



## **The Rain has Voices Strode Theatre Street and touring**

THE idea behind the commissioning of *A Play for Somerset* was to create a full-length piece that was firmly based in the county, reflecting its local distinctiveness in dialect, atmosphere and history, made in Somerset but with universal appeal.

The project started two years ago, the brainchild of Glenys Gill from Taunton's Brewhouse and Liz Leyshon from Strode Theatre, Street. A competition was opened to anyone with a Somerset postcode, 48 writers sent examples of their previous work, a shortlist of four was drawn up and Shiona Morton, Scots born but resident in Bridgwater, was selected.

The first draft of her play, under the name *Soundings*, was given a rehearsed reading in the studio of Strode Theatre last summer, and Take Art took the project on.

The result, a new draft and the new title *The Rain Has Voices*, opened at Street on Tuesday at the start of a 14-venue tour of the south west.

It is set in the very near future in Harrow Bridge, a fictional village on the Somerset Levels. It's been raining for weeks, and the Environment Agency is monitoring the situation. Most of the residents have been evacuated, but two who live on higher ground are sitting tight, as is a batty old lady who has taken refuge in the church, knowing that the tower will keep her from the rising waters.

If theatre is about suspension of disbelief, *The Rain has Voices* requires an acceptance of those feminine powers that men have traditionally called witchcraft - second sight, and in this case, second hearing. Anyone who knows the strange and intangible spirit of the Levels can easily be drawn into this world, where the shadows lengthen into the forms of unknown people, and the lapping of the water and rustling of the

pollarded trees seem to want to pass messages to strangers.

Here Thomas Fear, a farmer who has never moved from the village, and who is recently widowed, waits without purpose for the flood to subside. On the next door farm the new owner, Deborah, turns out to be the granddaughter of the neighbour who used to make cheese and pick apples.

Simon Fear, Thomas's son, has turned his back on the farm and become a scientist with the Environment Agency, but he can't resist the pull of this remote and mysterious region of Somerset.

Sarah lives in her village cottage awaiting the return of the child snatched from her at birth and sold by her cruel father.

And into this "community" comes Lizzie, a teenager on the run from a life of violence and unhappiness. Is she a threat or an answer to a prayer?

Shiona Morton cleverly weaves together the many strands of this complex drama, and every member of the cast plays at least two roles, allowing the past and the present and the imagined to flit across our consciousness like leaves on fast-flowing flood waters.

Director Chris Fogg and his designer Julie Read have come up with effective solutions to the demands of the play - emphasising the aqueous insistence and parallel realities.

The introduction of music, composed by Nick Brace and adapted from traditional folk song, is perfectly judged.

All five performers, William Bateman, Rebecca Hulbert, Tanya Myers, Michael Strobel and Maggie Tagney, have taken on the rhythm and texture of Somerset.

The evening ends as the rain stops, and, if you have made that leap of faith, you will KNOW who Lizzie really is.

*The Rain has Voices* is a dazzling debut for Flax303, the new professional company created by Take Art to tour the play.

Catch it at Mere on Thursday 28th, Bridport on 30th, Yeovil College on 3rd October, Frome Merlin on 5th, Drimpton on 10th or back at the Brewhouse in Taunton on Saturday 14th October. GP-W