

## Arts & Artists

### 1978

### Hugh Adams

---

Dr Strabisimus (whom God Preserve) of Utrecht, inventor of, among other things, the leather grape, the revolving wheelbarrow and the fog horn sharpener, was the creation of J. B. Morton ('Beachcomber' of the Daily Express) who died recently. The world of Beachcomber was grotesque and absurd, but it was his genius to make it at the same time utterly believable. We can all, surely, identify in our acquaintance the living equivalent of Captain Foulencough; the Filthistan Trio; Mrs McGurgle of Marine House and Mr Justice Cocklecarrot, all of whom are but slight distortions of a surbitonion surreality. Whether they were invented before they existed is another matter. A friend in the exotic Sixties, once predicted the imminent arrival of a pop-group called 'The Electric Prune', surely enough it was but a short while until life lurched into line behind art, which goes to show something as we shall presently see. In an 'Observer' encomium of Morton, Bernard Levin wrote: "The List of Huntingdonshire Cabmen, the appalling saga of Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot and the Red-Bearded dwarfs have passed into history, legend and the language; they are probably the most brilliantly sustained examples of true fantasy in English; his work surpasses that of Carroll, his natural ancestor, and I really do think that you have to look at Rabelais for his master, with Flann O'Brien his only possible peer. He made me laugh more often and more loudly than any other writer who ever lived, and I am sorry beyond the telling that he will make me laugh no more. Mind you, he was constantly saying that his occupation was gone, because nothing he could invent was as fantastic as real life". And, much as we might quarrel with the degree of Levin's enthusiasm, it is a fact that Beachcomber had his apprentices, albeit unwitting ones, and these are even now exploring and expanding that peculiarly British vein of humour. Stoppard and Milligan are clear examples of heirs to the tradition which goes back to include Carroll, Belloc, Lear and Chesterton, but there are others too who, unlike most of those above, are not fettered by the constraints of the printed page. What one might characterize as the English tradition has its practitioners still, and much less self-conscious ones than the former. Although working within the tradition described above, (admittedly with a strong measure of Peake added to the mixture) they manage to elude, in their activities, all usual classifications of artistic genres (a fact that, sadly, seems to cause immense difficulties to those bodies of public patronage charged with the support of what is new and worthy in the arts.) And even a concise description of their work causes difficulty: one caused largely by the lack of commonly held vocabulary to describe their product, which is a rich compound of activities susceptible to conventional "Art", "Music", "Dance" and "Theatre" labels, overlaid

with sound tapes, pyrotechnics and all the intimidating impediments of a high-tech society. Add to this a highly inventive exploitation of objet-trouve and more than a dash of Kamikaze/Dadism. Clearly 'Actions', 'Events', 'Happenings' and 'Performance' are all useful words, which might, suitably tortured, accommodate their activities, were it not for the fact that they themselves, without having an alternative, reject them all: what they are firm about is their intention to be entertaining.

However, to get to the meat of it and with semantic wrangling aside: I write about a group of artists – Tim, Chris and, occasionally, Simon Britton (alias The Britton Brothers – Forkbeard Fantasy) who, with their pyrotechnics and effects wizard Robin Thorburn, compose a team which has over the last five years reached and delighted ever-growing audiences throughout the country. These are of all ages, degrees of intellectual attainment and social class, so that one sees clergymen of the Established Church sit thigh-to-thigh with retired admirals, post-hippies and Hell's Angels, who share an unusual degree of exhilaration. The brothers work countrywide, performing outdoors at festivals and similar events, and in small theatres and art centres. Their work, crudely described as theatre with a powerful visual dimension, consists of the creation of an environment (generally from found bric-a-brac) which they then animate as actors, using a wide range of affects. There is little attempt at 'polish': the linear narrative is pre-written but often improvised upon, mutilated or abandoned, depending on the exigencies of particular situations. And exigencies there are; their construction of weird Emmett-Heath Robinson like machine structures (structural/sculptural compositions), and their capricious behaviour ensures that. In fact they start with the machines. The mouse-wheel, for example, a huge man-accommodating treadmill, in the performance piece "On An Uncertain Insect" provided the base upon which the work was built and from which ideas grew. Professor Biggins' ultimate exploitation of it in a demonstration of his theories on "Pentangular Rotational Hypnosis" is typical of a general tendency in Britton characters which always have inextricable and inexplicable attachments to life giving machines. On these irrational rituals and their performance on outrageously convoluted contraptions something, it is never clear what, depends. The parallel with the walk (in Peeke's "Titus Green") allowed to the winner of the competition for the brightest carving, on the East Battlement after sunset on the third Sunday after the second night of the first new moon in June (or whatever it was) is strong. And it is tempting to interpret these machine-rituals as metaphors for the most inane of mundane post industrial human occupations, but there are in this work no absolutely meaningless juxtapositions of events and images; and this is no latter-day surrealism. There is always a logic, if however twisted a one, and there is always a raison d'être, if however bizarre a one, that give the characters and their ghastly lives substance. The names, preoccupations and clothes of these characters may be shallow, there is never an attempt at a convincingly realized three-dimensional character. They caricature themselves, so that it is their behaviour, however improbable that finally forges a link with reality, so that one is always capable of recalling from real life people who have done even more

unlikely things. The work is an affirmation of the richness and joy to be found in pure eccentricity; it at once celebrates it and draws attention to the sadness which motivates it. The comedy is acerbic, the characters, although having their roots in humanity, possess all the joie-de-vivre and vigour of the undertaker's parlour: they are pallid and mindless creatures such as one might disturb by overturning a cold, wet stone. One is invited to recognise that, in deriving amusement from their antics, one is a sick and perverse voyeur watching an equally sick anaemic creature waddle hopelessly off to seek shelter under yet another stone.

In a situation of such blackness, comedy is essential to alleviate the madness which perpetrators and audience alike might feel. The classic Britton creation is an individual alienated from an unsympathetic and uncomprehending world, where alienation, and subsequent eccentricity, is compounded by absolute failure to communicate, and indeed the knowledge of the pointlessness of being able to do so. If this is a stock theme in twentieth century art then the Britton Brothers give it a new slant – if only because the existential Angst and the terror dream are leavened by a good dose of slapstick. Their work is infused with as much messiness and lime as that of the most outré German or Italian Performance artist: but they gauge carefully the degree of shock they administer, (people's capacity for enduring shock is, as Susan Sontag pointed out, the most remarkable feature of the modern audience) realizing that shock per se is unproductive, so they temper their presentation of the slimy realities of our primal clay with a good dose of humour as they assiduously slither about in an adroit avoidance of 'niceness'.

A noticeable feature of their work is the extent to which they extend themselves physically, abusing themselves sometimes more than they intend in a, perhaps puritanical, attempt to avoid making their work 'easy'. Certainly though, there is no "withdrawal of revolt into purely aesthetic remains" and their rendition of extremism into a semblance of normality, when we the audience accept the futile rituals (but simultaneously feel incipient hysteria) and the half hidden threat. In such doom-ridden, amoebic creatures as 'Blankman', from the 'Rubber God Show' (within the tight scientific structure of whose head is – nothing), who, in an aberrant, brief, unwanted moment of thought, experiences terror at the loneliness of his existence in which he wheels through space in his 'life' supporting machine. As he peers out into the blue blankness of the universe he sees the answer to his prayer – the Rubber Bubble, in which as God he builds up a faith. In a dream of baubles he transforms his module into a temple to the Rubber God and then accomplishes his own salvation in a transfiguration/transformation scene when he accidentally pricks the God-balloon. Into the behaviour of such creatures, God and devotee alike, we can read alienation and schizophrenia though not that of the manic or schizophrenic type but that of a pseudo-Napoleon who believes totally in his own self-image. They are, like ourselves, at once members of society and members of the void-alarming, bureaucratic, doomed creatures,

mindless, devoid of warmth, convinced of their total rightness, unable to adapt, and totally parasitic.

But, if all this seems too black, there are other sides. In addition to the slapstick there were transformation scenes in earlier works such as 'The Cranium Show', 'The Rubber God Show', 'AAArgh', and 'The Weird Woman' in which a triumphant monumentality emerged from the tat; then there is the exchange of repartee with the audience. It is the sheer complexity and depth of these pieces which as a delight and which accounts for their appeal to such a wide age range. Their references, often as esoteric as they are pseudo-esoteric, are to literature, fine art and science, so that in a single performance they might succeed in exploring the conventions of framing in theatre, art and film, taking a sideways swipe at Hammer horror genre, lace it with some Gothic fancy, set the whole in a farce in which Scarpia's arrival might seem imminent, and refer to the graphic conventions of the Ordnance Survey map and 'Les Demoiselles D'Avignon'. Certainly this reached its apogee in 'The Weird Woman', where the brothers, who were 'artists in residence' at a Hampshire school, worked with the pupils on a gloriously messy epic of Baroque complexity based on the 'ghost train' saga. 'Aargh!', written and performed in conjunction with Ian Hinchliffe, a hideous comedy of manners, did much the same thing though in this case the vehicle was a detective story which ruthlessly plagiarized Sherlock Holmes and raped the rest of the genre. It was also a comedy of manners "Don't sit there": "don't leave muddy footprints": "don't play with cushions"; the litany of petit-bourgeois injunctions is the introit to the action, backed by the slow sweep of Elgar. To it the setting – the drawing room of a mansion is revealed. Imperialist sounds-over contradict the seediness of the act as an aristocrat-cum-butler figure superbly butters his bandaged heads and threads sliced bread on a string. Imagine, if you can, an amalgam of Sherlock Holmes, the Addams Family and the 'Eustace Diamonds' then mix them with 'Don Quixote' and 'Vathek' and you're half-way to an apprehension of a marvel in which Mrs. Rochester plays with model trains in the attic while a barber-shop quartet sang a hideously mauling parody of Zappa's 'Billy the Mountain' and squashed, degenerate nympho Lady Blenkinsop, heiress of the transmuted bread/pearls, seduces her uncle with what may become one of the vilest kisses in art history.

As I say it is all very, very difficult to write about; you must, if you get a chance, see it.