel. Despite his young age, Martin oozes with star quality. He carries himself with a grace and maturity which many adults lack, and is destined for great things. Martin is a talented singer whose voice filled the theater. I melted when he sang "Heredity," which he absolutely nailed.

I was beyond pleased that the creative team made the stage adaptation of Hardy's work just as gritty and powerful as the original text. One need not have read the novel to get a true sense of the work from the musical. It's important that you see *Jude the Obscure* at the Burning Coal Theatre Company not just because it's a solid adaptation, but because as an arts community, it is essential that we support and value new work.

Jude the Obscure runs through May 5. For tickets and more information, visit www.burningcoal.org.

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