

Live!

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Celebrating Celluloid

The Fall of The House of Usherettes is a celebration of 100 years of film. A 'comedy for those with active imaginations', it aims to make grand ideas and aesthetics work in intimate spaces – recreating the sense of the Magic Theatre. Louise Stickland reports from its opening dates at London's Hammersmith Lyric Theatre

Bernard von Earlobe, tomb-robber for the national Archive, stumbles across the misty, sinister surrealism of the Empire Picture Palace ~ or 'The House of Usherettes', as he will come to know it. Once in the heart of a city which has since been sucked into the ignominious, glooping wastelands surrounding it, the Empire is the last remaining building, teetering on the hungry abyss that beckons its impending doom.

The Empire is under the conspiratorial protection of Deirdre, Lucy and Nancy – the three Usherettes – of haggard, ghoulish appearance, but with acute sensibilities. They guard the last ghostly remnants of an anachronous technology – liquid film – with disembodied jealousy, keep the Empire's eccentric manager Roderick Lilyhair in pills and opium and 'loop' forever in film any undesirables or prying visitors...

Forkbeard Fantasy present a bizarre, zany, oblique comedy for those with active imaginations. The production is a mind-expanding interactive visual and cerebral experience, drawing on a rich, diverse selection of literary and cinematic sources as the performers dive in and out of film, literally and narratively, to tell the story. An enormous sense of fun is complemented by an even larger helping of the totally unexpected; the production is designed to make ideas and aesthetics of gargantuan proportions work in intimate spaces.

Forkbeard, founded in 1974 by Tim and Chris Britton, produce some of the UK's most unique and original theatre. Their expressive vitality has often featured film as a primary interactive effect along with lighting and sound. *The Fall of The House of Usherettes*, loosely parodying the Victorian melodrama of Edgar Allan

Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, was written as their own celebration of 100 years of film.

Tim Britton explains that they wanted to recreate the sense of Magic Theatre and the turn-of-the-century world of illusionists like Méléés and Trewéy, some of the first people to be excited by the possibilities of film – the madness, creative energy and exhilaration that accompanied the first days of celluloid entertainment before it settled into its cosy, auditorium-based format that has altered little since.

Forkbeard's productions are a close-knit collaboration between the Brittons, Edmund Jobling, designer Penny Saunders and lighting designer Paul Dunaway. They conceive and produce all aspects of their performances: films, cartoons, mechanics, sound, lighting, projection – and, of course, the actors.

Usherettes features nine film projectors, eight 16mm and one Super-8 lop, most of them highly visible and audible, giving a fabulously-authentic whirring, clicking, sound backdrop. Wide angle lenses are used to enlarge the image for short throws. The company collects projectors "as they go", preferring Elf or Bauer machines for their robustness and reliability.

On tour with film

With a touring theatre show, film often gets damaged and the projectors can't be averse to dealing with a few broken sprockets! Penny Saunders says film cleaning sessions are a frequent event on tour "because every spec of dust will appear on the film soundtrack". As is common in Forkbeard shows projectors are controlled manually (switched on and off) by the actors.

The filmatic element of the play added greatly to its pre-production time of six months from the original writing, as film content evolved organically between the Brittons and Saunders. Because the story is told both in film and live on stage there's an added dimension of dramatic integrity that neither of the two mediums alone can achieve. Forkbeard also likes to integrate technical film jargon and references into the play's dialogues – a constant reminder of the insidious links between real and celluloid image.

LD Paul Dunaway enthuses about film being "the ultimate intelligent lighting effect". He says: "You can spend fortunes on moving lights or laser systems, but you can do the funniest and most fantastic things cheaper and more effectively with a film projector." Unsurprisingly, considering the play's film content, lighting levels are extremely low.

A few lanterns are being toured with the rest picked up at a venue. Many lights are built into set pieces, with some visible on-stage. These are once decrepit Patten 23s that Dunaway spent time sourcing from refurbished theatres and lovingly restoring for their classic antique shapes. Dunaway prefers to operate from a manual console or one with a manual override, simply because of the

“easy buskability and good improvisational facilities of these boards. If something changes on stage, he says, he is then able to respond immediately.

The central set piece is a revolving cage structure which serves as a myriad of different locations, from Lilyhair’s bedroom and the cinema to the crypt containing the mysterious liquid film. This is flanked by two large Greek-esque statues which collapse at the end as the Empire finally crumbles into the abyss.

Saunders says “portability” was a governing factor in the set construction. The revolve has a slip ring in the centre to avoid cables twisting. It was the first time that Saunders had designed a touring set in this way and she says, intriguingly, that the slip-ring research “proved to be highly educational!”

The statues are pre-hensile skeletons made of wood and ball and socket joints, wrapped in Plastazote, a foam common to the puppet industry, with an epidermis of latex and fabric. Plywood knee joints had to be replaced with aluminium joints to take the enormous strain as the torsos topple, manipulated puppet-style, by the actors for the finale.

Britton elucidates that “sound predates film as a sensory medium” in Forkbeard Fantasy. They like to create a sense of ‘rhythm’ for the performance via sound, even though it’s always the last element to receive attention. The sound in *Usherettes* is a vital contributor to the murky, moody, atmospheric ambience. It’s played from cassette tapes, some of which run continuously throughout the performance. All sound cues are executed by Edmund Jobling (*aka* Deirdre, the first Usherette) with three cassette players – two Sony Professionals and a Marantz. A Soundcraft Spirit console (which also gets a mention in the play) is a concession to modern technology and the company has its own Ramsa amps and speakers. Source material for the soundscape, meanwhile, is a provocative montage of classical and modern music, film scores and effects.

Usherettes is touring until December. Anyone fancying a bit of liquid film, comic illusion, imaginative fantasy and abnormality should get down to The Empire Picture Palace...