

Cart Macabre at the Old Vic Tunnels, SE1



Cart Macabre at the Old Vic Tunnels Ula Dajerling

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Face it, we're all jolting towards death, alongside strangers. We are tossed on a creaking sea, haunted by a fragile heart, moved by distant singing, afraid of goblins tapping on the window. We are all being trundled around, far under Waterloo Station, by 25 invisible performance artists dressed as sailors.

Oops, sorry. That last bit is just in the show. But the rest of Living Structures' installation-cum-drama resonates accurately with dark Jungian dreams, until even its rickety makeshift quality adds to the sense of vulnerability. With this immersive work, a sort of doomy ghost-train about notions of death, Kevin Spacey's new venue hits its stride.

From the moment that you empty your pockets into plastic bags and have a chap in a sailor-suit put a luggage label on you as trains rumble overhead, apprehension builds.

More unsmiling sailors summon you singly — ignoring pairs and groups — to be wheeled into pitch darkness on a trolley. Invisible soft hands push you on to a bench next to unseen bodies, four abreast, silent. You jolt, sway and stop in deadly blackness while strange voices mutter and mock (“You will die and you will rot! Who cares if you’re here or not?”). Sliding hatches in random directions intermittently cast glimmers on to your companions’ taut faces, revealing not commonplace ghost-train horrors but slyer images — red trickles, odd perspectives, nakedness, a moth and candle. Sometimes nothing happens.

Once the whole cart rocks on an invisible sea, once seems to slide downhill, all in that impenetrable dark. An odd thing happens to the ceiling. Once, a screen flashed a bleak monochrome face: staring eyes, wild hair. My own face! Oh, you artful German video-wonks.

But know what? It’s rather beautiful, this subterranean mischief by Klaus Kruse and his team. There’s more comradeship than gratuitous grisliness. Puppet heads may chant “This you know, you take nothing when you go” but there is a final unexpected embrace, and when light returns, one by one the players appear, young and warm and human, singing in beautiful harmony about how beneath the nightmare sea is “a current that takes me back to me”.

Then they giggle and show you the makeshift devices they did it with. Only 32 people can see this show at once. It’s impractical and a bit nuts, but lovely.

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