

British Theatre Guide

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

Infinita

London International Mime Festival 2016

Familie Flöz

Peacock Theatre

28–30 January 2016

You must not miss the Berlin-based Familie Flöz if you can help it—I nearly did. But I can't tell you to rush to the Peacock theatre in London, as I saw the last show tonight—of only three. Why only three? But remember the name. The theatre is buzzing, the family audience excited, involved, captivated. Talk about participation: they shout, clap, chuckle, guffaw, cheer, play ball (great rapport—a *Slava Snowshow* style descent into the stalls), and applaud a long happy curtain call.

Laughter and lumps in the throat, poignant, sentimental, touchingly real, *Infinita* addresses a matter of life and death without sugar coating—well maybe a little bit, the divine music helps—head on, shirking none of the messy bits (is that an enema and a full adult nappy?). All this behind masks and with body language so delicately exact, they could be speaking.

One of my offspring once observed at a very young age with the wisdom of children that adults are only old children. And this is what the Familie Flöz troupe of four, playing many roles, observes in its juxtapositioning of naughty playpen age children with the equally naughty senile in a nursing home. Easy targets, but done with gentle humour, tenderness and care.

The journey from birth to death, from big bang to back to the stars, starts as the audience is shuffling in and settling in: in silhouette video animation (reminds me of Lotte Reiniger) and shadow play on the backcloth a man is digging in his garden—no, wait, it's a graveyard. A dog comes and nuzzles him, and then comes the coffin and funeral procession. Is anyone paying attention? Do we ever?

A park bench—all of life seems to happen on that park bench—a cellist in white frock plays, a man in a wheelchair brings a single red rose for the grave. In a mosaic of life on the stage and black and white negative-photo memories on the backcloth a life's story unfolds. We piece it together as it goes—backwards and forwards—what is more satisfying than that?

A baby getting up on its feet, limbs floppy, hips loose, stance wobbly, slapstick observational. A bigger girl comes and snatches his rag doll—this rag doll is a constant—two slightly bigger flatulent toddlers try to get into his playpen, she sorts them out. Plays doctors and nurses—well, we know where that leads. They like it. Clowns in babygros... Watch the toddler try to climb a chair too big for him with dedicated ingenuity and guile.

The tension and build-up is great, the movements enthralling—the selfishness of children re-enacted in the nursing home, to which an embarrassed elegant old woman delivers the quiet old man in the wheelchair. Oblivious to the other inmates, as long as he can play the piano, he is easy to handle. The music, played live, is a wonderful choice of classical and klezmer (there's something of the Tiger Lillies in that jaunty accordion), jazz and easy listening.

The other residents are a handful: there's the junkie, who steals pills from the nurse and is rejuvenated by them, doing wheelies on his walking frame; there's the Romeo with his radio (great fun is had with the aerial) and the hots for the nurse (we all need love); and the unsteady man carrying his potty across the room. The audience anticipates the worst.

But there's friendship and electric conductivity between these thrust-together inmates. As between Familie Flöz and its audience: they have us eating out of their hands. Classical mime and clowning, unselfconscious, behind eloquent masks (by Hajo Schüler, one of the performers) brings out the joys and pains of life. What a multitalented quartet, tugging at our volatile emotions. Life is bittersweet. If only one could die as peacefully as the man in the wheelchair—beckoned up to heaven by the lady in white.

In heaven—I said it was A Matter of Life and Death—the four old men in dapper white suits do a cabaret act, walking sticks beating out a syncopated rhythm on the floor, moonwalking, jiggling and back-flipping. The audience shouts for more.

Bows are taken in character, but when the heads come off something remarkable happens. These shrunken concave-chested old men grow in size. Isn't it always actors who are smaller in the flesh, well, Björn Leese, Benjamin Reber, Michael Vogel and the above-mentioned Schüler are bigger.

A fabulous generous ninety minutes boldly goes where many are afraid to go: irreverence and respect hand in glove they hold the mirror up to absurd incontinent life. And we can't stop laughing at ourselves. For this light relief I can only give much thanks. Pure magic.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)