

Animations: A review of puppets and related theatre

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The Animated Brothers Britton

For the third year of VISION MIX, the unique festival that features animation on stage, film and television through performances, workshops, exhibitions and film and video showings, the Puppet Centre has invited one special company to be the pivot of the event. In 1988 it was THEATRE IM WIND from Germany – very serious, very beautiful. In 1989 it was VELO THEATRE from France – not quite so serious, and more surreal. This year it is going to be FORKBEARD FANTASY from England and it will hardly be serious at all.

Their work is hard to describe, but perhaps you'll get an idea from the pictures and the quotes which come from FORKBEARD itself and from others who have seen the shows and written about them. One thing is certain, the show they are bringing, 'The Brittonioni Brothers' might have been made for Vision Mix: it presents 'cine-theatre', a blend – a super-imposition – a collage – of cinema and theatre in which characters step from one medium to another, rather as they did in **Woody Allen's** 'Purple Rose of Cairo'. Only not really like that. Yes, it is hard to describe. Most of their theatre derives from visual ideas, with the set and the gadgetry central to the work. But there is nothing pretentious in the spirit of the shows, and 'glossiness and slickness are avoided like the plague'.

Two brothers, **Chris and Tim Britton**, are the heart of the whole thing: both as English as roast beef, but rather more eccentric. They formed Forkbeard Fantasy in Southampton way back in 1974, when they were into performance art and confounding their audiences, so that nobody had much of a clue what was going on. But their brand of hectic comedy and their way with animated props and film clips meant, even at first, that they were generally enjoyed, 'but definitely not universally', they admit. The pieces were funny but bewildering, probably because as true originals they were going in too many directions and trying out too many things at once. And they were very young.



Much of the early work was performed on the street, though one of their earliest venues was actually Battersea Arts Centre in the brief reign of **Bill McAlister** as Director before he moved on to the ICA. **Ian Hinchcliffe** of MATCHBOX PURVEYORS was a great friend and influence, and in 1980 **Penny Saunders** joined the group as a permanent member of the team, adding to Forkbeard her talent for creating wonderful working props and sets. She is in charge of the lighting too. More recently the ranks have been swelled by **Ed Jobling**, the Sound Man, and **Gary Sage**, both described as technical whizzkids. **John Tellet**

has been directing the shows since 1985, although his involvement with the group goes back to its beginning in the '70's.

The Britton brothers are the only performers, though the mixture of live and film acting sometimes makes the cast seem a lot more than too:

One of our greatest loves is creating a sort of magical realism with the sets and props and the suspension of disbelief, as the film trickery enables one to produce more and more characters on and off stage and in and out of film, as if out of some huge stage hat.

The eccentricities of human behaviour are a favourite theme, and film is a favourite medium. They are, it has been said, the only theatre company exploring so many techniques of blending film (16mm., super-8, live-action, sync-sound and animation) with theatre. Climbing in and out of a film has become second nature! Juxtapose this with the extraordinary sets, gadgets, animated sculptures and their unique style of comedy, and you have the flavour of the brew of the productions, like 'A Serious Leak', 'Work Ethic' and the show they are bringing to Vision Mix 'The Brittonioni Brothers'.

'A Serious Leak' was about a startling new discovery – the disposal of waste on film. It was billed as an 'eco-nightmare' and the Guardian described it as 'wildly imaginative, gloriously anarchic and hilariously funny, both live and on film'. It has scenes wherein a screen in the middle of the set shows a projected film, the 'fourth dimension' on which the contents of a waste tip are to be riddanced through a hatch. The actors squeeze through the hatch into the film, the head appearing onscreen as part of the film as the shoes disappear through the three-dimensional world. The magazine '20/20' called it 'interactive theatre', and praised its 'exciting potential'.

'Work Ethic', for those, the Guardian said, who like to take such matters seriously, is a show with something to say about the emptiness and inhumanity of a world increasingly defined in terms of market forces. **Mick Martin** the Guardian critic went on, 'Those that do not (like to take such matters seriously) will delight in the Britton brothers' typically emphatic definition of the two nicely contrasted characters. And both parties will marvel at the extraordinary combination of visual surprises, part comic, part grotesque, that runs through the show, as it builds to a startling climax involving an eight-foot youth and a forklift truck.'

'The Brittonioni Brothers' evolved out of a love of animation and film-making. They completed some mini-features, in which they performed, but somehow did not want the results merely to be passively watched, either by themselves or their audiences. They discovered that what the spectators really enjoyed was when they, the brothers, were somehow involved as live performers as well. That is how they came to start climbing in and out of their own celluloid and inventing more and more mind-boggling (the phrase recurs when anyone refers to the Brittons) surprises. They call it 'interactive' theatre, too.

The Brittonioni Brothers, not exactly types from whom you would buy a second-hand car, are 'fresh off the plane from Hollywood and their latest academy-award-winning epic, in order to

give you, the audience, the benefit of their cinematographic wisdom'. They will show some Brittonioni films, with interruptions, and you are warned of aching sides by the end of the evening.

There is another Forkbeard show called 'Hypochondria', which introduces subject matter that is rather more spooky. 'Hypochondria' features a life-size puppet named Anthony, a shrunken Bishop and a midget Russian eager to steal a Shrinking Disease so it can be hailed as a Soviet discovery. Technical ingenuity for the show produced the idea of a puppeteer under a false-perspective bed with his head and hands in the puppet on the bed. It can kick its legs and react most inexplicably if you don't know the technique.

Without simply drifting into Cabaret, Forkbeard Fantasy are always trying out ways of crossing the audience/performer divide to escape from the sense of 'the Play'. The need to be in close contact with people as well as with their audience is reflected in the number of workshops they do, with art students, with middle and secondary schools and with special needs. Southern Arts chose Forkbeard for what appears to have been the first residency in Performance Art at Barton Peverill College in Eastleigh in 1978. Since then the group has moved further into theatre and away from art, learning how to tighten and discipline their productions; but their commitment to educational work has, they say, increased. They like to stimulate connections between Art, Drama, English, Communications studies, Craft, Design and Technology.



Their residencies aim to produce a working exhibition or performance or a short film as a finale, the participants getting to experiment and work as artists, finally displaying their work to the public. They have used the theme of 'Ghosts' in a Residency, and 'Ghosts' is the name of one of their productions too:

Forkbeard sets and props are never mere wallpapering: they're animated. In addition to the two performers there are generally other 'people', animated figures, motor-driven and inflatable dummies, and life-size marionettes. In 'Ghosts' the set and most of the props live ... as befits such a theme.

Forkbeard Fantasy can boast of having produced thirty-five shows with many other supplementary events. They have printed books, made videos and films, mounted exhibitions and still give you the feeling they've hardly started. Their poetry readings, as Desmond and Dorothy Fairybreath, are, like 'Ship Poem' illustrated on the cover, unforgettable, and of course of the kinetic variety. They are true originals. We hope you will be at Battersea Arts Centre to see them on May 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th this year. You are guaranteed a lively night out.

