

My first taste of performance came as a small child. Growing up, we kids had our own theatre, the Amber Playhouse, a lovely little puppet theatre which my parents had made and outfitted with the usual cast of *Punch* characters; Mister Punch and Mrs Judy, the Baby, Constable, Alligator and Devil. With these puppets we performed not only various bastardisations of the *Mister Punch* oeuvre, but also works of our own making, and those based on fairy tales for which we had made or acquired additional puppets.

Samuel Pepys was the first to write down, to log, a reaction to *Punch*. Writing in his diary in May of 1622, of a visit with Mr Salisbury to Covent Garden, "Thence to see an Italian puppet play that is within the rayles there, which is very pretty, the best that ever I saw, and great resort of gallants." This was an Italian marionette company performing *Pulcinella* (or variously, *Punchinello*), a piece of *commedia dell'arte*. This being the 350th anniversary for *Punch*, then, Julian Crouch and **Improbable Theatre** have decided to bring him back, albeit with a twist.



A puppet show in *The Pit* at Barbican is one of the hottest tickets in London right now, a sold-out run, and we think that's just fine. Having failed to book in advance, we waited just a while on the returns queue before ending up with 6th row centre seats, right behind writer and performer Nick Haverson's dad, whom we met in lobby over cocktails prior to curtain. "When I got out of school," said Mr. Haverson, "I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I got a job and made a life. For our kids, we had two boys, we didn't want to tell them what to do, but we made sure they got into good schools." He was proud of his son's work in theatre, even if the shows are sometimes unfamiliar to him. He certainly could be proud of the show we saw with him last night!



The script for this performance, by Messrs Harvey and Hovey, we are told (or shown) was written by a dog at a typewriter. The dog himself claims no authorship, chalking it up as a publicity stunt in subsequent court testimony, but it does have a ring of truth to it, if you ask me. A half dozen piglets add comic relief, before thoroughly getting into the sausage making, as it were. A rag-tag band of musicians on bass, piano, metronome, bells and more serenade us, and the puppets... where to begin.



This is some of the most lovingly done, most graceful puppetry one may ever see. A scene in which Punch negotiates with Mephistopheles has the large puppet of the devil worked by three people, but with such grace and such slow, precise movement that the performers disappear. A hand puppet one moment is life-sized the next, shocking the audience.



The design and production crew all deserve kudos here. Julian Crouch and Jessica Scott's puppets are exquisite. Marcus Doshi's lighting design is at once effortless and exact, leading us around the complex set and focusing our attention just where it needs to be. That set, designed by Crouch, along with Rob Thirtle and Mike Kerns, and constructed by Heywood Productions, is a true piece of art. There are panels everywhere through which the puppets appear. The whole piece is a shrine.



The final performance of *The Devil and Mister Punch* will be Saturday, 25 February. Keep an eye out, however, there are rumours of a tour.