



**Living Structures**  
**Cart Macabre**

Shunt Vaults, London  
28 February 2009

Reviewed by *Dorothy Max Prior*



You can't take it with you when you die. No sir-ee. It doesn't matter what you've got, it's all just so much dust and ashes. You leave this world as you arrive, naked and alone.

And so here we are, stripped of our belongings, naked (well, beneath our clothes anyway), and alone (until we are suddenly aware that there is another body pushed in against us); abandoned to darkness and trundled off in a coffin-cart, reflecting on what it might feel like to shake off this mortal coil and journey through the underworld.

In the nicest possible way, or at least in a way that is not altogether terrifying all of the time, Living Structures give us an immersive theatre experience of – well, of death.

Cart Macabre is a kind of Jungian ghost train – a whiz-crash-bang fairground ride through the collective unconscious, a fantastical exploration of the 'after-death'. Living Structures have done their homework – Christian notions of purgatory and limbo; the Tibetan Bardo of Becoming; the Western Lands from the Egyptian Book of the Dead; the Ancient Greek journey through Hades' kingdom – the whole world of myths and mythologies, spiritual and religious signs and symbols relating to death and the imagined experience after death, are plundered mercilessly.

I am the first from the waiting group to be placed on a wooden 'stretcher' and taken to a place of darkness, where I am moved into a box of some sort. My 'coffin' at first confines me in complete darkness and almost- silence (I can hear random clunks and clanks and the distant sound of people drinking at the bar. Ah, that'll be my wake, then). After what seems like a long time alone, I feel another body next to me. I've no idea if it belongs to a man or a woman, young or old. More bodies arrive. We hear the melancholy (funereal, even) sound of a solo voice ringing in the darkness.

Then, little windows appear offering a welcome, if temporary, return of the light. I'm so busy grinning inanely at my fellow travellers, seen for the first time, that I almost forget to look at the little animations in front of me – four small square 'fish tank' displays featuring what look to be bones and blood, soil and watery amoeba. The building blocks of life now breaking down, or perhaps regenerating. The windows close, we are again in darkness, and are now trundled off – although it took me a minute or two to relax into the notion that I was in a cart being moved along, rather than being in a big dark box being shaken by lunatics and attacked by mad dogs.

And so it goes – darkness, sound, light, darkness – and on we go. A myriad of images and sensory impressions pass by, or leap out, or slyly intrude upon our space. A host of little butterfly-souls fly away; we look down upon a woman in her bed singing her swan-song; a marauding gang of carnivalesque Big Heads taunt us, clambering over our carts; we look out to see our bagged possessions dangling in a waterfall, and our coats merrily dancing above our heads.

At one point we are pulled from the carts and pushed through a tight tunnel of cloying material (the only part of the show that I find oddly pointless – not because it's unpleasant, I really don't mind –but I don't understand. If this is rebirth then it ought to be at the very end surely? And if it isn't that, then what is it? Why get us up and sit us down again?)

The musty tunnels and archways of the underground Shunt Vaults are in many ways the perfect site for this performance, although there are some issues with the way the arrival and 'pre-set' are handled – it would perhaps be easier to stage this piece in a space that is exclusively under Living Structures' control.

Yet this is but a small gripe. It is an extremely ambitious project, which for the most part is pulled off with great aplomb, somehow. (See **From the Frontline** in this edition to learn more about the making of this piece.)

It is great to see shadow puppetry, animation and a theatre-of-objects integrated so beautifully with physical performance, site, and music. It is the acapella singing – solo and chorus work equally wonderful – that is the glue that holds this experience together.

This is a theatre of the senses – Grotowski has spoken disparagingly of the 'children of Artaud' and their noise-making, but these children of Artaud give us an invigorating updated interpretation of the notion of a 'total theatre'. A sensory assault yes – but one that reaches the imagination through the senses, getting to heart of the matter (a matter of life and death...).

Cart Macabre gets the heart racing (literally), fires the imagination, and sets us thinking about the one inevitability we all face – death. It does so using melancholy, whimsy, grotesque humour, and more than a touch of beauty.

I'd say Living Structures are set for a great future – a company to watch (and listen to, touch, and smell).