

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY  
18 MARCH 2001

**KATE BASSETT**

**My Fair Lady**  
*RNT Lyttlelton, London*

**The Walls**  
*RNT Cottlesloe, London*

**Spirit**  
*Royal Court Upstairs, London*

A transcendent night can be had at the Royal Court watching *Spirit*. This is the latest company-devised gem by Improbable, two of whose core members include Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch- the creative duo behind the flamboyant West End hit *Shockheaded Peter*. Whilst just as fantastically inventive, *Spirit* is a more intimate, quiet three-hander about brotherly love, productive and destructive impulses. It's quietly played out on a narrow, steep slope of wooden planks.

A naughtily grinning yet sad-eyed trio – the impish McDermott, chunky Guy Dartnell and lanky Lee Simpson – enact a folk tale about three village bakers whose fraternal fondness is disrupted by battles for supremacy. The youngest, a restless dreamer, becomes a fighter pilot, leaving his siblings to struggle with feelings of guilt and remorse.

The storytelling is inspired, flexible, funny and poignant. In one scene, centuries of civil war are played out by small, ghoulish rag puppets who batter and yell at each other with monstrous heads fashioned out of torn bread rolls. At another point, our threesome just keep gleefully sliding down the stage until that game transmutes into a danse macabre, a vision of humanity hurtling into a mass grave. The baker's tale is, meanwhile, framed within two tongue-in-cheek yet painfully autobiographical therapy sessions, where the trio confess to the artistic troubles they've had with one another. What's wonderful is that *Spirit*, co-directed by Crouch and Arlene Audergon – who's an expert in conflict resolution – was born out of a near-fatal bust –up of Improbable itself.

*'My Fair Lady': RNT Lyttlelton, SE1 ( 020 7 452 3000), booking to 30 June, 'The Walls': RNT Cottlesloe SE1 ( 020 74523000), booking to 11 April, 'Spirit': Royal Court Upstairs, SW1 ( 020 75655000) to 7 April.*

## THE ARTS THEATRE

### The eloquence of the unspoken

SPIRIT  
ROYAL COURT  
UPSTAIRS  
LONDON

WHO WOULD you want along-side you in a crisis, a baker or an actor? And if you needed someone to take your place in the conscription queue, would you choose a performer or a pastry-cook? Improbable Theatre provide a simple tale that – improbably enough- seeks to compare the quiet dignity of three baker brothers with the posturing needfulness of its own three players.

For their new chamber piece, co-directors Arlene Audergon and Julian Crouch have returned to simple roots. A precariously raked wooden slope sits in darkness. Three wooden hatches are slowly removed from below. Then, through these trapdoors, each barely shoulder-wide, squeeze the performers Guy Darnell, Phelim Mc Dermott and Lee Simpson. In unassuming mufti, they look languorously around, allowing the silence to mellow and then one of them asks, “Is that something reversing?”

Episodes like this, which punctuate the piece, have the relaxed immediacy of improvisation and the unhurried manipulation of our own tense expectations. But, from this quiet (and very funny) intro, the actors move carefully into a story of three brothers, all bakers, living in a country cursed by civil war. Ted is due to be conscripted, but Bob, his sprite-like younger brother, does a Sydney Carton and goes instead.

There are no costumes and no furniture – everything we see is conjured on this slatted wooden slope, the characters seen waist-up through the grid of trapdoors, diving back through the hatches or rolling down the slope. They’re three boys playing with toys: to create larger panoramas, they produce cardboard planes, silver guns or rubbery puppets. Propped on the edge of the stage, these then strut and shoot like macabre, headless, Action Men, then, with the simple addition of a round bread roll they become snap-jawed, bullying square-bashers.

But, the most macabre dummy is Bob himself. After bombing a town – cardboard cut-out skyscrapers sprout and then subside between the planks of the slope - his plane is shot down. Grasping his “corpse” with the same brutal nonchalance with which they worked the puppets, brothers Tom and Ted enact their own eagerly imagined stories of Bob’s survival, his escape and his last, suicidal battle to save himself. Darnell and Simpson work Mc Dermott’s body, turn his head, fire his pistol with boyish “tffs” and “pows”.

You won’t exactly get narrative from Improbable, but you just have to wait for these imagistic gems. The limp, life-less mannequin that Mc Dermott’s body becomes expresses everything that the brothers leave unsaid about loss- and about the need to keep someone’s spirit alive.

JONATHAN MYERSON

## TIME OUT



### **'Spirit'**

Royal Court Theatre Upstairs WE

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The title is telling: 'Spirit' finds Improbable distilling its magical ideas about theatre to their purest, most striking essence, their spirit. When the three performers – Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson and Guy Dartnell – shift from being in character to being themselves, it's to address their very purpose on stage. Their remarkable puppetry techniques are used on each other. They destroy their story so that they can continually rewrite the script.

There isn't much story: in a village in a country at war live three bakers, brothers; the eldest, Ted, gets called up to fight, but the youngest, Bob, goes in his place. With this act of self-sacrifice, Bob attempts to create his own life: before now, his movements, his thoughts, his dreams have been directed by his brothers. That's one of the most astonishing things about 'Spirit': the way McDermott, playing Bob, becomes a puppet, an object for Dartnell and Simpson to animate. His body is expertly, poignantly manipulated; so are the doughy dolls with buns for heads, comic soldiers in a warped version of 'Mortal Kombat'.

If conflict is the theme, so is resolution (Arlene Audergon, co-director with Julian Crouch, is a specialist in the field). When Bob bombs a city, Dartnell and Simpson rebuild it to describe its inhabitants. The trio row fiercely on stage, a reflection of the arguments that nearly split the company, but then slide down the sloping stage together, like happy children, friends. Dartnell movingly describes wearing one of his father's suits to his father's funeral. Life goes on.

'Spirit' isn't perfect: it could do with more narrative, there are humdrum scenes and long silences and the self-conscious commentary is heavy-handed. But for this thrillingly rambunctious company, perfection isn't the point: making people think, feel, laugh, frown, and sigh is. 'Spirit' does all of that. I hadn't expected to review it, so I bought a ticket a month ago; rather than sell it on, I'm looking forward to going again.

*Maddy Costa*

THEATRE

**Spirit**  
**Royal Court**

KNOWING in their bones that theatre is a living art, the members of Improbable Theatre are keen to play with and even spook its conventions. *Spirit*, the London-based company's latest work, is a mournful yet often comic act of the imagination that blurs the line between reality and fiction with charm and clarity.

Two of Improbable's key personnel were largely responsible for *Shockheaded Peter*, the deliciously grisly musical-comedy currently playing in the West End. *Spirit*, which opened a short run at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court last week, is a work of gentler invention, but equally vital.

It was devised by Guy Dartnell, Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson, along with co-directors Julian Crouch and Arlene Audergon. The latter a specialist in conflict resolution, helped the cast deal with obstacles that arose during their own creative process. Gradually the show grew into a metaphor for the bellicose instincts of the performers and the brothers they pretend to be on stage.

The trio play themselves and sibling bakers, the youngest of whom (McDermott), flies off to fight an unnamed, all-purpose war. They also function as storytellers and puppeteers, who manipulate objects and each other. They repeatedly drop the bakers' tale to pursue their own emotional lines as sometimes less than co-operative or mutually admiring colleagues.

The men's internal demons are manifest as doughy-looking, headless puppets afflicted with a massive capacity for brutality.

This is theatre that doesn't hand out its meanings on a plate. It is up to us to connect the dots that draw out the show's themes (masculine aggression, mortality, make-believe). The most macabre, beautiful and funny passage finds the "corpse" of McDermott treated like a puppet by his actor-brothers. Eventually he "wakes up" and, banishing the others holds himself hostage, threatening his own imaginary life.

Again Improbable demonstrates a genius for achieving sophisticated effects via simple means. The stage, beautifully lit by Colin Grenfell, is a handsome piece of steeply raked wood with pop-up trap doors. A large sheet and a few sandbags convert the slope into a bedroom. A small-scale city made of paper cut-outs slips up through slits in the wood. Then, in the subtlest suggestion of wartime devastation, this instant civilization falls back through the cracks.

Improvisations that open and close the show- essentially relaxed bits of quasi-therapeutic true confession- risk waxing too lax. Still the three actors generate a load of goodwill as people who share a palpable history on and off stage and a belief, to quote McDermott, in "theatre to die for".

Donald Hutera

## **The Sunday Times**

London, April 1<sup>st</sup>, Theatre – Rest of the Week

### **Spirit**

Royal Court Upstairs

You've only a week left to see this 85 –minute show, teasing, sad and funny, a serious intellectual joke, a play about the theatre, life and death – yes that's about all. Performed by Phelim McDermott, Guy Darnell and Lee Simpson, and devised by them with Julian Crouch and Arlene Audergon, it is about three brothers in a war-torn country, plus clumsy-looking but delicately made puppets. The set is a steeply raked platform. Here toy soldiers are trained and toy planes bomb toy cities into oblivion. Spirit is also about the theatre - the stories it tells, whose stories, and to whom. I don't know whether performers and devisers discuss modernism in the rehearsal room, but they show it in action, question its meaning, affirm it, send it up brilliantly. The theatre is life that looks at itself; life is a story that needs the theatre to tell it. Book now. JP

John Peter and Robert Hewison

## **WHAT'S ON IN LONDON**

### **SPIRIT**

Royal Court-Jerwood

Theatre Upstairs

As the Cultural Industry's theatrically thrilling Shockheaded Peter plays to packed houses at the Piccadilly Theatre, its co-directors Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, present a more thoughtful, much quieter-though no less theatrically inventive – piece with their own company, Improbable, in the intimate Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. 'Spirit' employs many elements familiar to connoisseurs of the company's work: deeply personal reminiscence, subtle, almost imperceptible improvisation and inspired puppetry involving everyday objects. However, this time the team has employed Arlene Audergon, a leader of UN-Sponsored conflict resolution projects in countries like Croatia, to both help them devise the piece and co-direct with Julian Crouch. The result is a gentle meditation on the causes and consequences of war, revolving around a tale of sibling rivalry between three essentially nice brothers in some unspecified, war-torn land. And if the overall sweetness of tone risks making the show at times a tad fey, this is compensated for by moments of real insight into our aggressive inclinations.

The brothers her are all bakers - cue much breaking of bread and dough-as-you-would-be-done -by associations - and are played by the wry Lee Simpson, the dreamy McDermott and the heavy-set yet vulnerable Guy Darnell. Performing entirely on a steeply raked wooden platform generally acting as the roof of their bakery, the three play toy soldiers, with bread-headed toy puppets and model aeroplanes, and look forward excitedly to being able to take to the skies as fighter pilots when their call-up papers arrive – so much so, that the younger Bob (McDermott) steals an elder brother's letter and gets drafted himself. That grown men of war are still very much boys playing with their toys is beautifully illustrated by a sequence involving one of Bob's bombing raids, enacted using a

toy town of cardboard cut-out buildings, over which Bob swoops and dives with his model aircraft.

But where the show really takes flight is in the moments demonstrating how the act of play can lead to an imaginative appreciation of the consequences of war. In one disturbing and deeply moving sequence, two brothers attempt to come to terms with the death of the third using his corpse as a kind of puppet. However hard they try to animate him, they fail to return the departed spirit to the hideously lifeless features of their loved one. In an otherwise ethereal – if consistently engaging – evening, this is a moment to put you off violence for life

*Oliver Jones*

TIME OUT ( article previewing 'Spirit' at the Royal Court)



If you've seen Improbable Theatre's work (and if you haven't, you missed some of the most amazing theatre of recent times), you'll know that they make a virtue of their friendliness. Their light-footed adventures in storytelling – from 1997's '70 Hill Lane' to the beautiful impro experiments 'Lifegame' and 'Animo' – are marked by breezily open relationships with their audiences and with one another. So it's alarming to learn that their new show sprang from a quarrel that almost terminally split the company. 'Basically', says co-director and Comedy Store regular Lee Simpson, 'me, Phelim (McDermott), and Julian (Crouch) had fallen out. 'Money was a factor; even now, the company lives hand-to-mouth. It was a bit of a crossroads thing. Should we call it a day?'

By coincidence, the company was at that time working on a show with Arlene Audergon, a specialist in conflict resolution with experience in Bosnia and beyond. Audergon was developing what she called 'process acting', which says McDermott, 'means working with mistakes or disturbances rather than avoiding them'. It became clear to Improbable that, instead of seeing their internal conflict as an obstacle, they could feature it in their new show.

After US and UK tours, the resulting production, 'Spirit', this week joins Crouch and McDermott's comic opera, 'Shockheaded Peter' in the West End. It's a fairy-tale about three bakers, and stars Simpson, McDermott and Time Out Award winner Guy Darnell. Daringly programmed by Royal Court supreme Ian Rickson, 'Spirit', it has evolved since it was in Glasgow a year ago. Originally, the piece broached issues surrounding global conflict, says McDermott, but it was all a bit pretentious' Simpson agrees: 'We weren't really in it, we were sort of symbols'.

Realizing that they held opposing ideas about their own production and taking their cue from Audergon, the company reworked 'Spirit' so that the conflicts over what the show was about became what the show was about'. Now, says Simpson, it explores 'different visions of what theater can be. Or how complex it is when you tell a serious story. According to McDermott, 'its like Morecambe and Wise, where they are doing stuff and

having a row about what they're doing, but underneath is this great history of their relationship over the years. If our show works, it's because the relationships between us are real. We are real friends in a show, bickering, making up, connecting with each other: working together.' To Simpson, the show poses the question: 'How much ourselves can we be on stage?'

This is mouthwatering stuff to those who've seen the company's recent efforts to infiltrate honesty and interactivity into the theatre. ('Lifegame', in which the company enacted the biography of a different onstage guest each night, distilled theatre's capacity for turning everyday lives into heartsopping stories.) Says McDermott, exchanging theatre's pomp and artifice for a little, well, spirit, constitutes a radical act. 'I think there's a strong political statement in just seeing people work together on stage in a particular way. The fact that 'Shockheaded Peter' is in the West End and yet you can't say who wrote it is in itself a social statement. You see a show at the National Theatre and often think: There's no joy in this, the performers aren't enjoying each other, they've just been pushed together. It not just what the written content of a show is – it's about the way that the performers are with each other on stage. That's a marginalized thing, you can't quantify it, but it could change how the West End works.'

Simpson concurs. 'The only content that's given status is that which is perceived to have been consciously put in- by a playwright or whoever. That's a nutty idea. Why bother doing theatre at all? The point, surely, is that theatre is a collision of performers, directors – whatever they are – and audience, and between them all, something happens that can't be spoken about, that can't be described.'

It's terrifying to think that people who talk this much sense about theatre came within an ace of packing it in. It's exciting that they've now been let loose at the Royal Court to enlighten mainstream audiences. Their conquest of the West End – internal strife permitting – begins here.

*Brian Logan*

*'Spirit' previews from Wednesday 14 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. See West End listings for details.*