

# British Theatre Guide

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

## The Dark Side of Buffoon

The Brothers Marquez  
Lyric Hammersmith  
(2010)

John and Martin Marquez have a nice venue for their surreal, knockabout comedy set in an Italian circus at the turn of the twentieth century - any of the audience waiting to go in to [Ghost Stories](#) and losing their nerve could in theory dive into the Lyric's Studio instead and have a much less traumatic time. This is a gentle, quirky show, full of ideas and digressions, and speaks much of the closeness of the performers (real-life brothers) and their skill in picking out the gems that came out of improvisation in the devising process.

A kindly, grizzled old father lives in rural Italy with his imbecilic son, who gormlessly makes friends with trees, and doesn't realise that his young brother is a puppet. The mother has abandoned them, leaving behind only the memory of her words of wisdom - "If you can't think of an idea, just relax, and let it come. You dickhead." One day the circus passes by, and though Pepo's dad has a history with the brothers who run it, the son can't resist skipping away to join it and become a star. Thus starts a freewheeling, patchwork adventure involving incompetent clowns, Siamese twins, attempted murder, and the world's worst bird ballet.

A chalk circle transforms the floor of the studio into a circus round, and the show's costumes and props cover the back wall. The two performers switch marvellously between their numerous characters, changing not just costume before our eyes but also their physicality, their demeanour, even, we would believe, their actual size. Martin Marquez switches fluidly between the kindly, careworn Yorkshire father, the shuffling, apologetic Paolo, thicker of the two brothers running the circus (with "poifect" De Niro-esque Italian-American mumbling accent), and the menacing, inexplicably Glaswegian Doge of Venice. John plays the slimier brother in charge, Marco, as well as the gorgeously naïve and petulant Pepo, and a useless clown who's run away to the circus only to be tempted back home by his mum's shepherd's pie.

The skill of the performers, and the wealth of ideas and small sub-stories thrown into the mix, go a long way to sustain our interest and make up for a lack of depth in the script. There are some glorious absurdist moments: Pepo's puppet-brother, which his dad has convinced him is real; and the afore-mentioned Siamese twins, conjoined at the hair, whose fantastically banal Brummie conversation clearly came out of some larking about in the rehearsal room: "You love a girl with brown eyes don't you?" "A nice pair of brown eyes and some good weather and that's me done".

There's some poignancy too: a sub-plot involving Marco and Paolo that's strangely reminiscent of *Of Mice and Men*; and particularly when we realise what lies behind the father creating a puppet as a substitute for a real son. But the show's episodic nature means it doesn't work to a climax of hilarity in the way a farce would; and there's not a tight enough structure to keep us riveted every moment. It's rather about looking for the comic gems in among the shaggy, wayward plot developments.

Strangely, the circus performance scenes themselves are the least funny, with some rather laboured stuff about a pair of bickering clown brothers - one of the few times that the Marquezes let the pace slip. There's much more random enjoyment to be had from the conversations between characters backstage, and especially from watching Pepo skip about in utter obliviousness to reality - hugging a tree his father's just pissed on; giving a passer-by a piece of horse shit from the stables he's sweeping, "on the house". The Brothers Marquez never properly grew up, and it shows - and you wouldn't have it any other way.

**Reviewer:** [Corinne Salisbury](#)