

## London Life Arts

## Triumphant return to the trenches

## THEATRE

## OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR

Theatre Royal Stratford East, E15

★★★★☆

## HENRY HITCHINGS

JOAN Littlewood was a visionary theatre maker whose epic musical about the First World War, based around songs sung by the soldiers, seemed a landmark in the art of satire when it premiered in 1963. Here it's lovingly revived by Terry Johnson at the east London venue where it was first performed.

Littlewood was partly inspired by her loathing of R C Sherriff's play *Journey's End*, which saw the conflict from the perspective of the officers.

She chose to concentrate on ordinary soldiers – their suffering and camaraderie as well as their

twinges of scepticism or naivety. Here the show feels unfocused for the first 20 minutes. But then the song "Belgium put the kibosh on the Kaiser" works its jaunty magic, and from that point the rhythm is much more sure.

The brutal imagery of trench warfare alternates with peppy musical routines, while an electronic display panel parades grim statistics ("28,000 British dead, gained 5 yards").

Caroline Quentin is the biggest name in the cast, and has two standout moments – first as a music-hall artiste encouraging men to enlist, and later as an eloquent pacifist who gets pelted with abuse (and worse). Shaun Prendergast, in

his main role as master of ceremonies, has the wry knowingness of a pantomime dame

**Standout:** Caroline Quentin shines as a music-hall artiste then a pacifist

(a guise in which he has previously excelled). And Michael Simkins brilliantly evokes the blinkered arrogance of a ruling class shockingly ill-equipped for leadership.

There's a homespun feel about Johnson's production which is true to the spirit of the original while also making deft use of projections (the video design is by Ian William Galloway). Lez Brotherston's set resembles an adventure playground – albeit one fringed with intricate gold ornament.

The show remains didactic and certainly doesn't present a charitable vision of the American contribution to the war effort, while there's a strong Sixties sensibility in its picture of working-class lions being exploited by upper-class donkeys.

Yet this revival pulses with skill and ardour. It is at its best not in the episodes of brisk comedy but in its moments of poignancy, notably during the 1914 Christmas truce, which is almost unbearably moving.

■ *Until March 15 (020 8534 0310, stratfordeast.com)*

## Movement of the people

Multiculturalism may have failed but it works better in London than anywhere else, Protein Dance's Luca Silvestrini tells **Lyndsey Winship**, as he unveils his latest work, *Border Tales*

AS MPs debated the immigration bill in the Commons earlier this month, a different picture of multicultural Britain was unfolding in an old town hall in Greenwich. In front of the wood-panelled walls of the Art Deco Borough Hall, 12 dancers hailing from all corners of the world – from Egypt to Australia, Nigeria to Taiwan – united in an earthy, tribal ritual. Later they talk about their stories: their roots, their identity, and how they ended up here.

The transglobal cast were in rehearsal for the latest show by Protein, the dance company led by Luca Silvestrini, a choreographer who specialises in producing witty dance theatre that takes a magnifying glass to modern life. Previously he's covered booze culture (*Publife*), body image (*Dear Body*) and the ups and downs of online dating (*LOL*), always with a wry eye on social mores and human vulnerability. But this next topic is a big one. *Border Tales* is a story of immigration and the reality of life in multicultural Britain.

There couldn't be a more pertinent theme right now, but for Silvestrini, as an immigrant himself, it's not just political, it's personal. Born in Jesi, a small town in central Italy, he came to London aged 28. It was only supposed to be for a year, but four months in he fell in love, and almost 20 years later he's still here (with the same partner, Kenneth Sharp, a former dancer, now arts administrator).

Yet despite being well established, Silvestrini still feels like an outsider. "I am a foreigner and I feel like a foreigner here," he says. "I get in trouble quite a lot because I have a different temperament. The way you express your emotions is culturally different. People view me as arrogant, or not polite enough. Here you're always: 'Sorry, sorry, sorry'. The thing is, you have to adapt. It's your job to adapt – you came here. However, it's not always that simple."

Silvestrini is certainly not arrogant and is perfectly polite, although he can be amusingly direct. On first arriving in London in 1995 he says he looked around and said to himself: "Oh my God, who is English here?"

The impetus for *Border Tales* came after hearing David Cameron's 2011 speech on the failure of multiculturalism. The cast will tell their own stories of cultural identity and how British they feel, but Silvestrini began with a period of research undertaken around the world with members of the public and community groups "to find out what real people think, feel, do".

With both the dancers and the public



**Push and pull:** "There is an instinct to be protective when you feel your space has been invaded," says *Border Tales'* choreographer Luca Silvestrini

there were recurring themes. Typically, the stories were less about physically getting over the border, more about the borders that remain in our heads and our everyday lives. "It takes so many years to become accepted. It's not as easy as we think," he says.

One man, born in Denmark to Lebanese parents, told the choreographer, "I live two lives. I have my life at home, which is Lebanese. And I have my life outside, which is Danish."

Being stuck between two cultures was a common experience. Silvestrini talked to first-generation immigrants

about bringing their children up in an alien culture and seeing them reject their own traditions. "The majority said, 'You have to let it go'," says Silvestrini. "That tension really interested me, the sense of in-betweenness, and that [for a better life] there's something you have to give away."

Then there's the sense of limbo, of life being on hold, that's common to refugees and asylum seekers, all of which Silvestrini wanted to feed into *Border Tales*.

He's also interested in the views of the natives. In his home town in Italy, where growing up "there were no

foreigners", there are now Chinese markets and Bangladeshi-run shops, but he notices that each community lives within its own small bubble. "Everyone is quick to say, 'Of course I'm not racist...' but there is an instinct to be protective when you feel your space has been invaded. It's quite primal. But I think if we start to give away a bit of our feeling of superiority we might start thinking about things a little bit differently."

So does that mean that perhaps Cameron was right, has multiculturalism failed? "In a way, but I think it certainly works better here than in my country.

It's much more integrated here. And London is very different to anywhere else. You don't have the strong sense of [individual] communities; you belong to London."

For Silvestrini, *Border Tales* is a chance to look at the assumptions we make about other people, but he doesn't want to lecture. "I don't want to draw one conclusion," he says. "Who am I to say what is right or wrong? Anyway, I could make a hundred more pieces on the same theme..."

■ *Border Tales is at the The Place, WC1 (020 7121 1100, theplace.org.uk), Feb 25-Mar 15*

## DIVERSE DANCE

**Ballet Black**  
The small but perfectly formed company that celebrates black and Asian dancers is unmissable. **Tomorrow and Friday**, Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, WC2 (020 7304 4000, roh.org.uk)



CAMILLA GREENWELL

**Wild Card – Cindy Claes**  
Hip hop meets Jamaican dancehall, left, in this evening curated by London-based Belgian Cindy Claes. **Tomorrow and Friday**, Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, EC1 (0844 412 4300, sadlerswells.com)

**First Light & Choreogata**  
A bill of new works features the excellent dancer/choreographer Seeta Patel in a fusion of classical Indian and contemporary dance. **Feb 27-28**, Purcell Room, SE1, (0844 875 0073, southbankcentre.co.uk)



PETE SCHIAZZA

## WHAT ELSE IS NEW ...

## POP

## MODERAT

Koko, NW1

★★★★☆

## DAVID SMYTH



## IN TOWN TONIGHT

## DON GIOVANNI

Various cinemas

For a fraction of the price of a front-row seat, Kasper Holten's acclaimed Royal Opera House production is broadcast live into cinemas starring Mariusz Kwiecien, above, as Mozart's infamous womaniser.

**Information:** 6.45pm, for full details go to roh.org.uk/cinemas

WHEN Gernot Bronsert and Sebastian Szary of Modeselektor and Sascha Ring of Apparatus joined forces with a composite name, they became the Brangelina of German techno. In this ordinarily underground world the trio have star power, so their first album in five years was quite an event in 2013, as are two rare London shows this week. The European accents throughout the crowd proved their international reputation.

Facing the usual problem dance music has of how to entertain while doing something, or possibly nothing, behind bland workstations, they employed two translucent screens bisecting in a cross that were a blizzard of shapes and lines, hands and comic strip images.

Ring had a decent voice when he sang on tracks including *Rusty Nails* and *Last Time* but struggled to engage fully from behind his desk.

Although the catchiest moment was *Bad Kingdom* with its pop chorus and glowering dubstep bass, the trio sounded sharpest on some of the longer instrumentals. Songs such as *A New Error* and *No 22* rewarded patience with some overwhelming passages, and beats that didn't build to a gradual climax in the traditional manner but exploded out at you all of a sudden.

One part of *Milk* sounded as though it was being played underwater, before it burst to the surface in thrilling style.

This gig venue was not the ideal space for them, rammed with people who had no room to dance and stamped and jostled when they tried. Yet they seem to be becoming more of a song-based act, with Ring singing often and even picking up a guitar for the primal thud of *Les Grandes Marches*.

They may be too big for the clubs now, but this supergroup was most super when it kept those late night dancefloor sounds at the forefront.

■ *Also tonight (0870 432 5527, koko.uk.com)*

## COMEDY

## MILES JUPP

Ambassadors Theatre, WC2

★★★★☆

## BRUCE DESSAU

IT'S easy to make instant assumptions about Miles Jupp. On the surface he appears to be a tweedy, Telegraph-reading young fogey who likes nothing better than tutting at litterbugs. But stick around a while and there are welcome rug-pulling surprises in his latest show, *Miles Jupp Is The Chap You're Thinking Of*.

The panel game regular starts off with some seemingly off-the-peg moaning about society's handcart-assisted descent into hell. When he tries to admonish some local youngsters for a minor indiscretion they look at him "as if I was reading the Spanish Shipping Forecast". Delicious turns of phrase such as this transform potentially pedestrian subject matter into something special.

Jupp really hits his stride when he tackles parenthood. As the prematurely ancient 34-year-old father of four pre-school "infant captors", he has plenty to be stressed about, from sticky Weetabix to pushchairs that refuse to open. His comic exasperation builds up an impressive head of steam as he lists his multiple grievances.

After the interval this momentum dissipates a little. His monologue remains funny but becomes more bitty. Highlights include a sequence about Twitter, a reflection on the way some people still confuse him with the character he once played in children's series *Balamory* and an appoplectic Fawltiyish rant about the tyranny of coffee.

Yet just as one thinks one knows where Jupp is coming from he puts the boot, sorry, brogue, into government policy. It is an unexpected gear-change that leads into a well-polished farcical trouser-based finish that pulls a few strands neatly together.

A show that is not totally revolutionary in various senses, perhaps, but all exquisitely delivered.

■ *Tonight and February 25 (08448 112 334, theambassadorstheatre.co.uk)*


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