

British Theatre Guide

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The Birds

Aristophanes

The National Theatre and Mamaloucos Circus production of a new verse version by Sean O'Brien at the Lyttelton Theatre
(2002)

This is the first ever collaboration between the National Theatre and a circus company. Regrettably, it is not clear that the two do or ever can mix successfully. There are long gaps between the circus performances and in turn, these break the rhythm of poet, Sean O'Brien's narrative to such an extent that it is very hard to follow the plot.

The play starts with the arrival of two explorers played by actors with very strong experimental theatre backgrounds, Marcello Magni, who has spent many years working with Complicité, and Hayley Carmichael, who helped to found Told By An Idiot. Director Kathryn Hunter is also a Complicité regular.

Despite their considerable skills as a comic double-act, the material with which they have to work is often limited. Some of the rhyming couplets are extremely funny but the storyline does not advance, as it should.

After some witty clowning around, they arrive in the nation of the birds seeking freedom in its widest philosophical sense. The birds are led by a third experienced actress, Josette Bushell-Mingo. She is another immigrant human, who has become a hoopoe and chief minister of the country.

In a slightly outrageous performance very reminiscent of director Kathryn Hunter's style, she persuades the other birds, all of whom are played by seemingly very accomplished circus performers, that the way of capitalism proposed by Pezzer (Magni) will make them rich and happy.

Once the birds have taken on the new ethos, all sense of narrative drive disappears and the metaphorical strengths of the original are lost amid artistic confusion. It is unclear at the end whether democracy has won or has been subsumed by a tyrannical sovereignty.

Some of the circus performances can be breathtaking. There are trapeze artists and gymnastic athletes who throw themselves out over the audience and they produce some lovely moments: for example, the initial arrival of a very artistic nightingale. There is also a real highlight in possibly the best break dance that can ever be performed. This has little to do with the play, though.

The National has been very brave in its programming in the larger Lyttelton auditorium this season. Although the circus experiment has not been a success, the National should be encouraged to push for more new writing and exciting productions, which must be the lifeblood of British Theatre.

The Birds is playing at the National until 14th August

This review originally appeared on Theatreworld in a slightly different version.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)