



**PRESS ARTICLE –BLACKMORE VALE MAGAZINE  
MARCH 2009**

**They Shoot Horses,  
Don't They,  
Bournemouth  
Pavilion Ballroom**

REALITY television's icon, Jade Goody, died on Mother's Day in the blaze of publicity in which she had lived her last few years, raising questions of what is or is not intrusive and voyeuristic. But there's nothing new under the sun, as you can learn from Ecclesiastes 1:9. The dance marathons that started up in the United

States during the Depression of the 1930s may not have been televised, but they drew similarly voracious audiences, keen to learn more about the background stories of the desperate contestants who danced for nickels, dimes, a bit of food, ten-minutes sleep in a bed – and sometimes for their lives.

In Sydney Pollack's 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* a "never had it so good" audience learned about these gross exploitations of human misery, and there has never been a more relevant time to bring them to the attention of the public again.

Last week Ellie Nixon, a senior lecturer at Bournemouth's Arts Institute, saw a long-anticipated project come to fruition, when the graduating students on the BA Acting Course performed her adaptation of

Horace McCoy's 1935 novel on the dance floor of the Pavilion Ballroom.

It was an extraordinary enterprise and one which paid off from all angles. It provided a collaborative experience for students from the acting, costume and film departments of the Institute. Theatre was performed in the 80 year old ballroom, which was the perfect setting for the story. The cast had a chance to develop their ensemble skills, and both they and the audience took an inescapable close-up look at the reality of a "reality" show.

The young actors had to make their mark on the audience fast – it would have been all too easy to muddle up the eight pairs of contestants. Once they had captured our attention, they began that slow process of attrition, egged on by

contest organiser Rocky, watched by the roller-skating Rollo, cared for by a dubious doctor and Nurse Crandall (a Ratched blueprint).

Horace McCoy worked as a bouncer at the Santa Monica Pier ballroom, and he knew all about these popular but notorious contests. As his story unfolds, demoralised and exhausted dancers discover the bitter facts of the show - that the promised \$1,000 dollar prize is a chimera, and that exploitation is the name of the game.

This IS an ensemble piece, but outstanding in this remarkable cast were Daniel Shelley as that typically American literary creation, the bystander who becomes a central narrator, Charlie Band as the bitter and despondent Gloria, Wesley McCarthy, Simon Weeds, Effion Melnyk-Jones, Holly Smith ... but it seems unjust not to name all 25 of them.

Also special mention for the 11 on the make-up team, who ensured that the audience could see the progressive effects of this ghastly marathon.

The experience of Ellie Nixon's production at the Pavilion will never leave the participants or the audience.  
GP-W