

British Theatre Guide

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Polstead

Beth Flintoff

Eastern Angles

Debach Airfield

11 July–5 August 2018

Can anything new be said about Maria Marten and the Red Barn murder? Hundreds of books and plays have been written on the subject—is there anything new that Eastern Angles could bring to this most famous of Suffolk stories?

At the time, William Corder took on a macabre notoriety—this was one of the first murders well covered by the press—and a lot was written about him, especially as there was such mystery as to why he behaved in the way he did afterward. But not much was written about his victim—certainly not much that was anything other than disparaging. Writer Beth Flintoff has taken the story and turned it on its head, looking at it from the viewpoint of Maria herself and the women of the village in an imaginative and powerful interpretation of what was always a tragic if mysterious story.

With a company of six women, the story starts a year after the murder, as Maria's body is found by her stepmother and, re-emerging, she takes us through her life and the events leading up to her association with the man who would bring about her demise.

On a minimal stage, the women come to life as her friends and neighbours—women from the village of Polstead who lived at a time of harsh winters, hard work and no rights who had to make do as best they could—often at the expense of their own bodies—just to survive.

With original music by Luke Potter and imaginative staging by director Hal Chambers, this is an evening full of emotion as well as humour as Maria's short but tragic life unfolds.

Elizabeth Crarer plays a feisty, believable Maria, with Sarah Goddard giving a particularly sympathetic and impressive portrayal of stepmother Ann. Lucy Grattan and Bethan Nash do a fine job doubling up their female roles with the two main male protagonists Thomas Corder and Peter Matthews.

This is powerful play that explores women's rights in a time when they had very little and were often cruelly abused, but if there's any criticism it's that this is not a particularly balanced interpretation of the story—the men inevitably get a bad press here. There is no attempt to give other interpretations of the events—this is Maria's version and we are given her voice and her voice only.

In the programme, Flintoff says she could find no contemporary versions of the story written by women. There is in fact a very good novel by local but nationally acclaimed crime writer Ruth Dugdale, *The James Version* (now retitled *The Red Barn*), which gives a very credible re-interpretation of events and is worth reading.

Nevertheless, this is a superbly staged and performed version of a well loved Suffolk story—if a little long at over two hours. But, after the rather poor tour of *Guesthouse* earlier in the year, it's

good to see Eastern Angles back to doing what they do best.

Reviewer: [Suzanne Hawkes](#)