

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Cloudcuckooland

Words by Stephen Sharkey, music by Alex Silverman, inspired by Aristophanes' *The Birds*  
Riverside Studios (ended) and touring  
(2008)

Aristophanes' comedy with its satirical take on the dissatisfactions, aspirations and opportunists of the Athens of 414 BC may seem an odd choice for a play aimed at a juvenile audience but this piece of ancient buffoonery is not so precisely targeted that you need to know ancient history to get its message and, anyway, this is a very loose adaptation that captures the spirit of the piece rather than its detail.

It is being promoted as for audiences of 8 years up and the weekend family audience I saw it with did seem to be made up of very young children and their parents. It is reasonable, perhaps, to assume that at that age they will already know a bit about dinosaurs and pick up allusions to popular television, take-away fried chicken, the Prime Minister and 10 Downing Street, though I don't think they necessarily recognized the name Gordon Brown or knew whom a character called Richard Branston was satirising. I was not aware of much juvenile laughter: the simple satire such presumably primarily aimed at accompanying elders.

You'll have gathered this is a contemporary version: no difficult classical names here. We begin with a young woman zapping her way through boring television before her partner comes home. He works in a fast-food fried chicken joint, his tee-shirt an embarrassing give-away and the birds get their revenge by trussing and stuffing him and popping him foil-wrapped in the oven. Their pad gets crashed in on by a pair of twitchers looking for a curlew who is hiding. You might think bird-watchers harmless but this curlew doesn't think so: they may only shoot with a camera but snaps can lead to traps for ringing and next you could end up stuffed. Since they have helped him/her elude the twitchers, Curlew takes them into the sky to meet the birds where Dodo (not Hoopoe) rules as king of the birds.

The complications of the king being a man who has been turned into a bird, the classical gods and other ancient allusions are ignored. Instead writer Stephen Sharkey takes up Aristophanes' complaint about what humans do to things to make it a plea for save the earth from global warming and he makes a great deal of play with the avian secret weapon: poo.

Director Helen Eastman keeps her multi-tasked, quick-change cast busy singing, dancing and playing instruments and there are lots of bright production ideas from the monocycle that takes everyone up to the clouds to the flat pack kit for building Cloudcuckooland - with the help of a lot of balloon blowing by the audience. There is plenty of other participation too, from sing-alongs to helping name the new cloud kingdom - though I thought it a pity they didn't stick with one of the child-offered names rather than plod on until the forced out Cloudcuckooland.

Designer Ellen Dowell characterises the birds with simple beaked masks and bird feet and starts the show with a stage littered like an inefficient playschool. The chaotic feeling stays through the ensuing hour and a quarter, with plenty of chases and pratfalls, though everyone ends up in the

right costume and the right place - except perhaps for a few moments that left actors unlit and almost invisible (possibly because a scenic element was in the wrong place - one of the problems of whistle-stop tours) and an effect that I think is supposed to suggest flying hordes that clearly doesn't work.

There is a bright and sometimes clap-along score from Alex Silverman, though I thought it would have helped to have some choruses or at least a little repetition in some of the lyrics so that sense could be clearer. They went by so fast I wonder how easy it was for a young audience to understand them.

Much of the show is great fun, but it seems a little naïve to suggest that if Gordon Brown capitulates you have saved the world. You should tell kids the truth, or make it clear that you are deliberately lying for satirical purposes, not just about political realities but in facts: like claiming that birds are descended from dinosaurs. That gives the excuse for a very lively number but a shared ancestor is something different and I wouldn't be surprised if some of that young audience knew better! If it is meant as a bit of dodo-spin that is being a bit too subtle!

Everyone is so busy being everything in this show that it is difficult to know quite who played what. I particularly liked Nick Kellington's Duck and Dafydd Huw James' Owl but there is a lot of hard work and tremendous energy from everyone: Leon Scott, Georgina Philip, Charles de Bromhead, Fiona J. Keats and Helen Cole.

*Touring to: The Round, Newcastle (28th February - 1st March); Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast (6th-8th March); Central Library Theatre, Sheffield (12th - 13th March); Greenwich Theatre, London (18th March); Marketplace Theatre, Armagh (22nd March); Riverside Suite, Newport Centre, Newport (28th March); Charles Cryer Studio Theatre, Carshalton (5th-6th April); Bridgewater Arts Centre, Bridgewater (16th April); Komedia, Brighton (27th April).*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)