

# British Theatre Guide

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## Far From the Madding Crowd

Thomas Hardy, adapted by Theresa Heskins

New Vic Theatre Company

New Vic, Newcastle-under-Lyme

18 May–9 June 2012

Since Theresa Heskins took over as artistic director of the New Vic six years ago, the north Staffordshire theatre-in-the-round has taken great delight in presenting challenging productions which other venues might class as impossible to stage.

The New Vic started the trend with Lisa Evans's reworking of Daphne du Maurier's [Jamaica Inn](#) in 2007. That was followed by Heskins's adaptation of Charles Dickens's [Great Expectations](#), Bryony Lavery's take on [The Wicked Lady](#) and the production last Christmas of Lewis Carroll's [Alice in Wonderland](#)—all of which satisfied Heskins's desire to stage the unstageable.

Now Thomas Hardy's fourth novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* gets similar treatment and shows that almost anything can be brought to life if you have sufficient creativity and imagination.

It's not the first time that Hardy's 1874 opus has been turned into a play. Previous adaptations though have foundered because they've been either too melodramatic or have become bogged down by long passages of dialogue.

This doesn't happen in Heskins's adaptation, mainly because some of the minor characters' roles are reduced in size for the cast of nine.

She's put together an ensemble who've all been seen at the New Vic before and all appeared in the last home-grown New Vic production *Where Have I been All My Life?*. Some of them are excellent musicians as well as accomplished actors and give a rustic feel to Mary Keith's songs.

*Far From the Madding Crowd* tells the story of Bathsheba Everdene, a fiercely independent woman in a man's world who's forced to make life-changing choices when three very different men try to tempt her into marriage.

Rebecca Brewer plays Bathsheba with aplomb, giving a feisty performance as the woman ahead of her time who's as capable as any man but lets her heart rule her head.

As the three suitors, Ali Watt is impressively down to earth and practical as Gabriel Oak, the man the audience wants to come out on top; Andrew Pollard as prosperous farmer William Boldwood earns sympathy for being duped into believing Bathsheba wants to marry him before his anger spills over into violence; and Oliver J Hembrough is sufficiently profligate as dashing Francis Troy.

There's a strong presence from both Michael Hugo as Joseph Poorgrass and Peter Temple (Jan Coggan) and there isn't a single weak link in the cast.

As for the staging, designer Lis Evans, lighting designer Daniella Beattie and James Earls-Davis all embrace the ethos that nothing is impossible at the New Vic. A thunderstorm, rain, burning corn

ricks and a sheepdog driving a flock over a cliff are handled impressively and inventively.

Occasionally I got the impression that the visual interpretations verged on gimmickry. At times too the pace appeared to slacken ever so slightly, which is probably as much Hardy's fault as the adaptation.

Overall, though, this is a delightful ensemble production which illustrates that the New Vic is eminently capable of turning formidable works into an entertaining reality.

**Reviewer:** [Steve Orme](#)