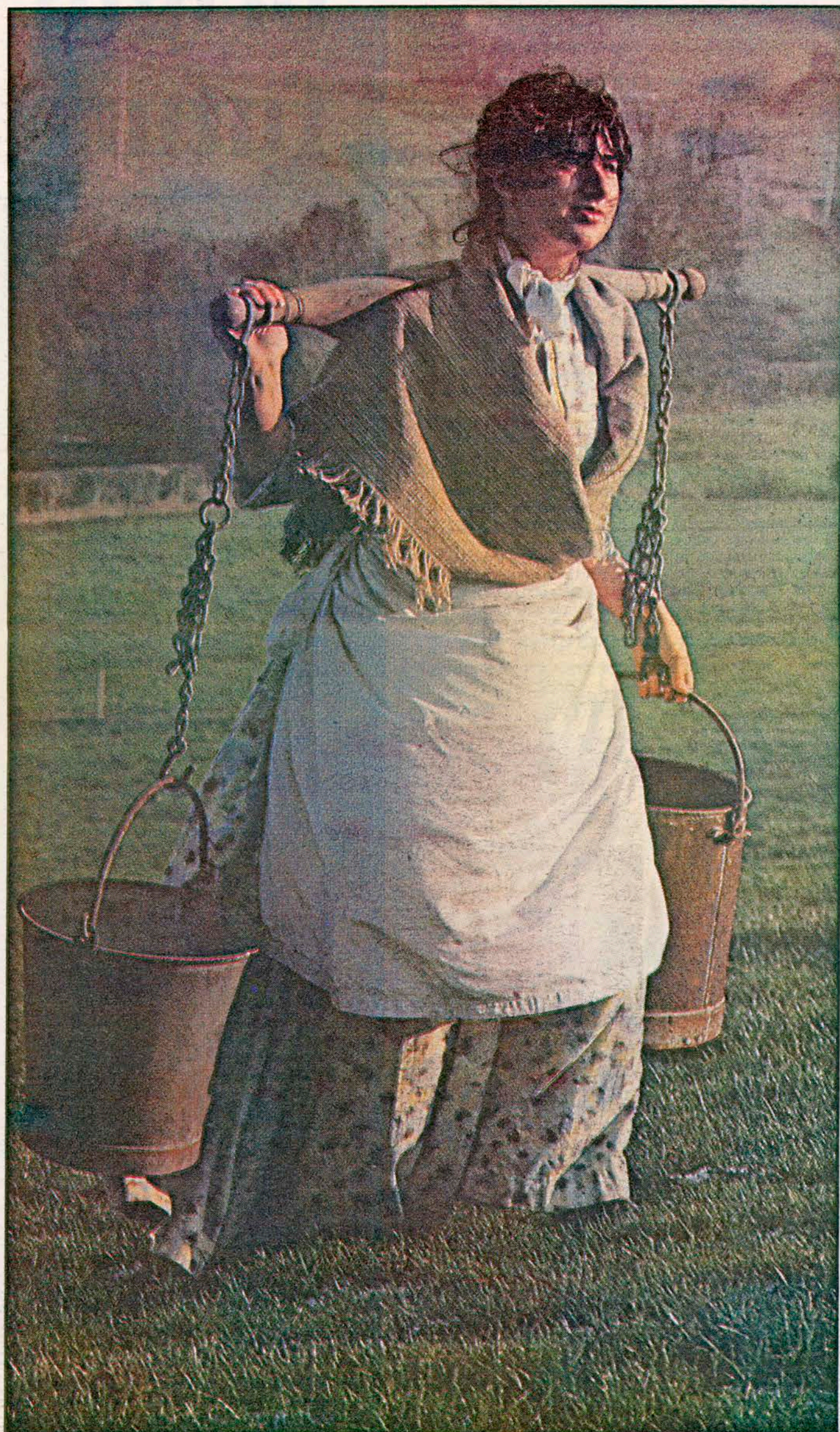




Pictures by Malcolm Nethersole



● **THE MASKERS Theatre Company stages Tess of the d'Urbervilles at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, for five days from Tuesday.**

To give readers a taste of the production, the Echo invited Debbie Moorhouse, cast in the title role of the country girl, to step back in time and sample life down on an old-fashioned farm.

Stopping off at Stonehenge, where Tess is arrested for murder, Debbie spent a morning at Farmer Giles Farmstead, Teffont Magna, to help prepare her for part of the milk maid driven to murder.

Tackling the many trials of Tess

"WHAT have I let myself in for," declared Debbie Moorhouse, 21, after she agreed to play Thomas Hardy's tragic heroine in the Maskers Theatre Company's Tess.

A reaction not unlike the one heard when she found herself visiting Stonehenge at 8.30am before doing a morning's work at the Farmer Giles Farmstead.

With the help of Wiltshire farmer John

Vining, Debbie carried the milk pails up the hill and fed the animals before sampling home-brewed cider.

Undergoing improvements, the farm — owned by John and wife Julia, whose maiden name was

Giles — will soon have a windmill and fountains — and it proved a perfect location to take Tess for a taste of life on the land.

"I see it as a way of rebuilding the bridge between townie and country," said John who describes himself as a middle of the road' farmer.

"Farmers have had a rough time," continued John who, like his wife, is from a farming family.

Despite the cold and the mud, Debbie enjoyed her time on the farmstead and wants a job there during the season — starting in March — helping with the thousands of tourists who pour into the farm which is situated 11 miles from Salisbury.

Debbie, who works in the administrative section of a DIY store by day, faces an enormous challenge in the role of Tess with the Southampton-based amateur group.

Cutting her acting teeth in the Young Maskers, Debbie appeared in Zigger Zagger, the Dracula Spectacular, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The Accrington Pals and Dance on the Moon and has helped back stage.

Hopes of doing a drama course were dashed when Hampshire County Council refused her a grant but a place has been left open for her at South Down College and she hopes to go in September.

As part of her year out Debbie joined two friends, who had bought a bus, and joined the hippy convoy for the summer.

"It is hard to adjust to civilisation," she said. "I used to get up when the sun came up, collect firewood, put on the kettle and everything was really relaxed."

"We visited pop festivals and in the evening would sit round the fire singing and playing guitars."

But in the end she missed the home comforts and needed to earn a living.

"All I know is, acting is the only thing I enjoy doing. If I can get into a profession where I am doing something I enjoy all well and good."

But she said, candidly: "I have not the dedication and at the moment I get distracted with having a good time with my friends."

Director Michael Patterson asked her to take the title role of Tess after seeing her in another Maskers show and, after immediately saying yes, the enormity of the task hit her.

"I read the book and thought 'What have I let myself in for because it is so tragic,'" said Debbie.

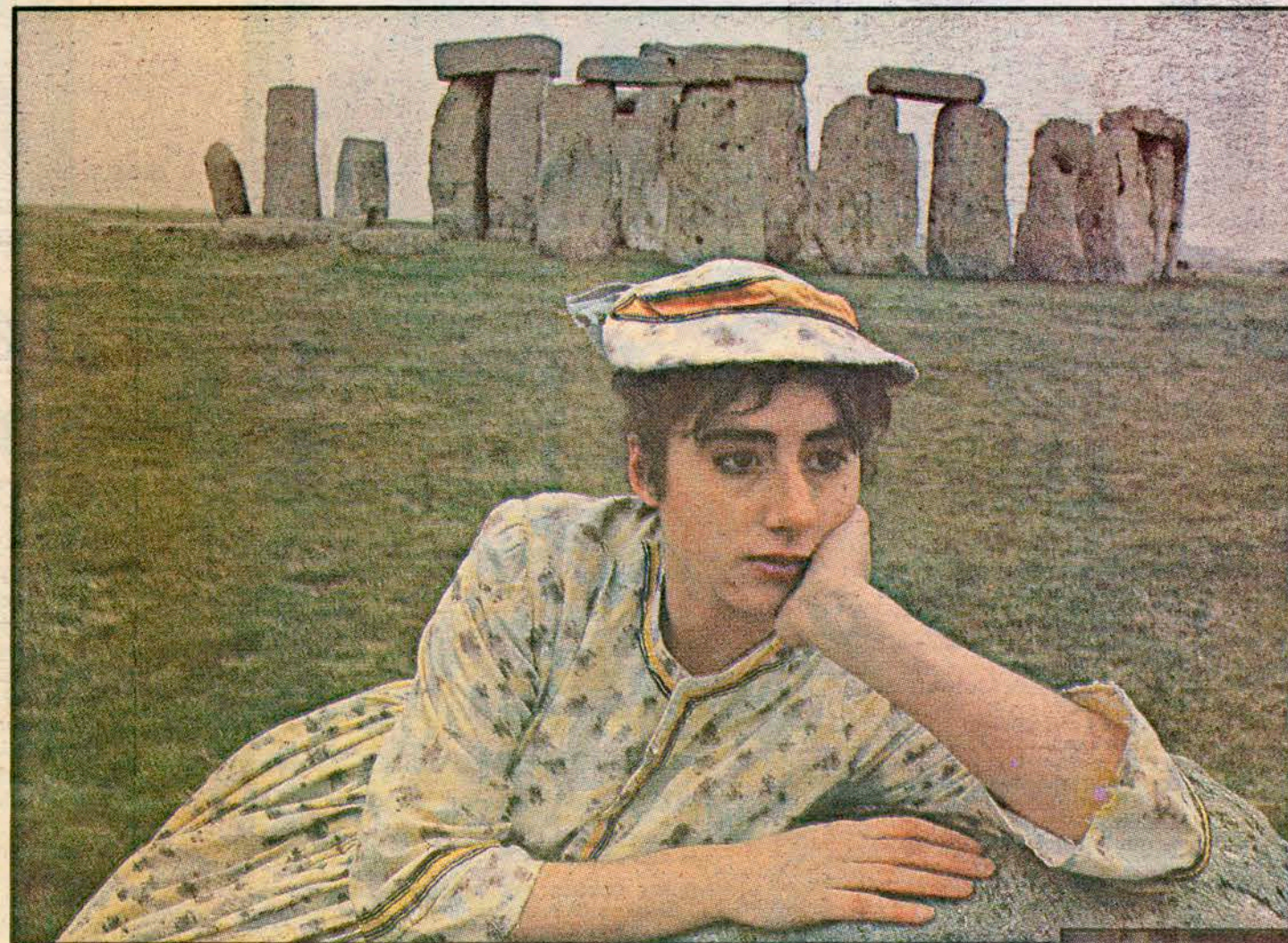
"And she is so unlike me. I would not have taken it the way she does," said Debbie about the country girl whom, abandoned by the husband she loves, kills the man she blames for her moral ruin.

"I am going to be emotionally disturbed by the end of the run," joked Debbie, already unable to resist a cigarette.

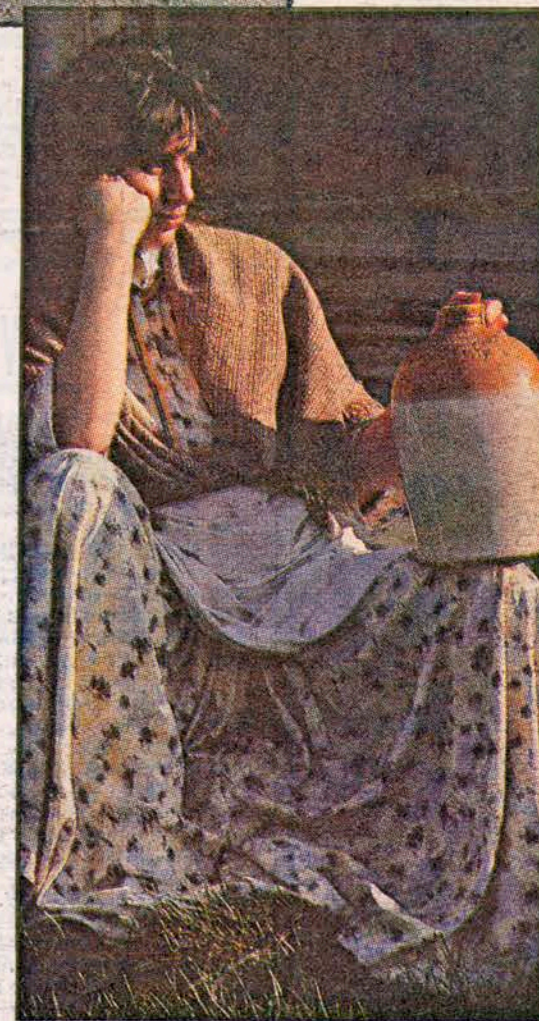
Watching Roman Polanski's film of the book has helped Debbie prepare for the role but she thinks Nastassja Kinski's interpretation was too weak.

"Tess is very proud, she is really upper class but is born into the working class," explained Debbie. "She is educated but suppressed and, but for having to help her family, she could have been a teacher."

"I think she is a strong person," continued Debbie. "The film was romanticised and Tess was unreactive. I play her a lot harder and with all that happens to her she becomes tougher."



"I think Tess is a strong person. The film was romanticised and Tess was unreactive. I play her a lot harder and with all that happens to her she becomes tougher."
— Maskers actress Debbie Moorhouse



Concept and stories by Sue Wilkinson



Recreating the d'Urbervilles tale sparks off a Dorset mystery tour

DIRECTOR Michael Patterson sent the 50-strong Maskers cast on a mystery tour as part of the task of staging Hardy's love story, Tess of the d'Urbervilles.

Questions led them to the Dorset locations — villages, towns and churches — used in the tragic tale of the milkmaid who has ideas above her station.

Winchester-based musicians Madding Crowd who have researched and documented 'west gallery music' — played at Sunday services — were also recruited.

And one of the Madding Crowd has taught the cast traditional dances as part of the painstaking preparations for the Nuffield five-day run.

Two giant revolves, designed by art teacher John Carrington, have also been built and housing them for rehearsals was one of the headaches Michael and his technical crew faced. They eventually found a home at Redbridge Community School.

"They did give us practical problems but as a solution to staging the show they were brilliant." Four chickens have been specially hatched and reared for use in the show and lighting designer Clive Weeks has been given the task of creating the special effects.

These include a railway siding in the middle of the night, the sun rising over Stonehenge and

a real wind to be generated by two huge studio fans in the wings.

While looking for a suitable play for the Maskers' annual Mottisfont Abbey open-air production, Michael realised the company had led the 150th anniversary of Hardy's death go by without recognition.

He also realised 1991 was the centenary year of the publication of Tess. "But it became evident to me that Tess, essentially an intimate and complex love story, was better suited to presentation in a theatre," said Michael.

"SHE was a fine and handsome girl, not handsomer than some others, possibly — but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment."
Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles

"Its great potential lies in Hardy's ability to portray characters as well as the settings they are in," he observed.

Go-ahead for the production was given by the Maskers' committee in the middle of last year and members like the idea of a company show.

Explained Michael: "There are 43 speaking parts and it is one of the biggest shows we have ever put on. The concept was that it should be a show that anybody who wants to be on stage could be."

The main casting-worry was the part of Tess who, said Michael, had to be someone who looked right and was the right age and he was all set to hold outside auditions until Debbie Moorhouse became available to do the role.

Adapting the 500-page novel into two-and-a-half-hours was also a problem for Michael.

"The script has been written straight from the book and bulk of dialogue has too," he said.

"You have to be a bit brutal and leave out some things which you would have liked to have left in."

"But Hardy provides many theatrical scenes, like the blind widow who has her chickens brought into her so she can feel how they are getting on, the scene where Tess baptises her own baby and Tess's arrest for murder at Stonehenge."