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George Eliot's
Silas Marner

Adapted for the stage by
Geoffrey Beevers

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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SILAS MARNER

This adaptation was first performed on 14th April 1998,
at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, with the following
cast:

Silas Marner	Patrick Drury
Godfrey	Brian Hickey
Squire Cass/Mr Macey	Frank Moorey
Dunsey/Aaron	Timothy Watson
Nancy/Molly	Karen Ascoe
Eppie	Leah Fletcher
Dolly/Priscilla	Caroline John

Other parts were played by members of the company

The play was directed by Geoffrey Beevers
Designed by Lorna Marshall

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CHARACTERS

Silas Marner, a weaver

The Minister, at Lantern Yard

William Dane, Silas's friend

Sarah, Silas's betrothed

Squire Cass, at The Red House

Godfrey Cass, his eldest son

Dunsey Cass, his younger son

Jane, their servant

Wildfire, Godfrey's horse

The Landlord, at the *Rainbow*

Mr Macey, the tailor

Mr Dowlas, the farrier

Jem Rodney, the mole-catcher

Ben Winthrop, the wheelwright

Dolly Winthrop, his wife

Aaron Winthrop, their son

Nancy Lammeter, Godfrey's intended wife

Priscilla Lammeter, her sister

Mrs Osgood

Dr Kimble

Molly Farren, Godfrey's wife

Eppie, their daughter

The Reverend, vicar of Raveloe

Various **Members** of Lantern Yard, **Villagers** of Raveloe, **Coachmen**,

Footmen, **Horses**, etc.

In the first production the parts were divided as follows:

Actor 1/Silas Marner

Actor 2/Godfrey/William Dane/Landlord/Wildfire/Footman (Scene13)

Actor 3/Eppie/Jem Rodney/Jane/Mrs Osgood/Bryce's horse

Actor 4/Mr Macey/Squire Cass/The Minister/The Reverend/Coachman
(Scene13)

Actor 5/Dunsey/Ben Winthrop/Aaron/Dr Kimble/1st Member (Scene1)/
Footman (Scene13)

Actor 6/Dolly/Priscilla/Bryce/2nd Member (Scene1)/**Villager**

Actor 7/Nancy/Molly/Mr Dowlas/Woman (Scene 27)

The first scenes take place about 1790, the main action of the play about 1805, and the later scenes about 1820

The running time of Act I is about 1 hr 23 mins; Act II is about 58 mins

INTRODUCTION

The play grew out of my attachment to the Orange Tree Theatre, where the play was first performed; out of my deep admiration for the work of George Eliot; and out of my previous experience of adapting and directing her *Adam Bede*.

Silas Marner is one of the most loved of George Eliot's stories, full of mysterious, legendary elements: weavers, ghosts and buried treasure, death in the snow, a skeleton in the quarry, gold stolen and a child found. It's about spiritual despair, and salvation through the coming of a child at Christmas. It's about reconnecting the lonely individual into the community. It also touches incidentally on many other topical themes: prejudice and class, drugs and smoking, the rearing and punishment of children, the rights of natural as against foster parents. Some of the nineteenth-century attitudes contrast sharply with our own, but we should aim for George Eliot's vision, and let the audience judge. The fact that the story remains so thought-provoking and moving is what makes it a classic.

SET, FURNITURE AND PROPERTIES

The play centres on the hearth: Silas's hearth where he keeps his gold, the Red House Parlour fire which only really comes to life with the arrival of Nancy; and the hearth at the *Rainbow* where the villagers gather. These are the three worlds of the play: the isolated and intensely personal world of Silas himself, the morally suspect world of the "horse-riding" class; and the deeply conservative world of the villagers. Apart from this there is a place of danger, death and surprise: the "Stone Pits".

The Set. This should be as simple as possible, a flexible "empty space" with the actors around it. The hearth is a central image and the doors are also very important, but they do not need to be real. In the first production in the round, the hearth was a central panel in the floor lit from beneath. The doors were simply the exits at the corners of the stage. Areas were defined by the furniture and the emphasis of light on one or other part of the stage, e.g. Silas's cottage one side, the Stone Pits or the Red House Parlour on the other. A trap in the floor by Silas's hearth proved useful.

Furniture. A chair and two benches. These can be on stage throughout, moved by the cast as needed or simply ignored. They should be light enough to be easily moved by one person. There is a bench for each side of the stage, the first making Silas's loom bench, the second marking the edge of the quarry or being moved to make a window-seat in the Red House Parlour. (The benches have many other uses, of course)

Props. These need to be conveniently on hand at the edge of the acting area, where the actors will need them for the next scene. It is important that the action is continuous, and must never be held up for scene changes, props or costumes.

Dolls. The dolls proved to be one of the great pleasures of the original production. Two rag dolls were made in a nineteenth-century style, one to represent Eppie aged between two and five, about 97cm high, the other to represent Aaron, aged seven, about 127cm high. It's very important that their limbs are firm but flexible, stuffed solidly enough for the head to remain upright, but easily manipulated into a nod or head-turn. A broad neck helps; weighting the feet is also helpful. It was found the face worked best with button eyes, and with other features, such as a smile, not strongly marked. The hair was made of wool: gold for the Eppie doll (to match Godfrey and Eppie), dark brown for the Aaron doll (to suggest Dolly or Ben, and Aaron).

COSTUME

One basic costume for each actor should be enough. But when doubling parts, sometimes a distinguishing prop or piece of costume may be needed, e.g., a shawl for Molly, or a mob-cap for Jane. Changes need not be disguised, but should never be distracting.

EFFECTS AND STAGING

It seemed important to me for the actors to awaken the audience's sense of theatre early in the play. The appeal is to the audience to contribute actively with their imaginations, and not to be merely passive observers.

Sound Effects. Apart from the sound of a single violin for the dance, the sound effects were all provided by the cast in performance, (Actors 2-7); the humming, the sound of the loom, dogs barking and horses galloping and neighing, breathing and screaming, as well as wind and rain and the "echoes".

It was found, however, with so small and busy a cast that pre-recordings of the cast were sometimes necessary to reinforce the live sound of the cast in performance.

The hum should suggest the power of the gold in Silas's mind. We used a basic low note starting with one man and joined by others and then added a sliding dangerous higher note from the women. Where the hum and echoes overlap, the basic low tone sometimes needs to be maintained by one actor, while the others provide the echo.

The loom noise was developed from watching a hand-loom in operation, and is a simplification of that sound. It consists of four beats mechanically repeated. The first beat is a soft breath as the shuttle is passed through; there is another breath for the drawing forward of the batten; a more sharply accented breath as it is pushed back again; and a soft double handclap as the feet are changed on the pedals. It should usually go at the speed of the loom, about a beat every second, not rushed. There are craft shops and museums where old hand-loom can be observed in action. The breathing and clapping is first introduced as a sexual nightmare in Silas's mind — the breathing of William and Sarah, the clapping approval of the brethren — and becomes incorporated into the rhythm of his loom. This noise cannot be pre-recorded of course, as it must be timed precisely to Silas's mime.

Masks. The aim of the masks here is to strip the actors of their individuality.

The rule, as for all "effects", is that they should only be used when they add to the precision and power of the story-telling, never if they become a distraction. But I wanted the story to be told entirely through the actors.

CAST AND PERFORMANCE

The smallest possible cast is seven actors. Silas needs to be isolated at the start, as the story is largely about his gradual acceptance of, and acceptance into, a suspicious community. Six actors can then represent the community, in the dance, in the doubling of parts, and in working together almost as a chorus, to comment more objectively on the action. More actors may be used if available, though some doubling is always a pleasure for actors and audience, and can sometimes be especially telling (e.g. William/Godfrey and Sarah/Eppie; Godfrey/Wildfire; Molly/Nancy).

The actors need to be closely around the acting area throughout, listening to the play. Then they can merely stand or step forward to enter the action or to make their comments on it to the audience. These comments cover a wide range of attitudes, from being almost completely ironic and objective in the manner of George Eliot, to being almost completely in character; that is a judgement to be made according to the requirements of the moment, but it's

quite permissible to let the feel or accent of the character affect the “narration”.

Everybody needs to relate to the dolls as to real children. Where the script says “the boy” or “the child”, this refers to the doll. “Aaron” and “Eppie” refer to the actors who will later play them when they are grown up, who come on stage to control the dolls where possible. The actor should stay close to the child/doll, discreetly, often kneeling or crouching, and provide the inner life of the child, crying, laughing, etc. This should not be distracting, provided all the actors work through the doll, which remains the audience’s primary focus of attention. The exception is at the end of Scene 25, when Silas recognizes the real person behind the doll, and he may respond to Eppie thereafter, though everyone else still responds to the doll.

A warning to the actors. It is important not to sentimentalize the story. Silas, for example, is possessive and defensive and may have a rough way of dealing with others almost as a habit. And the villagers too, must not be seen merely as comic, rustic “characters”. They are individuals with superstitions and prejudices (some unpleasant) and some strong traditions. They have a long journey to accept Silas, “the foreigner”, just as he has a long journey to accept them. The play will not work if this journey is devalued.

My thanks must go, not only to the wonderful first cast, but the actors who were involved in an initial workshop in which many of the ideas of the play were first tried out. So my thanks also to Jane Arden, Gareth Armstrong, Mark Carey and David Timson for their imaginative help. And of course to Sam Walters for putting on the play.

Good luck. I hope it’s as fun to rehearse, and as rewarding in performance, as it was for us.

Geoffrey Beevers

For the original production of **SILAS MARNER** at the Orange Tree Theatre, David Timson wrote an original tune for *The Molecatcher’s Song*. Producers wishing to use this music may contact him c/o the Editorial Department at Samuel French Ltd.

ACT I

The cast enter just before the play is due to start and discreetly take their places around the edge of the acting area

When the play begins, Silas moves C, carrying a heavy sack on his back. The Lights concentrate around him. The Minister steps forward, still half in shadow, a black book (Pilgrim's Progress) in his hand

Minister (reading) "And there was a man, bowed under a great burden ... living in the City of Destruction ... and he cried lamentably, saying 'What must I do to be saved?...'"

SCENE 1

Silas's cottage

Silas sits in his chair. He considers intently

A shaft of light comes up on the other side of the stage. Silas remembers Lantern Yard, in his home town in the north. He crosses the stage; as his younger self he joins his betrothed, Sarah. They sit at the feet of William Dane

Silas But how can you be so sure of salvation, William?

William As I say, I prayed earnestly for light, for many days and nights. Then at last, I had a dream ...

Silas How was it?

Sarah Yes, how?

William I saw the words "Calling and Election Sure", standing by themselves on a white page in an open Bible. And I was no longer in any fear or doubt.

Silas and Sarah look at each other, impressed

Silas I long to have such an assurance. I have some hope of salvation, but I'm afraid it may be a deception of the devil.

William (rising to go) You must pray more earnestly, brother Silas.

Silas and Sarah rise too

Silas Some say the trance I had at the prayer meeting last week may be a sign of salvation — although ——

Sarah The Minister said it might mean he was singled out for special dealings by the Lord ——

William Yet it may also have been a visitation of Satan, rather than a proof of divine favour.

A slight pause

Sarah Do you think so?

William (*going*) You must pray more earnestly for the light, brother Silas.

Silas and Sarah look at each other

Another shaft of Light comes up elsewhere. Sarah and Silas move into this and stand together

Silas I feel myself to be — unworthy — Sarah. Do you wish to break off our engagement?

Sarah (*smiling*) No, of course not. It has been recognized in our prayer meetings. We're to be married...

Silas Thank you, Sarah. I should never want to marry anyone if I couldn't marry you.

They kiss chastely. Then they laugh and embrace and Silas swings Sarah round in joy. Figures with lanterns gather in the semi-darkness

William Brother Silas ...

Minister You are summoned to Lantern Yard to meet the Church members there.

Silas Why is that?

Minister You will hear.

Silas What is it, William?

William You will hear.

All (*whispering*) You will hear ...

Silas moves c; a light comes up on him. A circle of dark figures surrounds him, the members of Lantern Yard; they include William, the Minister and Sarah

Minister (*producing a knife*) Do you know this knife?

Silas (*confused*) Yes, it's mine.

Minister Do you know where you left it?

Silas I didn't know I'd left it anywhere out of my own pocket.

A slight pause

Minister Silas Marner, we have believed you to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith. But now it's our duty to ask you some questions ... Last night you watched at the death-bed of our brother deacon.

Silas Yes, I took my turn in the nightwatching with William.

Minister But he didn't come?

Silas No, I was expecting him to relieve me at two o'clock as usual.

1st Member And then?

Silas I must have fallen asleep ... when I woke it was four o'clock. But I don't recall —

Minister Do not hide your sin. Confess and repent, and you will be forgiven. The knife was found today in the bureau by the deacon's bedside. Found in the place where the Church money had lain in a small bag.

1st Member Some hand removed that bag —

2nd Member Whose hand could it be, if not yours?

Silas I know nothing about the knife being there, or the money being gone. Search me and my dwelling. You'll find nothing but three pound five of my own savings ... which my friend William knows I've had these six months.

William (*disappointed*) Oh Silas.

Minister The proof is heavy against you, brother Marner. The money was taken in the night, and no man was with our departed brother but you.

First Member William Dane declares that he was hindered by sudden sickness from going to take his place as usual —

Second Member You yourself said he had not come —

First Member And moreover, you neglected the dead body —

Silas I must have slept — (*suddenly*) or I must have had another visitation like that which you've all seen me under, so that the thief must have come and gone while I was not in the body. But I say again, search me and my dwelling.

William (*sighing*) We have already searched, brother. (*He produces an empty money-bag*) We have found this bag, behind the chest of drawers in your chamber.

Second Member We hoped you might confess before this —

Minister Now you dare hide your sin no longer.

Silas (*after a slight pause*) But I'm guiltless of any ... William. We're friends. For nine years we've gone in and out together, we've been like David and Jonathan ... Have you ever known me tell a lie?

William Brother, how do I know what you may have done in the secret chambers of your heart to give Satan an advantage over you?

Silas But William, you know I... (*He stops in shock*) I remember now – the knife.

William I know nothing of what you mean.

Minister Explain yourself.

Silas (*staring at William; eventually*) No. God will clear me.

Minister If it was not in your pocket, where did you mean to say the knife was?

First Member Say what you mean.

Silas I am sore stricken; I can say nothing. God will clear me. (*He turns to the Minister*)

Minister Then we must judge by the drawing of lots. God will decide. First we shall pray and then brother Marner will draw lots to establish whether he is innocent or guilty.

They all kneel, Silas too. The Minister takes some sticks from a bag which hangs around his neck. He holds up white sticks in one hand, black in the other. They pray

Silas (*praying*) God help me—my trust in man is cruelly shaken, but O Lord, you know I'm innocent; clear me.

The Minister mixes the sticks together and puts them back in the bag. He holds up the bag and Silas, head bowed, picks out a stick at random. It is black

Minister The lots declare that Silas Marner is guilty.

All Guilty.

They turn their backs on Silas. The Minister puts on a white half-mask during the following

Actor 7 (*turning to the audience*) We are apt to think that a man in Marner's position should have questioned the appeal to divine judgement by drawing lots.

Actor 6 (*to the audience*) But this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known.

Actor 3 (*to the audience*) If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas.

Minister (*turning back to Silas, masked*) Silas Marner is suspended from church membership.

Silas appeals to the members of Lantern Yard; they reject him, saying "Guilty". They put on white half-masks in the darkness. It is like a nightmare

Only on confession, as a sign of repentance, can he be received once more into the fold of the church.

Silas (*moving to William*) You took my knife. You stole the money, and you've woven a plot to lay the sin at my door ——

William Oh, Silas ——

All (*softly echoing*) Silas.

Silas But you may prosper for all that. (*A slight pause. Then he cries out*) There is no God that governs the earth, but a God of lies that bears witness against the innocent.

Minister Blasphemy!

All (*pointing at Silas*) Blasphemy.

William (*quietly*) I leave our brethren to judge whether this is the voice of Satan or not. I can do nothing but pray for you, Silas

Minister Go. Leave us now!

Everyone except Sarah turns away from Silas. Silas goes over to her

Silas Sarah?

Sarah Our engagement is at an end.

After a moment, Silas returns to his chair in the cottage

The dark figures start to breathe and clap in rhythm. (This is to become the sound of Silas' loom.) They encourage Sarah to take William's hand. They gather around Silas in the semi-darkness. The breathing suggests heavy breathing and the clapping polite applause. William and Sarah stand before the Minister

Minister Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder ...

Sarah stands looking at Silas, while William Dane starts to kiss and caress her body, passionately then obscenely. Sarah smiles and responds. The church members watch and applaud. The sounds intensify and quicken. Suddenly Sarah drops on all fours, William kneels behind her, and thrusts up against her raising his hands in ecstatic prayer. A religious and sexual climax. Applause

Silas (*standing and crying out*) No!

Everyone except Silas freezes and the sounds stop

There is no God!

All the figures scatter back into the darkness

SCENE 2

Silas's cottage

Actor 6 It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had departed the town and come to the village of Raveloe.

Silas sits at his loom

Actor 7 He worked as a linen weaver in a stone cottage, not far from the edge of a deserted Stone Pit.

Silas mimes the process of weaving. The other actors breathe and clap in rhythm; we now recognize that this is the sound of Silas' loom. The monotonous rhythm of the work is established

Actor 3 He invited no comer to step across his doorsill.

Actor 6 He never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the *Rainbow*.

The villagers come forward warily on to the darker side of the stage; Silas pauses in his work. The loom noises cease

Landlord (*darkly*) He comes from North'ard ...

Macey Nobody rightly knows about those parts.

Mr Dowlas This trade o' weaving ...

Macey You can't trust folks who are over-clever ...

Ben Winthrop The children are a'fear'd of him.

Jem Rodney Knock on his door and he'll fix you with ——

Macey — a gaze to make you take to your heels in terror.

Ben They say he has strange fits and then ——

Landlord — his eyes are fixed, like a dead man's.

Silas (*turning; violently*) I need no man or woman.

The villagers crouch down. Silas continues to stare aggressively

Actor 3 His thought was arrested by utter bewilderment, and affection seemed to have died under the bruise.

Silas returns to working at his loom. The sound is established again

Actor 4 Year after year, he lived in solitude, his life narrowing and hardening.

Actor 5 He seemed to weave, like the spider, without reflection, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of the spinning insect.

Actor 2 His loom, as he wrought in it, in turn wrought on him, and confirmed the monotonous craving for its monotonous response.

Now Silas picks up a bolt of linen, comes away from the loom, and moves upstage to his door

Actor 5 Every man's work, pursued steadily, tends in this way to become an end in itself, and so to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life.

Silas goes through the door and puts down the linen, exchanging it for a golden guinea. He turns back and holds the coin up to look at it. A subliminal humming chord is heard. Silas comes back into the cottage

Actor 6 He seemed to love money little in the years when every penny had its purpose. But now, when all purpose was gone, the habit of grasping the money, with a sense of fulfilled effort, made a loam deep enough for the seeds of desire.

All (*echoing*) Desire ...

Silas opens a trap in the floor by the hearth; the hum grows more intense. He pulls out two bags of money.

Actor 7 His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own.

All (*echoing*) his own...

Silas opens up one of the bags, gathering the coins into a pile

Actor 6 Gradually the guineas grew into a heap of guineas.

All (*echoing*) Guineas ...

Silas carefully adds his new guinea

Actor 7 Every added guinea bred a new desire.

All (*echoing*) Desire ...

Actor 3 He thought fondly of his guineas still to be earned as if they had been unborn children.

Silas Children ... (*He puts the gold back in the bags, and returns them into the trap*)

The hum fades

Actor 7 The same sort of process has perhaps been undergone by wiser men, when they have been cut off from faith and love ——

Silas Guineas.

Actor 7 — cut off from ——

Silas Guineas.

Actor 7 — love ——

Silas Guineas. (*He shuts the trap door firmly*)

SCENE 3

Raveloe; in the village. There is bright sunlight over the whole stage

Villagers go about their business

Actor 3 What could be more different from Lantern Yard than the world in Raveloe?

Actor 5 Orchards lazy with neglected plenty ...

Actor 2 Purple-faced farmers turning in at the *Rainbow* ...

Actor 4 (*as the Squire*) The greatest man in Raveloe was Squire Cass, who lived in the Red House.

Actor 2 (*as Godfrey*) It was still that glorious war-time ——

Actor 5 (*Dunsey*) — when the rich ate and drank freely ——

Actor 3 (*Jane*) — and the poor thought that the rich were entirely in the right of it to live a jolly life.

Squire (*in a fury to his sons, Godfrey and Dunsey*) Goddam it, if Fowler doesn't pay his rent, I'll distrain for it. I'm short of cash and in no mood to stand any nonsense. Do you hear?

The Squire moves away. Godfrey turns to Dunsey; Dunsey shrugs

Actor 6 (*Villager*) It was thought a weakness in the Squire that he had kept his sons home in idleness.

Actor 5 To be sure it's no matter what becomes of Dunsey. (*He moves away*)

Actor 2 But it would be a thousand pities if Mr Godfrey, the eldest, were to go along the same road with his brother.

Actor 7 (*now as Nancy*) He'll lose Miss Nancy Lammeter.

The other villagers look between Godfrey and Nancy

Villager She's looked very shyly on him ever since last Whitsuntide.

Jane He doesn't look half so open as he used to do.

Villager Ay, there's something wrong, more than common ...

Jane What a handsome couple he and Miss Nancy would make.

Villager Such a daughter would be a saving to the old Squire.

Actor 2 But if Mr Godfrey doesn't turn over a new leaf ——

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