

Live!

Louise Stickland

Since 1974, the Forkbeard Fantasy Theatre has been amusing and beguiling audiences with a unique blend of theatre, film, soundtracks and bizarre sets, all tightly tied together with off-the-wall themes and a clever mix of subtle slapstick humour.

Louise Stickland profiles this unique company

Hilarious, surreal, highly original, a healthy smattering of mayhem, bizarre sets, ingenious interactive use of film, extravagant stretching of the imagination, intellectualism meets absurdity, Heath Robinson meets Max Ernst. The Forkbeard Fantasy theatre has been splitting sides since 1974 with its unique stagecraft.

Founded by brothers Tim and Chris Britton, Forkbeard was joined shortly afterwards by Penny Saunders, designer and creator of scenery, props, gadgets and weird and wonderful things. Forkbeard are a closely knit group of people based in Devon. They are dedicated to the widening of minds, the exploration of ideas and expression and the development of a dynamic visual alchemy via their productions, performance and characters.

Characterised by the use of film as an integral stage effect, the other members of the Forkbeard team are actor and sound enthusiast Ed Jobling, and lighting designer Paul Dunaway. Their film-making activities also involve a close creative association with TV lighting designer/lighting cameraman Robin Thorburn and directorial assistance from John Tellet.

Forkbeard's work is highly collaborative and all their shows are conceived, written, designed and produced by the team, including the film footage, cartoons, narratives, sets, lighting, soundtracks and publicity material. An eclectic mix it certainly is!

Their use of the moving image is particularly provocative. The clunking and whirring 16mm projectors add a tactile, mechanical dimension. Primitive but effective technology is artfully fused with human action. The performers (usually only the Brittons and Jobling onstage at any one time, morphing into a myriad of strange characters via rapid costume switches) seamlessly slide into and cut of the celluloid divide of screens and various movies.

Britton admits to a fascination with the old techniques of Magic Lantern theatres, and the days when conjurer and illusionist Georges Méliès experimented by introducing early (non narrative) film footage into his theatrical shows. Forkbeard spend a considerable amount of time researching historical filmic tricks and effects.

Their most recent show, *The Barbers Of Surreal* has just finished after a year on the road. The previous show, *The Fall Of The House Of Usherettes*, written to coincide with the anniversary of 100 years of celluloid, also toured for over a year.

Forkbeard sets are characterised by a amalgam of gadgetry, films, movement and colour. Their outlandishly oddball characters – both human, animal (giant rabbits, mutated griffins, *et al*) and anywhere in between, are all caricatures of the intense human values that also distinguish Forkbeard's work. The content can be convoluted and intense – evolution, science, the environment, community, responsibility, authority, all wrapped up with an underlying warmth and the notion that Forkbeard care deeply about what is happening around them. Then, naturally, the obligatory outrageous humour on top.

Contemporary relevance

Barbers Of Surreal has a particularly contemporary relevance with genetic engineering and the unforeseen consequences of messing with nature – currently high on the international agenda. The surrealist element also serves as a license to add total mayhem. Forkbeard do address very serious issues, and it helps to be slightly politically aware, a film anorak or to know your surrealism, but if none of those conditions apply, it doesn't matter either – you will still enjoy yourself immensely!

Forkbeard are passionate and committed to what they do, constantly challenging preconceived perspectives. Tim Britton is as witty off stage as he is on, and having always existed on the margins of theatre, he finds it somewhat of an paradox that they have been so successful and developed a cult following. It's only really for the convenience of performance that they have remained within theatrical spaces on the fringe theatre circuit. Past shows have included plenty of street theatre, locations as diverse as clubs like Arches in Glasgow and festivals such as Glastonbury and Roskilde.

Theatre critics sometimes find it hard to pigeonhole Forkbeard and consequently, even harder to get their heads around the non-conformity.

The Brittons first started developing their surreal and comical ideas in Southampton in 1974. Having both studied English at university, performance art and avant garde 'live' theatre was still in its infancy and there were few venues

suited to that type of performance. The arts festivals emerged as a forum for experimental work.

Their first equipment investment was the purchase of an old Revox. Back then they would have a continuous (sound) tape playing and never speak during a performance. Tim was too self-conscious to speak, "And now you can't shut me up!!" he declares!! Even then at the outset, all the lighting they designed would be integral to the set and they would throw switches and set the tape machines going at the start of the show – a *modus operandi* that is successful in this day – performers, action and technology all inextricably linked.

The name evolved from a show they were doing at Edinburgh Festival soon after their inception. It was originally intended to be a kids show, performed on the street. However rain intervened and facilitated a move to one of the fringe clubs, so Chris and Tim ended up performing to a volatile, beery lunchtime audience instead. They hadn't really worked out what they were going to do, so the piece ended up being a Dadaist happening – the Brittons dressed in overalls armed with a tin transistor radio started constructing a big wooden box in the middle of the performance area. Then they took it apart again and exited!

Among the audience were the Birkenhead Dada group. They thought this was so cool they returned the next day to 'raid' the show. Complete anarchy ensued and the name Forkbeard Fantasy was applied and stuck!

Using film as a dramatic tool

Tim and Chris's father, Jim Britton, was a filmmaker, so they were always keen on using it as a dramatic tool. The first images they used onstage were raid-fire slides which told a story away from the environment on set. The slide subject matter was insects and how they worked, and the show was about the obsessive nature of entomologists.

The first moving image they used onstage was a black and white cartoon on 16mm film, incorporated into *The Clone Show* in 1980. "*The Clone Show* was about cloning", elucidates Tim. "But no-one really knew what cloning was then and it kept getting mis-spelt as *The Clown Show!*" The characters in the cartoon were supposed to be illustrating the narrative coming from Tim on-stage...but instead were behaving irrationally and not doing what they were supposed to do!

Another early filmic integration experience was *Body Politic* which involved live prosthetic animation overlaid on top of Chris who was stripped almost naked onstage and divided up by dotted lines to denote his anatomical regions.

In 1985 *The Famous Brittonioni Brothers* was conceived as a vehicle for the showing of Forkbeard's stand on live action films. The Brittonioni's still perform prolifically in their own right and are a personal favourite of Tim's. The Brothers are precious Italian film critics who love jetting between avant garde film festivals,

collecting awards and rubbing shoulders with their high profile, intellectual celebrity friends. They are huge bullshitters and their desire to sport the hippest fashion takes precedence over any of their films. The Brittonionis first became seriously entangled in one of their movies during the thriller *Who Shot The Cameraman?*, when an intruder in a Parka anorak mysteriously enters a sequence of the action, who was definitely not involved in the making of the film. At this point Chrissy Brittonioni gets into the film to chase him away.

The Barbers of Surreal features four moving image sources. The shop window film runs for nearly an hour with a break while the blind is down, showing the town square and the heterogeneous collection of people wandering by. Some peer into the shop, some enter the shop and others just do their thing. As characters enter and exit the stage through the door of the barbers shop they simultaneously enter or leave the movie in the window – requiring split second precision. The shop mirror also has film moments of the reflections of the players onstage as well as its own dark secrets, coded messages and warnings about what is taking place in the shop and next door, in the requisitioned Museum of Childhood. The pace of film and stage action gets steadily more chaotic as it builds to a manic crescendo!

Subversive trademark

The film element has become a gloriously subversive Forkbeard trademark, as have the extravagant humour, nervously deranged coherence and enigmatic presentation.

“It’s not a gimmick”, insists Tim. “It’s a way of extending the environment and breaking the mainstream barriers of theatre”. He goes on to explain that the suggestion of reality in an outside world, essentially what they do with film, goes against the grain with certain traditional theatrical attitudes “They think having some thunderclaps or a couple of bursts of birdsong is radical” he says. “They often can’t get their heads around what we are trying to do at all. Comedy is fine for them because it’s cool to do the odd wacky thing within it – but we don’t fit that straightforward comedy definition”.

For the last 15 years they have received Arts Council funding, without which they couldn’t have survived. This has given them the chance to retain their fierce expressive independence and collective identity in the face of an increasingly corporate branded, conventional, mediocre and mainstream theatre scene.

They have been collecting their own cameras and projection equipment over the years, and have an impressive array of Bauer projectors plus a collection of ex-MOD Eiki Elfs and Elf Lites (which are incredibly heavy!).

Obviously with film and the way they use it having such precarious parameters, things can and do go wrong. Whether it’s switches being accidentally flipped amidst the action or footage drifting (and any spare projector they might have to

be sprung into action unexpectedly will run at a slightly different speed) – Forkbeard have had their share of onstage disasters. Tim and Ed collapse into hysterics when I ask if they were prepared to reveal any of them: “Of course, but that’s for another article” they say. However, being Forkbeard they even manage to put a humorous spin on the Machiavellian perspective. There is always the occasional deliberate blip in the show action (e.g. a ‘pregnant pause’ in *Barbers*) just to keep the audience on their toes, to prepare them for any real touches of the unexpected and remind them that they are watching a real performance of energies and beliefs from the heart.