

## » Theatre

# Festival highlights puppetry is no longer just for children

## Art form comes of age with cutting edge adult productions

by Bridget Galton

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Until Joey the life-sized horse graced the National Theatre's stage, few childless adults would be caught dead at a puppet show.

But the galloping success of *War Horse* and spectacular use of puppetry in work ranging from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *A Season in the Congo* has done much to open the art form to new audiences.

Islington's Little Angel Theatre, which for decades ploughed a lonely furrow in British puppetry, founded the Suspense Festival back in 2009 to trade on this newfound enthusiasm for these inanimate, but expressive performers.

The bi-annual event, running this season from tomorrow (Friday) to November 3, programmes cutting edge adult puppetry across a dozen venues including Jacksons Lane, Highgate; the Puppet Barge, Little Venice and the New Diorama, Marylebone.

### Magical

The Little Angel's *Macbeth* is directed by the theatre's outgoing artistic director Peter Glanville, with puppets by co-founder Lyndie Wright and stars Nathaniel Parker and Helen McCrory as the murderous Macbeths on the show's soundtrack.

Chris Wootton, Little Angel's operations manager, says Suspense's range of highly-skilled, challenging work fulfils their mission to prove that puppetry is a sophisticated art form – and explode the myth that it's just for kids.

*War Horse* helped the profile of puppetry and it's now more and more in vogue, in both fringe and bigger productions. We have



■ A scene from *Macbeth* which translates Shakespeare's macabre tale to the realm of birds

been at the forefront of the craft for 50 years and are always building on our contact with artists, professional development and bringing in new audiences."

Wootton describes puppetry as "like a magic show" using precise lighting and manipulation of characters to direct the audience's attention to a storyline, while preparing a puppet for the next.

"There's something magical about the way you invest in a puppet story, you make that leap of imagination and forget there are no actors on stage. It's like looking at a gloriously illustrated 3D storybook. You can create beautiful, poetic stage images."

The 90-minute *Macbeth* translates Shakespeare's macabre tale to the realm of birds, a feat unimaginable in conventional theatre.

"There's a lot of bird imagery in the text and this puts you into a fantastical imaginary world that allows



■ Puppeteers Donald Sumpter, Helen McCrory and Nathaniel Parker

you to throw out any expectations you might have watching Shakespeare and focus on the raw emotions of the story.

"It's a major technical operation to time the movements to the words coming out of the speakers and the original music soundtrack."

The festival includes productions on many subjects. Lynnette Shanbury, Little Angel's executive director, says: "There are some really

strong themes, some shows that wouldn't look out of place at the London Mime Festival, shocking, provocative scenes and atmospheric and funny work that shows puppetry is crossing over into different art forms.

"It's quite clear there's no stigma attached to puppetry any more."

■ For productions, venues and bookings, go to [www.suspensefestival.com](http://www.suspensefestival.com).



■ A scene poking fun at Agatha Christie

## Crime does pay in this silly, but inventive comedy sketch

**PEOPLE SHOW 121:  
THE DETECTIVE SHOW  
Old Red Lion  
70 mins**

★★★★☆

People Show is Britain's longest surviving alternative theatre company, debuting in 1966, and the joy of their 121st outing is its unabashed, old-fashioned entertainment.

This zany lampooning of the whodunit takes pot shots at everything from Agatha Christie and *Taggart* to *Prime Suspect* and even *Cluedo*, and if some gags miss the mark, there are still more than enough in this packed 70-minute sketch show to satisfy.

The comic layering offers two options: if you tire of the music hall farce, with its mime, slapstick and daft disguises, there's also a barbed post-modern thread, as Gareth Brierley's unctuous narrator breaks the fourth wall to reveal backstage tensions and deconstruct theatrical conventions.

If you ever wondered about the gulf between programme notes and the actual content of a play, he has the answer.

There's stellar support from founding member Mark Long, who gifts us a waiter more stereotypically Italian than Bruno Tonioli, and Fiona Creese, strong as both the voice of reason and an idiosyncratic take on *Poirot*, while director Jessica Worral keeps the unwieldy train on the tracks.

However, the company's combination of devised physical work and meta humour isn't as radical as it once was, with mainstream hits like *One Man, Two Gwnors* and *The 39 Steps* in the West End and Charlie Brooker's sharp pastiche *A Touch of Cloth*. Where People Show suffers by comparison is lack of specificity and the indecision as to whether these storytelling tropes are useful in engaging an audience or mere objects of ridicule.

Still, where else can you see a *Monty Python*-esque seagull salad, plot twist involving Hitler's condom and a perfect 10-second skewering of Bob Dylan?

This is a great reminder that theatre can be inventive, inclusive and above all fun. Until November 2.

Marianka Swain

## Unlikely pairing continue their career revival on the stage

**SPAMALOT  
Playhouse Theatre**

★★★★☆

As one of the more unlikely comedy pairings in the business, there was a lot of intrigue when Les Dennis and Warwick Davis signed up for *Spamalot*.

Having both undergone unlikely career revivals through the television ventures of Ricky Gervais, there seems to be a rekindled joviality in the former particularly and the result is a light-hearted and hugely entertaining performance.

Playing the lead character of King Arthur, the story sees Dennis set out to find the Holy Grail with his trusty sidekick Patsy (Davis) in a rough tribute to one of Monty Python's most famous films.

Alongside Bonnie Langford – who perfectly satirises diva culture as the Lady of the Lake – the pair slot in well with a seasoned cast all too happy to send up their guest leads on stage.

Dennis for example is the butt of more than one Family Fortunes reference, while Davis's size adds a physicality to the plight of poor Patsy that is so fitting it's hard to imagine anyone else playing

him. Unfortunately the latter's run came to an end last week, but it should be of no detriment to the production.

For at its core is the genius of Monty Python that has the potential to not just entertain dedicated fans, but relatively casual ones such as myself.

Whether you're laughing at their classic sketches for the first time or eagerly waiting for the punch lines you know and love, it'd take ribs of steel to stop sides splitting in *Spamalot*. And for a short but packed silly comedy on a cold winter's night, isn't that all that you really care about?

Alex Bellotti



■ Warwick Davis, Les Dennis and Bonnie Langford in *Spamalot*