

# Edinburgh Festival Fringe REVIEW – We Will Be Free – Tolpuddle Martyrs Story \*\*\*\*\*



We Will Be Free. Tolpuddle Martyrs Story – Townsend Productions.

The synopsis tells us that this poignant, redeeming and thoroughly engaging production is 'based around the true story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Set in 1834 and the extraordinary story of George and Betsy Loveless. He was a Methodist minister and the leader of the six Dorset farm labourers who were tried, convicted and condemned to harsh transportation by an oppressive Government for having the temerity to swear a secret oath and form a secret union to fight against a succession of wage cuts inflicted by the local landowner.'

Playwright, Neil Gore, chooses to set this heroic tale within the traditional Folk genre of Mummers Plays. The opening scene, The Prologue as allegory, introduces The Casterbridge Mummers, actors/musicians Neil Gore and Elizabeth Eves. In trusty Mummers' tradition they establish the concepts of Good and Evil when Good Knight Saint George slays the wicked Dragon. In the 1840s there were 'dragons' a plenty preying on the poor and dispossessed. Hanging was common, Transportation for minor felonies a means to export the scourge of 'criminal vermin'. Enclosures and the factory system bringing unprecedented social and economic changes. Using song and verse, prose, puppetry and mime, Gore and Eves portray both the protagonists, noble George and the fiery Betsy, together

with the principal heroes and villains (with plenty of Pantomime opportunities to boo and hiss the latter). The back-projections of satirical cartoons and contemporaneous sources provide an engaging narrative context. Scene transitions are marked by the recurrent melody of 'Under The Sycamore Tree' on which, Betsy ties a yellow ribbon as a token of her love for the Transported George. Music and song play an integral part of this charming play exploiting the simplicity and clarity of Folk instrumentation including accordion, mandolin, violin and tabor. (Make sure the kids keep a wary eye out for Jack 'o Green Man watching over them!)

Very much a play to appeal to all ages, it doesn't preach and the time flies by in a seeming instant. There is genuine sentiment, hearty good fun and a poignant reminder that what we take for granted is the most easily taken away from us. Another Fringe-buster following last year's highly acclaimed The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist. It comes with hearty recommendation.

Assembly Rooms, George Street. Venue 20. Until August 25th. 12.30, 70 minutes. All ages.

