

The Peninsula Voice

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Profile by Mike Venning

"We have always relished peculiar behaviour, absurd situations, eccentricities and obsessions in our shows ... preferring all that to the more usual current theatre themes of politics, sexual and racial squabbles, war and social mistrust. We delight in the use of strong visual spectacle as a base to all our shows, and then, via unusual, unexpected and often disconcerting themes, use humour and absurdity to achieve our most sought-after aim ... to entertain and get you along to see us again"

(Forkbeard Fantasy – programme note, The Brontosaurus Show)

Two rather seedy-looking business types, complete with bowler and Financial Times march through Elephant Fayre, strap themselves onto a device made of Union Jack-painted planks and perform the Great British Square Dance. Late at night in a corner of the site, a strange contraption belches fire and smoke while odd figures move in and out of it, acting and speaking with obsessive determination. The festival is over and the razzamatuzz entertainment experiences soon fade from memory, leaving a clear image of Forkbeard Fantasy, for they are the square dancers and the nocturnal obsessives. It's a disturbing image too; they've been very funny, but the unobtrusive ease with which the humour is created also reaches into darker areas of the psyche, leaving an uneasy feeling that you've been laughing at yourself, particularly those shadowy corners of the brain that you don't usually like to bring to the surface.

Forkbeard Fantasy are Chris Britton, Tim Britton and Penny Saunders. They've been a theatrical group for twelve years and have weaved their very individual way through plays, spectaculars, poetry, films, lectures and workshops. Their main stated aim is to entertain, and this they do with great success. Everyone who has seen them remembers them with amusement and pleasure. They are not obtuse, most often eccentric, doing things on their own terms, but always funny and accessible. Forkbeard don't preach or teach, they stick to life as it is. Maybe their scenarios are unlikely, but like all good theatre, the essence is anchored in the reality of human life.

Obsessive behaviour is a major starting point for Forkbeard's work. The obsessions that they observe may be inconsequential (don't forget though, we've all got them), but once stretched, exaggerated and built on, they become moving theatre pieces, most often extremely funny, but always containing more sombre overtones. Is the sting in the tail that the audience has been subconsciously re-acquainted with its own obsessions?

As Tim Britton says, they are interested in presenting pieces that are most definitely slices of the lives of their characters. They have been getting on with their lives before appearing on stage, and will continue to do so afterwards. Take the participants in the Square Dance, who perform their ritual with the air of two men involved in an integral part of their daily life. This is compounded by their inviting two members of the audience to take part, and these two people have really been getting on with their lives without any expectation other than watching Forkbeard Fantasy. After the show is over, these "actors" then walk away with the rest of the audience.

While Forkbeard are quite startlingly original in their concepts and productions, they do acknowledge certain general influences. First are the great twentieth century clowns, Chaplin, Keaton and of course Laurel and Hardy, all of whom have based their comedy on the quirks and oddities of normal, every-day life. Also, and seeming to come from a very different direction; Samuel Beckett, whose bleak writing contains a lot of humour, much obsessive behaviour, and many situations where psychological limits are reached that leave the reader unsure whether to laugh or cry, or perhaps attempt both simultaneously.

Influences, originality or whatever, Forkbeard reply on their own experiences and do everything themselves. Between the three of them they conceive, write and act their plays, design and build all their sets, special effects and costumes, make their own films and write and illustrate their own books. That's a wide spread of creativity, all the more impressive because of the variety of subject-matter. Shows such as 'Plants, Vampires and Crazy Kings', 'High Tech', 'Myth - The Revenge of Tellywoman' and 'Springtime' have rubbed shoulders with films ('The Bonehunter', 'Night of the Gnat'), cartoons ('Could a Whale Fly?') and books. One book, 'The Suffocation' by Holcombe Rogus, the story of a vanished ghost hunter, dictated posthumously via a séance, relates directly to the stage show, 'Ghosts'. Last but not least on the literary front is 'Wildly I Dribbled on a High Rock', a collection of

poems and other gems by Desmond Fairybreath, (and one by his wife, Dorothy). Desmond and Dorothy also give highly successful readings of their verses, although they find the outbreak of cockney-accented "ranting" poets encountered at recent festivals not condusive company for their more refined offerings.



These books and further information about Forkbeard are available from Moor Cottage, Huntsham, Tiverton, Devon. They haven't appeared in West Cornwall for some time and would like to remedy that, entrepreneurs please note. As for summing-up, I think it should be left to Forkbeard.

"We can be safely advertised as good entertainment and suitable for all. We aren't Obscurists, nor purveyors of Angst, and make no apology for being funny. Our content is all original, visually exciting, and our style unique to us ... any further self-acclamatory expletives might smack of humbug to the publicity-swamped Programmer!"



Footpieces on.



By Foot "A".



Mount Planks.



Knees Bend.



DANCE.