

“Le Nozze di Figaro” by National Czech Company, Prague
A Theatre Review by Mark Allen

If you ever visit the old town area of Prague, you will see a multitude of advertisements for different puppet shows. Although admittedly I'd never known the Czech Republic to be famed for its exceptional puppetry, I took the plethora of productions advertised to be a sign of quality – “How can a puppet show continue to run if it's rubbish?” I thought. Then I discovered how. Tourists.

My girlfriend and I were hit with a sense of dread as soon as we first walked into the theatre. There were very few people in the audience and when we sat down, I noticed that the stage curtain wasn't fully closed, so I could see part of the set. This isn't a huge issue in itself – It's not going to ruin the show - but it did deepen my suspicions that we were about to watch a spectacularly shoddy piece of entertainment and I was not to be disappointed.

After several minutes of waiting to have my fears confirmed, the tattered curtain finally opened to reveal a ramshackle set that looked as though it had been painted by infants. Before I had chance to take all of this in, the music started. It was “The Marriage of Figaro”, which I wasn't familiar with at the time and which, I'm sorry to say, I'm even less familiar with now I've seen this production.

Normally, it is the convention in puppetry, to indicate to the audience which of the characters is speaking (or in this case, singing), so that the audience are able to follow the plot. Unfortunately, this is a convention that the National Czech Company decided to dispense with for their production, as their puppets moved in response to the music seemingly at random, as though they were each at a different rave.

The clarity of the plot was made no easier by the fact that the lighting was so badly designed that many of the characters spent their time in partial darkness and even if they were moving, we were unsure as to whether they were singing, or whether it was due to the puppeteer drumming their fingers through boredom. It soon became clear that the lack of light was a tactical ploy however, when the leading lady moved into a spotlight and we could see that it had obviously been a very long time since the puppets had last been cleaned, as they were all filthy. I don't think it was Figaro's intention to marry someone with a five o' clock shadow.

As the show progressed further, it became almost comically shoddy. On several occasions, I could see the hands of the puppeteers emerging from above, which I suppose at least served to detract from the noise being made backstage as puppeteers crashed into each other on their way to whichever side of the stage they were supposed to be at.

At one point, although my girlfriend is unable to corroborate this on account of dozing off, I'm convinced I saw a hand shoot down from above the stage and quickly turn the head of one of the puppets so that it was facing the character he was singing to.

I wasn't sure how much more amateur the whole event could be, but I was still not to be let down. In the final scene, when all of the characters are on stage at the same time, and I swear I'm not lying to you here - one of the male puppet's legs fell off. There was a brief moment of shock before I just had to laugh. The audience at this point sparked into life for the first time throughout the performance, as they burst into fits of giggles and even began taking pictures of the dismembered puppet on their mobile phones.

There was a half hearted attempt to try and cover up the amputated puppet by making it sit down as if he'd just had a fainting fit, but it was fooling no-one. Eventually the show ended and what has to have been the most haphazard curtain call I've ever seen took place. One by one, very sheepishly, the puppeteers emerged from behind the curtain and bowed apologetically to the gobsmacked audience, who weren't even clapping by the end of it.

As the audience filed their way out of the venue, we were rapidly overtaken by one of the puppeteers themselves, who pushed through us, collected their money from the box office and almost ran out of the building. It's surely a bad sign when the performers flee the building before the audience has had a chance to get out themselves. It all reminded me of a very bad children's entertainer that knows full well they are putting on a terrible show, but still blindly hope that no-one notices.

Tickets for "The Marriage of Figaro" cost roughly the price of fifteen pints of Czech beer each. When my girlfriend and I emerged from the theatre having watched it, it was quite obvious how the money would have been better spent. For anyone else considering seeing this woeful production, I suggest that you follow the example of one of the puppets we saw and get legless instead.