

CAROUSEL OF FANTASIES

THURSDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2010

Cart Macabre, Old Vic Tunnels

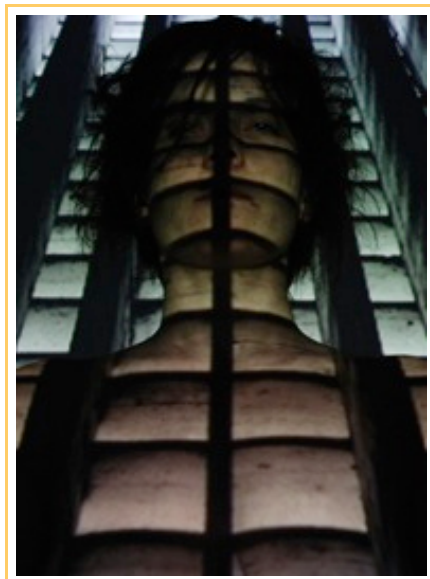
It may not quite take you to hell on a hartcart, but *Cart Macabre* – a ride through the pitch-black, stopping at a series of momentary vignettes and stills – has all the eerie uncertainty of a trip across the River Styx.

Having handed over all our earthly possessions, like dead sailors trading coins for safe passage, we are stretched into the dark on white mortuary slabs and shunted into rickety wooden compartments. Your head is ducked under the doorframe like an arrested citizen folded into a waiting police car. Sat there, in the chilly dark, your arm grazes against someone else's. It's both comforting in its intimacy and disconcerting in its anonymity. And then, you wait; abandoned and expectant, anxious and excited.

What follows is a sequence of pit-stops, at each of which the box's various panels – in front, behind and above – open into windows. Each provides a glimpse of entrancing darkness: butterflies flickering through a candle, clouds of ink dancing in diffusion. In one we watch a film, reflected in a stagnant pool below, of a human heart torn apart at the sinews and remoulded in reverse. Another places us on the ceiling of a bedroom as a woman sleeps below: a dizzying out of body experience.

All the while, distant siren-song calls: soft, almost seductive, sea-shanties that mangle your defences and lull you into trance. These anonymous, echoing chamber-voices sing of "wastelands without even waste," of the empty void and the purposeless existence. "Do you," a looming, cartoonish sea-captain's face demands, "have a good idea / of what you are doing here?"

The truth, for the most part, is no. What one sees, always laced with



MATT TRUEEMAN

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Royal Court casting for Richard Bean's *THE HERETIC*: James Fleet, Johnny Flynn, Adrian Hood, Juliet Stevenson, Leah Whitaker & Lydia Wilson
[22 hours ago](#)

[@jakeyoh](#) I think you should wait to find out for yourself. It's more than any of those words suggest.
[yesterday](#)

[@jakeyoh](#) I think you should, Jake. Rory Kinnear is a phenomenal Hamlet, even if (in my mind) the production around him is a bit deliberate.
[yesterday](#)

Review: *Cart Macabre* at the Old Vic Tunnels – <http://bit.ly/f1pswl> "All the eerie uncertainty of a trip across the River Styx."
[yesterday](#)

Also, I'm going on a one-man campaign for Adrian Scarborough as Best Supporting Actor in [@Whatsonstage](#) awards: <http://bit.ly/dWF6aq>
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death, is more kaleidoscopic slide-show than narrative route. It tickles your brain without entirely coming together. One thinks of purgatory, where time forever passes, in the not-unpleasant hypnosis of individual stops and in the quietly foreboding journey through the dark.

Can that blind journey, trundling along on bumpy wheels, be considered substantial? Certainly, the in-between makes up a large part of *Cart Macabre* and, though it is always disorientating, its returns diminish. One grows accustomed to the dark and relaxes into the uncertainty. What feels, at first, positively dangerous, softens into safety.

If anything, *Cart Macabre* trades too heavily on the ride itself. At points, the sensation can be spectacular, as when you genuinely – and I have no idea how it was achieved, preferring not to root about afterwards – seem to take flight, lurching gently left and right. Elsewhere, you incline and descend. Or seem to move, but can't be sure. But the overriding sensation is one of pleasurable passivity. In that, the ride is much like massage – or, perhaps, its inverse.

For where, with massage, one's physical boundaries are affirmed by contact, here they become uncertain. Your own stability and firmness, your orientation, is here dissolved. Rather you sit suspended in space, blurry and ill-defined. The self-awareness, the definite feeling of presence, is just as strong, but it is not so defined by physical existence. You lose sight of your skin. Your edges disappear.

Cart Macabre is undoubtedly enjoyable, but that pleasure is more kinetic than sensory; much like being rocked in a cradle or pushed on a swing. The sights and sounds contained enhance the ride, sending a tide of tingles down the spine, but – as theatre, rather than fairground attraction – it should be the other way around.

Photograph: Living Structures

POSTED BY MATT TRUEMAN AT 08:50

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