

**THE NAVVY'S WIFE - A FOLK MUSICAL BY MICK RYAN - Parish Centre,  
Stonegravels, Chesterfield, 2nd November 2008**



One of this country's very finest singers, and a songwriter of great standing too, Mick Ryan is no stranger to the concept of the folk musical, having made several nigh unrivalled contributions thus far to that genre: his previous ventures have all been major undertakings, invariably being well received and lastingly well regarded, and have proved both highly influential and an

inspiration to other creative minds as well as providing source material for many singers.

Only a few years after *Tanks For The Memory* comes *A Navvy's Wife*, which "gives a voice to the men and women whose lives were shaped by the drive, over the course of three centuries, to build our canals, railways, roads etc ...", positing that "the land we know couldn't have been built without the navy and *The Navvy's Wife*".

Mick has assembled the finest possible small cast to help him realise his vision: Judy Dunlop, Jackie Oates, Heather Bradford, Paul Downes and Roger Watson.

The production was semi-staged, with a sensible use of costumes for role-playing, and the small stage area was well filled with singers and props; a measure of sympathetic amplification was used, but this proved no distraction to the intimate power of the experience.

The venue was jam-packed, with a keen buzz of anticipation amongst folks, many of whom had travelled some distance for this important event. It all ran smoothly, like a well-oiled machine (the very occasional fluff or missed cue was taken up for comic effect), and it was obvious too from the empathetic writing and choice of material that Mick had done much careful research into his subject and was intent on presenting his characters with both sympathy and realism.

Social issues such as poverty, rootlessness, racism and attitudes to death were examined within the narrative and commentary too, and resonances, links and parallels were drawn throughout to bind the whole together satisfyingly.

The production was conveniently divided into three temporal phases (the Canal Era, the Railway Era and the Modern Era), but Mick was also keen to maintain the common human thread - the songs and their timeless styling were a key factor in this.

Each of the participants played a number of characters, and these were without exception entirely suited to their roles and believably managed.

Singing and playing were of the highest standard, with musical arrangements lithe and economic and fully supportive, pulling back to give the sumptuous voices full rein where needed. And what abundantly fine singing from everyone!

The really special moments came with the simpler and more intimate personal observations perhaps: Jackie's heartfelt acappella I Miss Him, Judy's matchless rendition of The Navvy's Wife, Heather's tender Farewell My Son and - perhaps finest of all - the reflection of Old Tim (the retired navvy, played by Roger), Just Like You. The "lighter" numbers were convincingly done too, particularly Roger's forthright portrayal of railway contractor Thomas Brassey on the darkly comic patter-song So Many Ways To Die and Paul's chummy Here Comes Mick.

There's a small but inevitable amount of judicious recycling of songs (no complaint is intended!): the universally powerful Poppies gets another airing, in the perfect context, and The Journey has been a Ryan set staple for some time. The three songs on which the trio of women combined forces (one in each "phase") formed another useful connection between the eras, while the closing anthem The Land Around You bound it all together in tellingly praising the permanence of the navvies' creations as monuments unforgotten by the land and the people.

Musicality has always been a hallmark of Mick Ryan's songs and performance style (it's been said that Mick can even make abject nonsense sound musical!), and these attributes didn't desert him on this occasion.

The Navvy's Wife proved to be another triumph for Mick; it's an unmissable show - so I'd recommend you make every effort to catch it when it begins touring next festival season.

<http://www.thenavvyswife.co.uk/home.html>

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