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THEATER REVIEWS

Lost in a Theatrical World Of Slapstick and Magic



J. J. Tizio

Trey Lyford, left, and Geoff Sobelle star in "All Wear Bowlers."

'All Wear Bowlers'

Here Arts Center

If an egg symbolizes the birth of something new, then it's the perfect metaphor for "All Wear Bowlers," a singularly inventive and surreal vaudeville act filled with images of dancing eggs, magical eggs and even one giant egg head. But this is only one of the show's striking motifs. There are also the elastic arms that stretch across the room, exploding light fixtures and floating bowlers.

Trey Lyford and Geoff Sobelle, who star in and wrote the show, play silent-film clowns who are lost inside this bizarre theatrical world. Imagine Laurel and Hardy stuck in a Magritte painting. On a giant screen, we first see Earnest (Mr. Sobelle) and Wyatt (Mr. Lyford) in a vast "Godot"-style wasteland emerging from behind a crooked tree in the distance. (The breathtaking film work is by Michael Glass.) Then, by accident, they stumble out of the border of the screen, and in an impressively timed effect, onto the stage. It's a surprising, fantastical moment, and it lets you know early on that in this show, anything is possible.

While the plot is thin, the show features a constant parade of classic slapstick, elegant pratfalls and rigorous sleight of hand. Mr. Sobelle's Earnest has an aggressive streak,

*Two silent-film clowns
are caught in an
existential nightmare.*

while Mr. Lyford's Wyatt is a meeker, second-banana type, but the defining trait of both of these characters is a cringing, nervous energy, as if something terrible is about to happen at any moment. Directed by Aleksandra Wolska, the displaced tramps, who while on stage speak in a spastic mumble, turn the fourth wall into dust, constantly playing with the relationship between viewer and viewed. At one point, they grab two chairs, sit down on stage and stare at the crowd. "I don't get it," Mr. Lyford says, before his partner explains, "It's avant-garde."

During a recent performance, Mr. Sobelle walked into the audience, grabbed my notepad and started reading out loud. ("It sucks!" he shouted, with mock surprise.) If there's one thing you should never do to a critic, it's steal his notebook. But in this instance, I didn't mind, because I had written hardly anything. I was too busy laughing.

The mood of high anxiety is played not just for laughs. In a reverse of comic relief, the actors pause from the jokes for a few interludes of absolute terror. For example, Earnest performs a silly ventriloquist's act, until the dummy, played by Mr. Lyford, revolts. Mr. Lyford, who has been giggling throughout the entire show, becomes icy cold and mean; he makes Chucky, the murderous doll from the film "Child's Play," look cuddly.

The slickly designed production includes fine work by talented veterans of the Off Off Broadway scene like the costume designer Tara Webb and the film composer Michael Friedman, both of whom capture the silent-film aesthetic. The new vaudevillian David Shiner ("Fool Moon") is also credited as a vaudeville consultant. Mr. Shiner has kept a low profile since playing the Cat in the Hat in "Seussical: The Musical," often cited as Exhibit A in how Broadway can waste talent. Indeed, it's hard to imagine the kind of daring and ingenuity in "All Wear Bowlers" in the commercial theater. It's one more reason to feel foolish about spending money on a Broadway show.

JASON ZINOMAN