

Waltz of the Hommelettes review – beware of the bunny

4 / 5 stars 4 out of 5 stars.

Barbican, London

Les Antliaclasses' puppet show is a bewitching ride through the dark side of fairytales with close attention to detail

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Wed 16 Jan 2019 11.21 GMT Last modified on Wed 16 Jan 2019 14.40 GMT



Mischief at its heart ... Waltz of the Hommelettes. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/Guardian

Darkly comic and absurdly charming, this wild gothic ride has mischief at its heart. The French company [Les Antliaclasses](#) demonstrate masterful puppetry as they loosely weave together The Elves, a trio of short stories collected by the [Brothers Grimm](#), in which beautifully grotesque creatures wreak havoc on humankind.

A brass clock cracks at the stroke of 13, unleashing the elves and goblins living within. Slithering and scrabbling through one fairytale to the next, the string puppets run rings around a trio of masked actors (Josephine Biereye, Richard Penny and Patrick Sims). This Grimm world has little logic – few characters have clear plot or purpose – but it's easy to forgive when chaos looks this good.

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Ever more secret compartments are revealed as time dismantles itself. Some surprises are sweet, some sour: in here, beer brewing in an eggshell; under there, a baby's face melting to a pile of bones. Each fragment of design is noteworthy: a delicate deer distracted by a butterfly, a skeletal winged elf nosing a trail of thread, a rabbit's antlers protruding behind its soft ears. Even the static objects are expressive, the oversized masks of a shoemaker and his wife deeply creased with concern.

The actors' performances are solid: a bird aches to hold her fearsome baby and a cocky rabbit pretends to bounce to match our expectations before waving it off as a ridiculous notion and slouching away. Much of the puppetry is done on an exquisitely minute scale and something as small as a newborn bird's shaky wing is bewitching. Director Patrick Sims' eye for the

tiniest detail allows each blink and bend to be executed with care. We become so attuned to the slightest leap or flutter of a puppet that when the actors regain our focus, it's almost jarring how strongly their bodies follow the rules of gravity.



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Puppetry on an exquisitely minute scale ... Waltz of the Hommelettes. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/Guardian

The tech is transformative too, as Sophie Barraud's delicate lighting design shivers across the set while Karine Dumont's soundscape draws us deeper down the rabbit hole. Les Antliaclasses are not just puppeteers but magicians, and like their stringy companions, they manage to manipulate time. This hour whizzes by.

- At the [Pit, Barbican, London](#), until 19 January. The [London International Mime festival](#) runs until 3 February.

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