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The Vegan Tigress (2025), directed by Tracy Collier,
Bread and Roses Theatre, Clapham (18 February–1 March 2025)

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The Vegan Tigress is a new play by Claire Parker, directed by Tracy Collier and performed by Claire Parker and Edie Campbell, that premiered at the Bread and Roses Theatre, Clapham, and ran from the 18 February–1 March 2025. This witty and vibrant celebration of the 175th anniversary of the birth of the fairy tale writer, Mary De Morgan (1850–1907) explores her later life through her interactions with a fictional, spectral antagonist named Lady Tuttle, and an imaginative reinterpretation of De Morgan's own fairy tale 'The Hair Tree'. Although a prolific and influential writer of literary fairy tales, and an active suffragist, De Morgan's contribution to both the fairy tale genre and feminism has been largely overlooked. *The Vegan Tigress* seeks to remedy this by acknowledging the modern progressive value of De Morgan's writing and feminist achievements. Although Lady Tuttle (Edie Campbell) is an unintentionally summoned ghost, her presence brings both levity and surrealism to the play's first half. Her exchanges with De Morgan (Claire Parker) highlight the significance of De Morgan's decision to pursue a career as an independent writer. At the same time, Lady Tuttle's resurrection also forces De Morgan to confront the economic and romantic consequences of choosing a literary career and activism over marriage. Much of the tension between the two women originates from De Morgan's decision to break off her engagement to Lady Tuttle's son and from Lady Tuttle's disapproval of De Morgan's independence.

The claustrophobic nature of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the entire play takes place in the cramped, cluttered interior of De Morgan's home, which is filled with bric-à-brac and piles of books. Much of the play's dynamism stems from the two protagonists' playful yet acerbic barbs exchanged in this crowded yet intimate space. As the play progresses, Lady Tuttle's derision at De Morgan's unmarried and childfree state, as well as her career as a writer, is

undermined by her dawning realisation that her own autonomy is limited and her marriage is loveless.

The dramatization of 'The Hair Tree' also subverts Lady Tuttle's stiff, upper-class social mores. In this secondary narrative, De Morgan plays Rupert, a young man tasked by a hairless queen with finding seeds from the magical 'Hair Tree'. Campbell transforms into the tigress of the play's title, who is actually a princess named Trevina. She was turned into a tigress as punishment for evading an arranged marriage. Trevina can only escape this form by being beaten until she bleeds,. Although Rupert expresses his disgust at this, he eventually complies. The sound effect of whipping in the play effectively conveys the gruesome violence of this scene, but also exposes the latent horror of the fairy tale tradition itself, with an emphasis on grotesque bodily transformation and mutilation found in tales such as the Grimms' 'The Girl Without Hands' (also known as 'The Armless Maiden') (1812) and 'The Juniper Tree' (1812).

Several of the tales in the decadent fairy tale tradition also depict violence. However, the examination of marriage as a form of entrapment and the depiction of male violence in 'The Hair Tree' in particular may be informed by De Morgan's vision of emancipated womanhood and social reform. Campbell portrays Trevina as a character full of verve, intensity, and desperation, conveying the tiger's feral unpredictability through spine ripples, roaring, and tossing her hair. Through the metaphor of the tigress, the audience sees the societal threat posed by the liberated, transgressive 'New Woman' and suffragette who is given a wild embodiment. Trevina is an excellent foil to Lady Tuttle's *sang froid*, and we see Lady Tuttle's rigidity begin to loosen as the two women form a tentative truce.

In the second act of 'The Vegan Tigress', the truce between Lady Tuttle and De Morgan softens into moments of bittersweet tenderness. Despite De Morgan's protestations of independence, Lady Tuttle cares for her through her worsening attacks of tuberculosis and begins to question the truth of her own place in society. In one particularly compassionate scene, De Morgan brushes Lady Tuttle's hair in an echo of the Queen's yearning for hair in 'The Hair Tree'.

This parallel is clear; however, Parker's arresting performance as a frail yet determined De Morgan serves to emphasise the economic vulnerability and hardship often experienced by women writers of that era, as well as the genuine physical danger posed by diseases such as tuberculosis. For both Lady Tuttle and the Queen, hair is a symbol of respectable femininity and beauty. However, in 'The Hair Tree', hair is subverted into signifiers of magic and wildness. This is conveyed through the play's inventive use of shimmering gold ribbons, which evoke the feminine accoutrements enjoyed by Lady Tuttle and the ribbons used by the WSPU, one of De Morgan's favoured causes. Despite this growing bond, however, we still see Lady Tuttle questioning and challenging De Morgan's fairy tales, searching for aspects of conventionality and, in her own words, 'resolution'. She is frustrated by De Morgan's response that sometimes the stories simply 'write themselves'. Yet these fairy tales provide Lady Tuttle with an escape from the exhaustion and ennui of her ghostly afterlife and enable her to recognise the emancipation and transgression afforded by the fairy tale tradition. At the same time, the romantic union between Trevina and Rupert in 'The Hair Tree' leads her to the painful realisation of her own marital sacrifice and her troubled relationship with her son. Nevertheless, the enchantment of 'The Hair Tree' speaks to the enduring magic of the fairy tale tradition, and the alluring power of the unknown – an element explored through De Morgan's decision to travel to Egypt despite her fragile health. The play concludes with this voyage, echoing how the real De Morgan died of tuberculosis in Cairo in 1907. In this way, *The Vegan Tigress* encourages us to reconsider the significance of early feminism and literary autonomy for women like De Morgan in a fresh, experimental and exuberant manner. It also invites us to explore how De Morgan's work illustrates this call for emancipation through the lens of the fairy tale.