

Alton Fringe Theatre's Sell out performance of T S Eliot's Famous Poem The Waste Land at Alton Library

Anyone lucky enough to get hold of a ticket for Alton Fringe Theatre's superb reading of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* in Alton Library on May 4th was in for a real treat.

For those who have not encountered the poem before, *The Waste Land*, first published in 1922, can seem a daunting prospect. It is long and layered with innumerable mythological, literary and biblical allusions. In the hands of Alton Fringe Theatre's five readers (Anita Applegarth, Michael Biddis, Penny Cushing, Louise Dilloway and Catherine Gerlach) however, many of its shadows burst into light. By using different actors to bring to life the various 'voices' in the poem, the group, under the direction of Jo Hopkins, rendered *The Waste Land* much more accessible than if it had been read as one flat whole,

When Eliot wrote the poem he was locked into an unhappy marriage. In addition, the First World War had only ended four years earlier. To many at that time, the western world must indeed have seemed a waste land - sterile and infertile, with little hope of regeneration.

Eliot drew the title of *The Waste Land* from the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King, wounded so severely as to render him infertile. In the legend, not only was the ruler infertile, but also his lands. So too in Eliot's *Waste Land*, where each of the sexual encounters alluded to is equally sterile.

The performers brought out superbly the 'voices' in each of these encounters -the Hyacinth Girl (recalling the classical legend/vegetation myth of Hyacinth), the neurotic wife or mistress unable to communicate with her partner, the typist and her perfunctory lover, the girls at Richmond, Moorgate and Margate Sands. Also well evoked by different voices were the old lady recalling her childhood in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, the snatch from *Tristan and Isolde*, where Tristan (like the Fisher King) requires healing, and above all Madam Sosostris with her bunged up nose!

One aspect of Eliot that it is easy to forget but which was exceptionally well brought out by the readers is his capacity for humour and his ear for dialogue. The tribulations of 'Lil' and her newly demobbed husband, Albert, gossiped over in a pub by a female friend, had the authentic twang and show Eliot at home with the low as well as the highbrow.

The poem leaves many unanswered questions. Does 'the third who walks always beside you', who reminds us of Christ encountered by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, offer some hope? The Perilous Chapel of the Grail legend is now deserted, but there is a damp gust of rain; and the sunken Ganges, where the first vegetation myths arose, now echoes faintly to the sound of thunder, with its promise of rain. Meanwhile, the Fisher king, perhaps, can only try, with the arid plain behind him, to set his lands in order and shore up a few fragments against his ruins.

Plenty for all the eager listeners at that splendid reading to ponder.

Wendy Crozier