

## Visions of Toy Soldiers, and War, Dance in Boys' Heads

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

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It is a slippery slope on which the wondrous events of "Spirit" occur. That's speaking literally. The tiny wooden stage for this funny, melancholy and altogether entrancing journey into a land of dreams, warfare and actorly neurosis, which opened last night at the New York Theater Workshop, is slanted to such an extreme degree that you would assume that rappelling gear would be required for anyone who appears on it.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times from left, Lee Simpson, Phelim McDermott and Guy Dartnell of Improbable scramble up and down the slanted stage like little boys.

Yet Guy Dartnell, Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson, the three actors who make up the cast of "Spirit," directed by Julian Crouch and Arlene Audergon of the London-based Improbable troupe, scramble up and down this perilously raked box with the heedless grace and alacrity of little boys playing king of the mountain. Occasionally, as boys will, they go crashing or tumbling downward, looking like soldiers who have just been shot. Then they often lie stock-still. And a feeling creeps in that what's happening isn't merely child's play.

"Spirit," scheduled to run here for four weeks, is poised on a perilous slope in ways other than the merely physical. Whimsy, of the dreaded variety associated with story theater and pantomime, threatens to rear its precious noggin as the cast animates little headless manikins, weighted burlap sacks and various forms of bread. Hovering also is the cloudy menace of the smugness that comes with improvisational performers annotating their own performances, while interjecting confessional snippets about their lives. And, really, isn't it dangerously arrogant to start by evoking Samuel Beckett's visions of human bodies in confinement?

But while they may flirt with obnoxiousness, the creators of "Spirit" are masters of balance, restoring sharpness and integrity to theatrical tools that in other hands have been blunted by overuse. Improbable, after all, is the company that summoned, in ways equally charming and haunting, the poltergeists of everyday life via household cellophane tape in "70 Hill Lane." And Mr. Crouch and Mr. McDermott are responsible for the self-implosion Victorian spook house called "Shockheaded Peter," seen Off Broadway last season.

"Spirit" is, as its title promises, the airiest of these exercises. This performance is set not in the bump-riddled night of "70 Hill Lane" and "Shockheaded Peter," but in a brighter, clearer realm of the imagination. Or so it seems at first. As Messrs. Dartnell, McDermott and Simpson wander in and out of a fragmented bedtime-storylike account of three brothers, bakers in a war-torn land, they gently probe recesses in our instinctive responses to images of battle and the masculine myths that exalt them.

For "Spirit" is all about boys and their toys: soldier dolls and model airplanes and plastic guns and jeeps. "Spirit" is also about actors and their tricks. And these two levels of play converge as the performers enact (with detours into autobiographical asides) the story of a young baker who went to war while his older brothers stayed home.

This all takes place on and in that raked box of a stage, a deceptively simple-looking construct with removable panels that allow the cast members to pop like chipmunks out of holes and sink back in like water down a drain. An entire town grows into being and then shrinks into nonexistence, with two-dimensional buildings that later turn into letters to be read aloud, missives from a world blown apart by bombs. (The design is by Mr. Crouch, Graeme Gilmour, Rob Thirtle and Helen Maguire; Colin Grenfell is responsible for exquisitely subtle lighting that seems to emanate from your own changes in mood.)

First seen pulling themselves awkwardly into view out of tight, square openings, the three actors initially bring to mind the haplessly tethered souls of Beckett's "Endgame" and "Happy Days." But while "Spirit" softly echoes the existential futility and gallows humor of those works, it is never as opaque or forbidding. Audiences who have enjoyed, say, "Blue Man Group" should feel perfectly happy at "Spirit," as its performers bring a corps of pliable puppets to life by endowing them with makeshift heads that include rolls, a baguette, a toy car and a pistol. Then there is the antic physics involved in turning that sloped stage into a bed, a testament to the visual possibilities of gunny sacks and a single sheet.

Anyone of open sensibilities, though, is bound to be more than just entertained. Slowly and unobtrusively, as the actors interject childhood memories of fathers who were veterans and visions of airplanes and funerals, the show puts death at center stage. This does not mean that the production loses its sense of humor.

VIDEO



On the contrary, the most impressive accomplishment of "Spirit" is its ability to blend so fluidly what's funny and what's unspeakably serious. Certain vignettes run you swiftly through an entire scale of emotions, like the one in which two of the brothers treat the inanimate body of the other as if it were a puppet. Comedians regularly trade on the blurred line between laughter and screams in an absurd world. But "Spirit" does so with a richer, more wrenching ambivalence than jokes ever allow.

I almost forgot to mention the fourth actor in this production, who fleetingly stole the spotlight when I saw the show. That was a blue-bottle fly, or I think it was. It was hard to identify it from the audience, but it definitely landed on the stage, inspiring much rumination and argument among the actors. There is no guarantee that this special guest star will be available on other nights.

But should a Gila monster drift off the streets and into the New York Theater Workshop (and stranger things happen in the East Village), I have no doubt that the actors in "Spirit" would embrace the creature and weave it seamlessly into the show's design. That's the level of creative confidence and suppleness at work here. Anyone who has yet to grasp that theater can go places no other art form can need only experience this transporting 90 minutes, in which flesh is truly made spirit.

## **Spirit**

By Improbable; created by Julian Crouch, Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson, Guy Dartnell and Arlene Audergon; directed by Mr. Crouch and Ms. Audergon; design realization, Mr. Crouch, Graeme Gilmour, Rob Thirtle and Helen Maguire; lighting by Colin Grenfell; sound by Andrew Paine; production management, Ms. Maguire; production associate, Ax Norman. Presented by New York Theater Workshop, 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200. Running through Oct. 9. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Guy Dartnell, Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson.