

Les Antliaclastes: Here Lies Shakespeare



"Good friend, for Jesus' sake forebeare, To digg the dust enclosed heare; Bleste be the man that spares thes stones, And curst be he that moves my bones."

Inscription on the tombstone of William Shakespeare

Photo: Jean-Pierre Estournet

Shakespeare's epitaph is a record set in stone that grave-robbers have ever been a nuisance historically, as I was reminded the other day watching period drama "Taboo". In the opening episode gravediggers ask for extra money from relatives of a deceased gentleman as payment to inter the body deeper in the ground as a safety precaution. It is a series set in the early 19th Century, at a time of bitter dispute over boundaries between Great Britain and the United States. A few decades later, American humorist Mark Twain would enter into another turf war in "Is Shakespeare Dead?" asserting through a number of compelling arguments that the Stratford Shakespeare did not write the literary canon ascribed to him and that the awkward words on the tombstone comprise the only poem with which he can genuinely be credited. Talk about digging up the dirt in sacrosanct ground. Taboo indeed! I caught up with Twain's short semi-autobiographical work, after learning that **Les Antliaclastes**, a puppet company based in France, took it as the point de départ for their show **Here lies Shakespeare**, part of **London International Mime Festival**.

The show came onto my radar just before Christmas thanks to a chance conversation with Thomas, the brother of one of the puppeteers, while we were watching our daughters take a tumble again, and again, down the bouncy slide at Aircraft Circus Winter Festival ([post on the Aircraft Circus - click here](#)). I live for those moments of random connections that lead you down a path you wouldn't have happened on otherwise, for while I am a regular at Jacksons Lane, and well aware of the diversity of their programming, I struggle to keep up with all the circus-related happenings they have there, let alone check out any of their other delights.



Photo: Jean-Pierre Estournet

Still, this time I made an exception, and I was rewarded with one of the most triumphantly creative, fantastically surreal and exquisitely crafted, challenging shows I have ever seen. The structure paid homage to Shakespearean plays in terms of having a Prologue, three acts and an Epilogue, based on themes rather than a linear narrative. In texture it had the feel of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the mix of oneiric images and scatological humour, think Ariel meets Bottom, with cameos from Yorrick, and Hamlet's gravediggers. "Wondrous strange" pretty much covers it, by turns irreverent, cynical and moving.

I was in awe of the craftsmanship of the puppets, and the special effects that gave the piece a cinematic aesthetic. I was not surprised to find out later that Artistic Director Patrick Sims came to puppets via studies in film and animation, as the influence was clear. I fell in love with the exquisite warrior Pallas Athena, and the fish revealed to be a mermaid, experienced a fascinated revulsion at the carrion birds in Elizabethan dress, goggled at the squid and was impressed by the verisimilitude and dignity of Karloff's Frankenstein's monster. I was mesmerised by the concept and depiction of a wormhole where a filament snaked out through strobe lighting, and marvelled at the sheer ingenuity of a set full of surprises that shrunk in half the space at Jacksons Lane and caused me to lose all sense of perspective. The soundscape too was clever, ranging from extracts of familiar Shakespeare speeches and narratives on the (his)story of Shakespearean idolatry to experimental electronic Elizabethan music that gave it an other-worldly feel.



Photo via Steph Broachie's Instagram @thescruffian

In the Prologue an alien skeleton rooted around an excavation site digging up bones and potatoes. Simple movement fascinated me, the way the skeleton could lift up a potato for instance, or the way he scuttled across the dirt, gollum-like. The humble potato was a recurring theme. It was obviously a nod to the arrival of the potato on the scene in Elizabethan times, spoils of the New World, an emblem of the past, that was then set into a time capsule and launched into the future, along with Shakespeare's works. As a satellite transmitted Shakespeare's words out into the universe, I was struck by how the signifier "Shakespeare" is so important to the story humanity tells about itself, holding his works up as proof of our civilisation, broadcast to all and any alien nations willing to listen. But **Here lies Shakespeare** begged the question: have we created a monster? We met a giant with a sackcloth over his head, reciting an emotive discourse from *The Elephant Man*, whose deformity was revealed to be an oversized potato for a head. Uncovering that was both funny and strangely moving. Could Mr Potato Head just as well have written the sonnets? The theme of alienation continued when a pint-sized potato-head sang "Are you lonely tonight?" before reciting Jacques' soliloquy "All the world's a stage..." from *As You Like It*. [Citing that same speech, how could the author of such eternally beautiful words have so prosaic a tombstone, argued Twain].



Photo: Marc Mandril-Ferrario

Later Frankenstein's Monster, impossibly dwarfing the space, took tea in front of a doll's house of a replica Stratford-on-Avon, with a doll in Elizabethan dress that was revealed to be a monkey once the mask was lifted, tail peeping out from under its skirts.

It was a world where nothing was quite what it seemed. Stratford-on-Avon was not so much a real town as a monument to consumerism, drowning us in an endless cycle of commercialised shit: my stomach turned as Shakespeare's corpse was put through a mincer and squelched into sausages, and when the back end of a cow crapped almost interminably on a merry-go-round of tiny shopping trolleys, rounded off with a few sulphuric puffing farts. Sir Toby Belched, I thought. The theme of pollution was continued later in a beautiful scene conjuring up an underwater realm where a Beast rescued a Beauty of a fish-cum-mermaid floundering in netting and all manner of rubbish. It was poignant and ephemeral.

Most eloquent was a tableau vivant where Shakespeare's portrait appeared to be writing. But who was pulling the strings? A Stratford swan peered over his shoulder, nabbed the quill and carried on writing until the text wrote itself, while potatoes rained down from the gods, like some *tuberosum ex machina*. In the final act, we were back at the excavation site, via an ingenious shadow play, to see the unearthing of another colossal dinosaur, a reference to Twain's observation that piecing together Shakespeare's life was like reconstructing a dinosaur with a few bits of bones and plaster. The fraud of

a brontosaurus, that was really an apatosaurus with the wrong head on, was here given Shakespeare's head to drive the point home, and wreaked all sorts of havoc. It struck me then that **Les Antliaclasses** have something of Monty Python about them. *That Stratford player, Guillem Shakespear, he's not the Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy...*

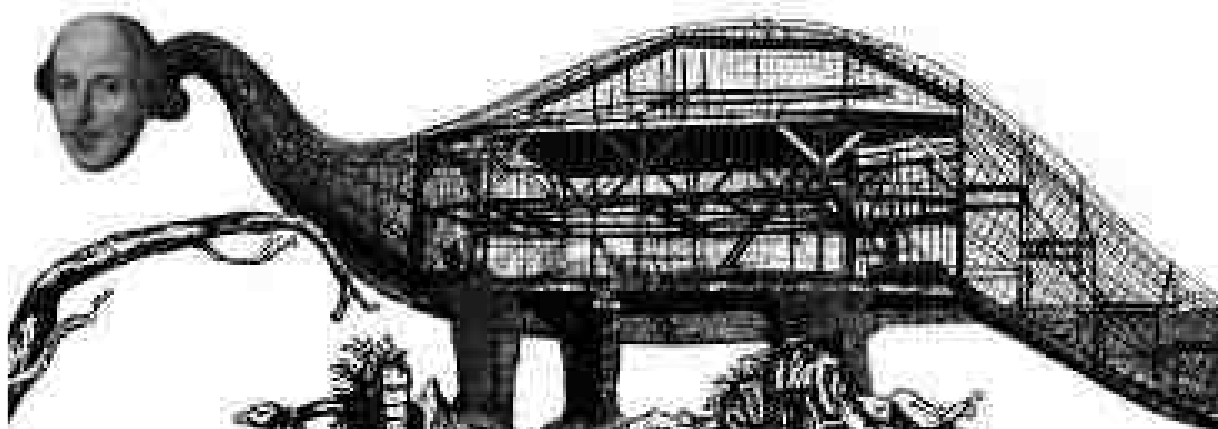


Image: Centre Culturel Yves Fuert www.ccyf.fr

Epilogue

Thanks to **Les Antliaclasses**, my son and I have been enjoying Mark Twain on Audible together (next stop Huckleberry Finn!). It did feel rather like sharing the news that Father Christmas doesn't exist, even if *Horrible Histories* had already paved the way, but the humour softened the blow and it gave us plenty to talk about. My son observed afterwards: "The thing is Mum, I know Mark Twain is probably right, but I'm still rooting for Shakespeare." Me too. I'm a romantic, you see, and the myth of Shakespeare is my type of humbug. And yet despite my resistance to the fact that the Stratford Shakespeare was a ham actor who's no Bacon, I found **Here lies Shakespeare** to be a darkly beautiful, carnal, vibrant testimony to Shakespeare's legacy, all the more so for being a provocative one.

[Here Lies Shakespeare](#). from [Mandrill](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Here lies Shakespeare

Patrick Sims: Direction, design, puppets, performer
Josephine Biereye: Masks, costumes, puppets
Richard Penny: Design, puppets, performer
Puppets and masks: Josephine Biereye and Patrick Sims
Camille Lamy: Costumes
Oriol Vilodomi & Karinne Dumont: Sound creation, design
Nicolas Hubert: Design, performer
Jesse Philip Watson: Design, performer
Raül Berrueco: Video creation
Olivier Francfort & Sophie Barraud: Lighting creation
Sophie Barraud: Stage management

With: Patrick Sims, Richard Penny, Nicolas Hubert, Evandro Serodio