

Kids' Theatre On The Fringe: 2008

Forcing house for young talent or graveyard of reputations? Risking money on a showcase in Edinburgh is something very few RFO's would do today. 89 shows are listed in the 'Children's Shows' pages of the 2008 Fringe brochure. Apart from locally based **Puppet State**, with the superbly entertaining *The Man Who Planted Trees*, there are a few well-established companies, like **Widdershins** or **Tall Stories**, with their much loved *Gruffalo*, which have such a sound reputation that they can be assured of both a strong following and – one assumes – reasonable financial returns.

Many student, amateur and youth theatre groups offer a kids' show alongside the show they really want to do, a morning warm-up before an afternoon of flyering and an evening of the real thing. My focus this year was on companies that demonstrate through their websites that they offer a year round service of professional theatre related work for schools and other venues.

Science Wins

There were about a dozen qualifiers and I managed to see nine. Mind you, I am counting in the delightfully wacky and accurately pitched [Visualise:Reloaded](#). This is science made simple through witty demonstrations of tricks with light, shadows and sound, such as use of video recording and microscopy to observe common objects, like your tongue. It is all dressed up as a magic show by a rather incompetent ageing rocker and his long suffering wife in the role of reluctant glamorous assistant. If I were a teacher, of which there were clearly many in the packed venue, I would book this show in preference to most of the performances aspiring to be plays. There was a lot more interesting and engaging content and it was light hearted without resorting to too much gratuitous low comedy. Even the compulsory fart gag is a projection of the frequency of sound vibrations under slow motion film of lips delivering a deeply resonant raspberry!

Real Plays

The best examples of real, original plays were *Heartbreak Soup* by Laura Lindow, long time associate with Newcastle based **Monster Productions**, and **Scamp's** production of a Bristol Old Vic adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's *Mozart Question*. The latter is a carefully crafted monologue for a middle-aged actor who can play the violin well enough to convince you that he is a professional. With the heavily reviewed *The Factory* there seems in 2008 to be a time window on the horrors of the Shoah, viewed through the lens of passing generations. As most of those who survived the Holocaust are coming to the end of their lives, they are perhaps only now able to talk with their children and grandchildren about their suffering – and the terrible guilt felt by survivors.

While, by all reports, *The Factory* presents Auschwitz as a scene of relentless and open violence and thus alienates the viewer, distorting the bitter reality of passivity and self-deception in the face of overwhelming, organised cruelty, *The Mozart Question* looks betrayal bravely in the face and is immensely moving. A musician in his fifties recalls discovering that his parents played in the infamous orchestra that played to soothe the nerves of those selected for the gas chambers on arrival.

Having promised he would never play Mozart while his father was alive, the violinist will, like Barenboim playing Wagner in Israel, assert the power of great music and art to endure beyond a particular moment in history and to keep people alive in body and spirit, now his father's generation has passed on. To people who make art for children,

the play is also an implied challenge to tell the whole truth, be servants of children and not the State, to question every compromise between children's needs and ours.

At the prestigious Assembly Rooms, the audience was more adult than youthful and I would not rate the adaptation as accessible beyond a quite narrow range of children of the educated middle class, despite the overall excellence and discretion of the production. But hey, rich kids need good theatre too.

[Heartbreak Soup](#) by contrast, brings a blast of fresh North East working class wit to bear on a similar subject of life with death, sacrifice and unfair suffering. Laura Lindow has worked as a Clown Doctor in a children's hospital and been inspired to write an excellent play about a fantasy relationship between two boys – one of whom will soon receive the heart of the other in a transplant operation. In structure the play resembles ***Matty and Sis*** by Dutch writer Theo Franz. In both plays, one living and one dead child play out scenes from their real or imagined lives, looking for clues to help them understand the realities of life and death.

What makes ***Heartbreak Soup*** fly is the skill, control and discretion of the director and actors in keeping us delighted and attentive, aware and sympathetic, but still able to think how we might behave in such circumstances. Chris Price as the Pink Boy, killed by a car, is a strapping six footer but he has a speed and lightness of touch with small asides and details of childlike movement that avoids all taint of mimicry. The set is a hospital bed with inset drawers and cupboards for key objects and moments in a child's life – some of them uncomfortable feelings or painful aural memories. Lindow deftly switches the focus between fantasy dream sequences in which the Blue Boy can do anything and reality moments when the adult actor before us struggles to lift something we know is light and climbs painfully and slowly into a bed that is only inches too high for him. Both actors address the audience with openness and equality, showing restraint in a fluid and sometimes breakneck performance.

As a model of open and honest theatre for children, delivered by adult actors who play children with clarity, integrity and respect, ***Heartbreak Soup*** is a gem and should win prizes.

Best Of The Rest

Theatre de Complicite have many imitators in children's theatre – at least four of the other shows I saw use physical theatre approaches to storytelling, which derive from the Meyerhold -Laban- Grotowski-LeCoq-Gaulier tradition. **Gomito**, **En Masse** and **Brief Candle** offer highly competent delivery and vivid imagery. Journeys to Bali, India and Japan in the 1960's by the charismatic founders of Welfare State, Odin Theatre, Footsbarn and others reinforced earlier discoveries of the power of puppets, dance, colourful fabrics and natural materials to create a language of images which evoke instinctual responses and stir the subconscious mind. Given the broad range of abilities and intelligences in a school audience – so unlike the self-selecting audience for most theatre performances – it makes good sense to address all the senses.

The problem comes when such a wide spectrum of visual, aural, cognitive and sensual assaults on the viewer are used without full recognition of the impact of each powerful language. In such richly furnished shows the form becomes the message. The story or theme can be masked by the presentation. At worst the images can contradict the aim of the show.

En Masse in *We All Fall Down* built a complex story around the well known incident during the Plague of 1665 when Eyam closed itself off from neighbouring villages to stop the epidemic spreading. After three days, all I can remember of this shaggy dog story of a show is the initial framing device and a couple of images. For some reason, the company of six present themselves to us as strolling players with strong stage-Irish accents. An infuriatingly persistent questioning schoolboy, under instruction from a local Wise Woman, descends into Hell to find a Doctor – named Parachute? Paralytic? Paracelsus? - you get the kind of verbal wit - to cure the inhabitants of another village, which we eventually learn is the one which leaves food for the Eyam people.

As an image of a difficult escape from Hell, a staircase of chairs is held up. Another actress represents a spine-chilling Devil, switching her voice between the twee tones of a stage-child to those of a threatening mature woman. All impressively done. But what did the show really mean to say about faith, fortitude, sacrifice or superstition? Sadly, the Fringe sketch show ethos seemed to have leaked back into the kids' show slot. Enormous amounts of individual talent, wit and skill in evidence. Five years hard work together. Who is it really for?

Commitment

Gomito are a much younger ensemble, six energetic and intelligent people again, less well drilled than **En Masse**, more interested in rough puppetry as the lead artistic form, thinner voices, faces daubed inexplicably with random smudges. Best image; a composite giant made from a carpet flung over an actor bent double, with floating head and big hands. They have learnt about Poor Theatre but are perhaps too well fed to do it for real. They are brave enough to use a large electric fan and a smoke machine in full view but are not sure of the tone of their text for an audience beyond their evidently privileged social class. If they study the younger Koreans or Japanese companies carefully for lessons in the value of precision in physical performance and respect for objects, their natural energy and ability may help them develop an individual and coherent style. But their version of *The Sun Dragon* does not fully satisfy.

Brief Candle is a company led by an artistic director, who hires good younger performers and has earned their respect to the point that they will readily return to earn very little for the chance to perform in the Fringe showcase arena. *No Place for Dreams* is a rather mechanical script, which thumps home a message about having an independent mind and rejecting the accepted superstitions and racist convictions of your community. Rather reminiscent of David Holman's once ever present *Peacemaker*, this play invites us to deride the belief of the Earth, Air, Fire and Water castes that contact with the other groups means death and the Volcano God is only to be placated by submission to the Rule of separation. In this play, when young people from each caste meet accidentally or through perverse curiosity, they instantly unite in rebellion. And are punished severely for it. Each then uses the skills of their caste to rescue the others. A paradox.

This naive theme is well crafted, with strong moments of challenge and danger, well played by capable and confident performers. Once they had settled into the show after an over-enthusiastic welcome, the clarity of the text, characters and direction made the experience safe, warm and inclusive. The overall impression is less confusing, fizzy and clever than with **En Masse**, but a bit too worthy and instructional to be genuinely celebratory of children's natural irreverence and curiosity and also not respectful enough of their natural loyalty to family and cultural tradition. Children need to believe and be included as much as to be free to dream and invent new worlds. So do we all.

To my mind, continuing popular support for tyrannical regimes of all kinds proves this conclusively.

Bad News

Of two out of the remaining three shows I will write nothing for fear of litigation. Suffice it to record disappointment with home-made costumes, lack of skill, poor dramaturgy and an arrogance which prevents recognition of one's own weaknesses and the strengths of others. That such companies are allowed to sell their work into schools without official or peer regulation remains a disgrace.

[Forbidden Theatre's](#) *Mrs Wobble the Waitress and Friends* is a brave attempt to make entertaining storytelling theatre out of the very slight stories about Mrs Wobble, Mr Biff the Boxer and Mrs Plug the Plumber. Four good actors work hard and obviously like their audience. They were under-rehearsed and had not found a confident original style for engaging with stories which are so well known. Fringe conditions make it almost impossible to have a real set but the choice of a few two-dimensional props and tuneful music demonstrate the company's care for the visual aspects of a production. They are simply under-resourced.

Good News

I also saw **Footsbarn's** extravagant *Dream* in their packed big top on Calton Hill and so paid my respects to a pioneering troupe, which knows so much about engaging audiences of every kind that every aspiring young company should be forced to learn from them.

Mortal Engine set high benchmarks in the use of advanced theatre lighting and sound technology while **Scottish Dance Theatre** remind us how hard the body must be trained to be both fluid and precise and how important it is for audience satisfaction to have bold and clear choreography, dramaturgy and direction.

My final experience this year was the **National Theatre of Scotland** in **365**. On a huge stage a cast of 14 young actors, professionally trained or experienced in TV, played out the lives of young people leaving care. The theatrical gestures are bold, the settings are in the style of Central European expressionism, there are dance sequences and moving monologues. The old Soviet children's theatres regularly did this kind of show. Take a group of 'problem' kids, select an 'issue' and dissect it through short scenes and interviews. **365** is threaded together with voice-over recitations from the official handbook for young people leaving care, which advises on everything from the danger of electricity to the number of guests it is safe to have in your flat at one time.

It is well done. The facts are harrowing. The actors look so disturbingly right for the parts that we are on the edge of voyeurism. As with all 'issue based' theatre for young audiences, my questions are; 'Who benefits from seeing this show?' and 'Will anything change now?' One thing is clear. The **National Theatre of Scotland** regularly makes theatre both about and for children and young people – unlike the **RNT** in England. By investing substantially in [Imagine](#) as well, Scotland gives substance to the recognition that young people are as much a part of society as adults and deserve theatre and the arts of the highest quality. Just what the UK signed up to in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Paul Harman. Edinburgh, August 2008