

### Out Of Your Knowledge

By Steve Waters  
Menagerie Theatre Company

Review by [Jill Sharp](#) (2006)

Cambridge-based Menagerie, a writing company that enables and encourages collaborative work between writers, actors and producers, demonstrates the efficacy of this approach in their wonderfully rich and evocative piece, *Out Of Your Knowledge*. Writer Steve Waters and actor Patrick Morris undertook to walk in six days the journey that poet John Clare had made in three, when in 1841 he walked home to Northborough from the Epping Forest asylum where he'd been incarcerated.



*Photo by Debby Besford*

Waters' absorbing and spellbinding play follows the experience of a contemporary young devotee of Clare's poetry as he travels the route today, 'companied' by a Clare he constantly addresses and invokes. This framework suits the needs of the play well because it is more than a mere device. Most of us have walked London with Dickens or seen Suffolk through Constable's eyes, and here our experience of the contemporary landscape and its issues is enriched by its relationship to Clare's life and time.

As he rewalks Clare's route, the young traveller, in a luminous and passionate performance by Patrick Morris, takes us through the sights and folks he encounters along the way, presenting a variety of characters in their own voices. He gives us the speaker at a Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) meeting, a road construction engineer, a birdwatcher, the spokespersons for Huntingdon Life Sciences and their activist adversaries SHAC. Every encounter is refracted through Clare's prose or poetry: his love of the unbounded spaces, his despair at the 18th century enclosure of common land.

The Pride of Place Festival venue was a tiny church hall where the audience was ranged along either side of a narrow performance space. This contained Stefanie Muller's three-part set, around which the actor moved with extraordinary ease: a chair draped with Clare's clothing, similar to that worn in William Hilton's well-known oil portrait; a wooden frame containing sections of meadow turf; and a large rectangular map of the walk which also served as a screen for the projection of photo images. This prop-like set served all the play's needs with admirable economy: a means of clearly tracing the route for the audience, a little plot of enclosed rural England to interact with, and a focus for the player's ongoing discussion with Clare.

The entire 80 minutes moves boldly and deftly through place and time, culminating in a scene of inspirational stillness when the actor, now dressed in Clare's garments, sits in the chair and raises his head into the light, like the young Clare in the Hilton portrait.

The play is both a tribute to Clare and a journey through contemporary England, bringing its various environmental issues to the fore in a way that is deepened and illuminated by their connection with the poet who, when just three miles from home, felt himself to be 'outside his knowledge.'