

SLAPSTICK AND SLAUGHTER at the Wardrobe Theatre, Bristol



Desperate Men have been devising highly original and often startling street theatre for 35 years, and *Slapstick And Slaughter* gives clear evidence that their capacity to surprise, provoke and delight remains undiminished. Richard Headon and Jon Beedell have created a commemoration of World War One entirely in the spirit of Dadaism, the anti-art movement that responded to the insanity of war by rejecting as 'bourgeois' all traditional ideas of form and content. So initially *Slapstick And Slaughter* seems entirely nonsensical and anarchic, but it quickly becomes clear that it is in fact carefully crafted and choreographed, and that there is meaning in the madness. It is also very funny. Headon and Beedell are not in the first flush of youth, so much of the fun arises from seeing two mature men doing such gloriously silly things. At times there is more than a hint of Laurel and Hardy in the slow deliberation of their movements and the way no flicker of a smile disrupts their sustained air of solemn dignity.

Their chief prop is a large colourful painting, perhaps reminiscent of Kandinsky and apparently abstract, though more careful inspection reveals it to be an aerial view of the trenches, complete with barbed wire, shell holes and dead horses. Headon and Beedell peer over the top of the painting or pop out from behind it to deliver angry tirades of meaningless sounds one moment, or to sing sentimental ballads the next. At times they engage in pure slapstick, skillfully delivered with spot-on timing. There are sly sideswipes at referendums and a spontaneously improvised and hilarious sequence

where they attempt to describe in unison individual members of the audience. There is an impressively animated cheese-grater. Amid all the seeming chaos there are moving glimpses of the tragic realities of war. There is a particularly poignant recreation of that well-known fragment of film from the trenches that shows a soldier glancing up at the camera as he struggles to carry a wounded comrade.

Dada prepared the ground for a wide range of 'anti-establishment' comedy; think of The Goons or Monty Python. Free from all the usual restraints of narrative, character and even language, *Slapstick And Slaughter* will not be to everyone's taste, but it's perfect for the Wardrobe and was received rapturously last night. Street theatre indoors! I loved it. ★★★★★☆ Mike Whitton 28th June 2016