

The downwardly mobile in Burning Coal's musical Jude the Obscure, Part II

By Tom Elrod

"Do not do an immoral thing for a moral reason," Jude Fawley says toward the end of *Jude the Obscure, Part II*, the conclusion of Burning Coal Theatre Company's original musical adaptation of Thomas Hardy's final novel. It's a plea from Jude to Sue Bridehead, his cousin, after the two have lived as lovers without being married. Poverty has crushed them and Sue blames their sinful relationship for their woes. It's from the schism between the moral and immoral, what those words mean and how they affect one's life, that the play draws most of its conflict. That conflict, though rooted in Hardy's late Victorian world, never feels distant or alien in this adaptation.

The two main performances are key. Stephen LeTrent's Jude is a frustrated young man at the start of the play, his ambitions of being a scholar dashed after the events of *Part I* (**reviewed last week by Byron Woods**). LeTrent portrays Jude's growing insecurities and self-doubt well, even if in early scenes it feels a bit one-note. The performance improves as it becomes apparent that Jude's devotion to Sue is irrational, a salve to cover up his personal failings.

As Sue, Alice Rothman-Hicks pulls off a more complicated portrayal. The performance could have been annoying or inscrutable in other hands, but Sue's struggle is real: a woman caught between the moral strictures of her rural upbringing and the desire for more autonomous life. Rothman-Hicks never makes Sue unlikable or irrational, finding a balance between the supremely ethical and the morally confused that makes Sue's struggle rounded and fully human.

Performances by Kirby Wahl and Liz Beckham, as Sue and Jude's first spouses, are strong, too. The script, by Ian Finley, Bruce Benedict, Jerome Davis and Jonathan Fitts, and the direction, by Davis, are also sharp. The songs, unfortunately, fall flat. None of the melodies are very memorable, and the lyrics tend to be too spot-on. "Burning," about Jude's failed literary ambitions, is the worst offender, and "Gossips Song" is an awkward retelling of backstory we've already heard about. Rarely do the songs give us new information or move the story along in any significant way.

Despite that, *Jude the Obscure, Part II*, a play about the downwardly mobile, the harsh grind of poverty and the strict moralism of the upper classes supporting an immoral system, still appears strikingly relevant in 2012. Jude and Sue's inability to prosper is as much a failure of the broken institutions around them as of their own internal faults. The tragedy is that they never realize this, and continue to blame themselves for their lot in life up to the very end.

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