



Bristol Feast

Five shows in two days in Bristol and Bath ought to reflect a richness of activity, variety and accomplishment characteristic of what the UK can do for young audiences in 2011. This is the second year in which a small group of – how shall we say- senior TYA citizens have enjoyed a winter busman's holiday break together. We stay in the same house, eat together, argue, agree, struggle to articulate our opinions, we look for patterns, trends, exchange gossip and love every minute.

In 2010 we saw Travelling Light's *Ali Baba* and *How Cold my Toes* at Bristol's Tobacco Factory, Kneehigh's *Hansel & Gretel* at Bristol Old Vic and *Around The World in 80 Days* at the egg in Bath.

This year we started at Bath with *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. While the small auditorium of the egg makes for a delightful theatregoing first experience and it's ingenious architecture is as good as any in the world in creating a warm and embracing welcome for children and their carers, this year's seasonal show did not match up. The egg is a converted cinema but the architects did a radical job in gutting the shell and inserting a multi-storey gem of a modern working space for theatre from the child scale toilets through a low ceilinged cafe, two level auditorium and top floor studios. Brilliant. The show felt like converted cinema with text and theatre clichés from the 1950's, lack of clarity in its overall vision and intentions, a carelessness or ignorance of child development stages and reception theory, lack of passion for the bizarre ideas hidden behind the characters and storytelling imagination of author Lewis Carroll, alias for Charles Dodgson the University lecturer, mathematician and photographer of young girls.

Not So Brillig

Passion for the material and a desire to make it clear for a new generation has to be your starting point to make a successful play for modern young audiences. Here the author and director colluded to avoid facing up to this primary responsibility – to reveal the meaning of the content. Instead they used the original material as a pretext for playing with many theatrical clichés and styles, as if a seasonal show must be all icing and no cake. One ten year old in front of me summed it up in a question to his teacher: “What is a brook?” In chess, I believe, that denotes the boundary between squares. But this child probably did not know a brook is a small stream or ditch either. This after Alice had spent an hour or

more jumping between squares and rows to move from scene to scene, character to new character. Simple words, concepts and turns of phrase for someone with a literary education at degree level. Impassable barriers for many kids today.

Several shows this year betrayed such gulfs between the worlds of writer and child. The classic symptoms of commercial pantomime and children's entertainment had infected their makers as surely as this year's version of the 'flu virus knocks out whole schools but comes back again a year or two later and we all just shrug our shoulders. It may not be a coincidence that some of us OAP's had a jab this winter and are protected – at least from an accepting complacency.

The actors are all competent, they sing and dance and can remember their lines and what silly costumes to wear or regional accents to adopt as scene follows scene. But sadly they do not show any commitment to a message, and the writer and director dictate how they switch effortlessly from one pastiche style to another, always with a smile lurking to indicate that this is all a jolly game of no consequence. For them it is a job. For the audience, brought by conscientious teachers – even a couple of school governors were present – it was an initiation into a mysterious freemasonry within which they are not expected to attain more than the most elementary level of understanding. “Keep Out!” said all the signs in the show, while the building said “Come In”. *Very Alice in Wonderland*.

Lessons Not Learned

Of *Pinocchio* at the trendy **Tobacco Factory** least said is soonest mended. They had the impeccable *Ali Baba* last year but appear to have learnt nothing from it.

Bristol Old Vic's *Swallows and Amazons* is a highly sophisticated, well resourced, imaginative recreation of yet another middle-class novel popular with today's OAP's. On reflection, the device of using all purpose actor-musicians to move scenery, manipulate junk puppets, play a lot of nice tunes for songs and play the odd extra part could be a tad fussy if not ruled with the rod of iron wielded by Tom Morris. Clever enough to avoid the problems with *Alice* at the egg.

My favourite show was *Boing!* a dance piece directed by Travelling Light regular Sally Cookson. The two male dancers Wilkie Branson and Joel Daniel (aka Champloo Dance) have a strong hip hop thread in their style but they are well trained and fully committed to creating work which really speaks to young children. After *How Cold My Toes* it seems that Jude Merrill brings to dance a secure element of theatrical storytelling, an understanding of what young children like and need with a rigorous selection and nurturing of artists who can deliver innovative and high quality productions. Experience will out!

Paul Harman was 70 in September.