

British Theatre Guide

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The Strange Tale of Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel

Paul Hunter

Told by an Idiot with Theatre Royal Plymouth, Royal & Derngate Northampton and Unity Theatre Liverpool

Northern Stage, Newcastle

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Little can weaken our affection for Charlie Chaplin or Laurel & Hardy. Decades have not seen their reputations tarnished by scandal, impropriety or the vagaries of fashion. They were stars who survived that notorious shift from silent movies to talkies which destroyed many of their contemporaries. The word ‘celebrity’ has been so devalued by the number of untalented nonentities to whom it is now attached that I can scarce be moved to type it and I would not demean the above trio with such a description.

They are seemingly eternal icons. So a play with a title such as this—written and directed by Paul Hunter for Told by an Idiot—would be hard put to fall flat on its face. Unless it was a complete turkey.

Which happily it isn't. And though it may be a bit straggly in places and have a few annoying time-shifts, it's bursting with athletic energy, ideas and visual innovation—an affectionate, highly comic homage to a long-gone but never forgotten age.

It's 90 per cent mime, built round the transatlantic journey to the USA in 1910 of the ship containing Laurel, Chaplin and the impresario Fred Karno, whose circus made it all possible. It was a voyage that was to change forever the shape of film comedy and very soon Chaplin and Laurel spent two years touring the USA. Only later was the Laurel and Hardy partnership created. Like Chaplin himself, that duo were among the most famous people on earth. In many ways, they still are.

The piece pays little homage to the facts themselves. More the spirit of things. Does this matter? Not that much. Iona Curelea's multi-tiered set is one the actors can climb all over and swing from and it also allows them at times almost to emerge out the ground such is the tiny aperture they squeeze through. There's the appropriate ragtime-type live piano music throughout to set the tone, plus the distinctive silent movie caption boards projected at appropriate moments. Jerone Marsh-Reid is Laurel, with Nick Haverson as both Fred Karno and Oliver Hardy, Amalia Vitale as Chaplin and Sara Alexander playing the piano and also tackling the part of Chaplin's mum.

As my partner said at the end when they took their bow, “were there *really* only four of them?”

Yes, there were and their comic elasticity makes all this excellent movement look so simple.

Chaplin, Karno and Hardy are wonderfully effective with only Stan Laurel a letdown, lacking both the right hat or real sense of disarming vulnerability.

This company does not do conventional theatre. The storyline fires about like a scattergun yet for the most part we are with it or at least just allow ourselves to be swept along by its innovation. At one stage, an actor enquires of the audience, "can anyone play the piano?" (Luckily, one person did and performed very well for their brief glory). Elsewhere, the cast trust us with bits of prop or costume or actually arm us with things to hurl at them. And note the imaginative way the actors depict their character's death (or birth).

These strictured times see an increasing number of joint stage productions; Told by An Idiot is buttressed here by Theatre Royal Plymouth, Royal & Derngate Northampton and Unity Theatre Liverpool. Safety in numbers of course, but it would be interesting to know what effect such amalgamations have on production totals overall.

Reviewer: [Peter Mortimer](#)