

Lucy Loves Circus

Chapter 172: Les Antliaclastes: Here Lies Shakespeare

<http://lucylovescircus.blogspot.fr/2017/01/chapter-172-les-antliaclastes-here-lies.html>

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. 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.

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.

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].

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 Antliaclastes** have something of Monty Python about them. *That Stratford player, Guillem Shakespear, he's not the Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy...*

Epilogue

Thanks to **Les Antliaclastes**, 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.

Exeunt

Review: Here Lies Shakespeare at Jacksons Lane

Jacksons Lane ♦ 11 - 15 January 2017

<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-lies-shakespeare-jacksons-lane/>

The Bard meets Mr Potatohead: Sally Hales reviews Les Antliaclasses' dissection of the Shakespeare industry.

It's an image I don't think I'll ever unsee: a puppet cow shits prolifically onto a merry-go-round of tiny shopping trollies a while a grotesque puppet hybrid of Elizabeth I and some kind of goat-monkey thing dances a jig on its back. It's part of a scene that takes place around halfway through Les Antliaclasses's *Here Lies Shakespeare*, performed at Jackson's Lane as part of the London International Mime Festival. And, by this point, it's pretty clear that the makers of this show, led by director, puppeteer and performer Patrick Sims, don't think much of the Shakespeare industry.

Based on Mark Twain's *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, in which the American satirist seems to espouse the argument that Shakespeare was not the author of the plays attributed to him, the show takes some of Twain's arguments (the absence of biography of Will-the-man and the surfeit of legal knowledge found in the work are among them) and, as with the original, uses them to interrogate the present. Our desire to 'know' and 'solve' Shakespeare-the-man, even if that means uprooting him and replanting someone else there altogether, is an act of attempted possession redolent of the project of capitalism. And, before you know it, you've got the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, instead of a direct relationship with the plays. Can't really argue with that.

The prologue takes place in a half-circle in front of the tiny stage, where an alien puppet skeleton collects potatoes as a makeshift satellite beams Shakespeare's words out into the ether. This seemingly random beginning is fleshed out through the next three 'short stories' and the epilogue: potatoes become an extended metaphor for the flawed Shakespeare project, as the bard's image (but not his work) is found polluting the oceans, buried in the

earth and filling the airways. But is he there? We dig for answers, but there are only potatoes: the man himself is forever elusive. At various points, his excavated skeleton is exposed only to be revealed as made of the humble root vegetable. There's a toy Mr Potatohead, followed by an enormous man with an actual potatohead, and another tiny potatohead sings *Are you Lonesome Tonight* complete with Jacques's famous soliloquy from *As You Like It*: 'All the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.' Shakespeare's parts, it seems, are all made from potatoes. Surreal doesn't really start to cover it.

And that's just a small part of the onslaught of images that probe our Shakespearean misadventures: Frankenstein takes tea from a Union Jack china service in Stratford with a doll that changes face to reveal a monkey, while a skeletal turkey (?) with Shakespeare's head sits atop a Globe Theatre itself topped with a till, happily ringing up money as a parade of tiny trollies pass by. You get the message.

The stunning staging plays with perspective and merges performance, puppetry and humour – at times, it's laugh-out-loud funny – with effortless ease. The technical virtuosity on display often defies comprehension. But, structurally, it feels a little like a one-trick pony: the same message being driven home through several, albeit entertaining scenarios, with little sense of narrative drive. The strongest scenes pass early on. An underwater section featuring an erstwhile Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, a fish-mermaid and lots of marine rubbish flounders, and the concentration wanders. Mind you, if you're still tamping about Emma Rice (and aren't we all?), this will fill your anger tank to overflowing, and is well worth it for that reason alone.

Theatre Bubble

Mime Fest: Here Lies Shakespeare at Jacksons Lane

<http://www.theatrebubble.com/2017/01/here-lies-shakespeare-london-mime-festival/>

Freely adapted from *Is Shakespeare Dead?* by Mark Twain, Les Antliaclasses' *Here Lies Shakespeare* bills itself as a comic tragedy comprising prologue, three short satirical stories, and an epilogue, based on themes surrounding the continually raging Shakespeare authorship debate. Which was interesting, as I for one didn't spot any of that. What I did see were some of the most beautiful puppets I've seen in years. The sheer craftsmanship of the puppets, set, props and overall design of the show was breathtaking. Like a beautifully animated film, you could have frozen any moment and it would have revealed an aesthetically stunning tableaux.

The show itself is difficult to describe, there was no narrative to speak of, just a series of dream like sequences loosely based around Shakespeare, but frequently veering into the completely surreal. The set was based around two deep holes. The first was horizontal, with

the stage screened off to create a tightly focused circular aperture through which we viewed most of the action. This tunnel-like space seemed to extend into infinity back stage, like a huge black hole. Yet within this playing space there was also a vertical hole leading down through mud and soil to create a space into, and out of, which various puppets could appear and descend: at various times conjuring images of an archaeological dig, an open grave or just a vegetable plot full of potatoes.

The puppets themselves were works of art. By far and away the high point of the show. Beautifully crafted from actual skeletons and animal parts, they looked both macabre and lifelike, grotesque and oh-so-real. Sadly the quality of the puppeteering didn't quite live up to the quality of the puppets themselves. It wasn't bad, but it lacked the precision we've become used to in London during the puppetry renaissance we've witnessed over the last decade. That said, the quality of the puppets, the visual design and the sound design together was strong enough to create a believable and immersive world of the show, which is half the battle won. My complain however, is that having created that world, they then didn't do anything with it.

I am going to go out on a limb here, I know a lot of my friends in continental theatre will and do disagree with me, but theatre is a narrative form. Its function is above all else to tell a story. Beautiful design, clever images, outstanding soundscapes and exquisite lighting are all fantastic, if and only if, they help move a story forwards. I am more than happy to sit and watch a beautiful image for a minute or so, but after 10 minutes, unless I've met a character I care about, whose journey I'm invested in, I'm bored. Drama is created by seeing a character we feel connected to, go through a situation that has the capacity to change them and therefore change us. Here Lies Shakespeare was a collection of beautiful tableaux and some clever ideas, but it never came close to being able to move me.

That isn't to say some of the tableaux weren't interesting. For me the stand out moment was seeing a headless decaying cadaver, nailed to a cross and hung with the lifelike head of Shakespeare, being worshipped by a dodo sitting on top of a model of the Globe theatre working a very busy cash register, while a huge cash cow is milked in the background surrounded by miniature shopping trollies; before the cow, in a moment of scatological delight, starts shitting on them copiously. Did I mention the show was quite surreal? But it was a beautiful visual metaphor for the Shakespeare industry and how it's the antithesis of creativity and art, as Emma Rice found out to her cost. But sadly, like the rest of the show, it was never anything more than that. A clever idea that failed to touch me on an emotional, human or physical level. Instead the show remained abstract, intellectual and ultimately dead.

I would recommend seeing *Here Lies Shakespeare*, if for no other reason than the beautiful design and puppet making that's on display. Ultimately, however, I couldn't help feeling that I spent 75minutes watching a collection of beautiful puppets, and the talented people who made them, staring into a big black hole hoping to find a purpose for them to be on stage.

The Stage

Here Lies Shakespeare review at Jacksons Lane, London – ‘technically dazzling’

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/lies-shakespeare-review-jacksons-lane-london/>

The skeleton puppet scrabbling in the dirt to unearth potatoes and bones during the prologue to *Here Lies Shakespeare* is a wry summary of its archaeological mission. Loosely based on Mark Twain's *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, this piece does not identify an alternative author of Shakespeare's plays and poetry. Rather, it examines his importance within our culture: does it matter that we know so little about him? And if he wasn't the author of these works, does it matter that we believe he was?

Projections, shadow-play and live puppetry are ingeniously combined as a dinosaur's bones are dug up. And with surreal, occasionally scatological humour, a ragtag team of Elizabethan-clad taxidermied creatures dusts off Stratford and turns it into a theme park with a dodo ringing up the till.

Arresting images allude to the writer's legacy throughout. Frankenstein's monster feeds Shakespeare's exhumed remains into the mincer as clack-jawed Mr Punch churns out sausages. While Shakespeare writes, multiple hands and a swan grab the quill in succession – until it starts to write by itself. Later, the inside of Shakespeare's head is revealed to be a toothy potato, which croons *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* into the void.

The eclectic soundtrack encompasses organic sounds, electronica, 16th-century choral music and the obligatory music-box Greensleeves. Voice-overs remind us of the history of the Shakespeare-veneration industry as well as snatches of his most famous lines.

Though highly accomplished, the puppetry occasionally proves too clever for its own good – strings are tangled in the same way as the narrative threads. Despite a rich web of reference, the action often dwells on tangential themes and loses focus. It's certainly thought-provoking, but by the end is our concept of Shakespeare any clearer?

Theatre Full Stop

<http://www.theatrefullstop.com/2017/01/14/here-lies-shakespeare-jacksons-lane-london-international-mime-festival-review/>

Here Lies Shakespeare @ Jacksons Lane (London International Mime Festival) Review

The new puppet theatre company, **Les Antliaclasses** is lead by **Patrick Sims**; former creative director of Buchinger's Boot Marionettes, and based in Maillet, France. The UK premier of ***Here Lies Shakespeare***, supported by **Institut Francais** and **Arts Council England**, is currently being shown at **Jacksons Lane Theatre** as part of the **London International Mime Festival**.

Here Lies Shakespeare is loosely based on *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, by Mark Twain. The cast of taxidermied animals tackles a gruesome debate via the excavation of Shakespeare's notability and urges the audience to speculate the beliefs, or frauds, in society.

The play begins with a Day of The Dead themed eclipse; through darkness, smoke and peculiar, clicking sounds, a small, alienesque skeleton, scuttles mesmerizingly across the stage. I am unsure whether we are on Earth or some unfamiliar planet. The puppeteer follows suit, dressed as a giant Grim Reaper, moving the skeleton with effortless flicks of the hand.

As a whole, the play is beautifully constructed by the vast talent of artists who made the masks, puppets, set and sound design. The music is strange, yet phenomenal as a central piece to the play; the audience will become captivated by the raw sounds, which is at once delicate, claustrophobic and organic.

The four male performers/ puppeteers succeed in a wordless and threatening grip of the puppets and audience. However not all skeletons seem to have their head in tact and this organic glitch crunches comedy into places where there shouldn't seem to be any room. With too many props for this narrative to chew I find myself lost at sea with a sea lion singing to seaweed while a giant lobster recites a monologue, barely audible above the sounds of the seascape.

The play is certainly thought provoking and has a very clear side toward the fraudulent Shakespeare debate. The potato head that buys a 'Plot of Ideas' is unveiled to be Shakespeare and there are some clever japes toward society, which will leave you questioning the nature of a belief.

With an ingenious amount of imagination and eccentric, although at times confusing, narrative, *Here Lies Shakespeare* is a show well worth seeing; if not for the obscure details, than for the dazzling skeletons in Elizabethan attire that will allure you.