

George Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London and Down/Out by Cardboard Citizens, a play freely adapted from Down and out in Paris and London and People of the Abyss by Jack London.

Reviewed by Julian Raphael for the Willow Walker

In my opinion it is useless to criticise the book Down and Out in Paris and London. It still seems like a very cutting edge piece of literature, still modern in its placing of the author on some sort of quest. In this case a hobo quest and, as the programme for Down/Out informs me Jack London was an American novelist who spent a month or so on the streets of the East End of London researching his documentary People of the Abyss. This, almost myth like, displacement of middle-class author into the underworld must be the only way to write on the subject. Obviously the author need not stay in that underworld, but like Orpheus return to the top world once he has gathered enough material for the book. He is, after all an artist not a saint like Mother Theresa.

This underworld awaited us, the audience for Down/Out, as we took our seats. The entire cast dimly arrayed on the stage in freeze frame, (no curtain) I liked this touch. By erasing the conventional beginning of a performance we are made to feel like this is not a theatre play, it's a slice of life, or maybe, to quote the bard "all the world's a stage." So far so good I thought.

That night's performance was sold out and it must be said that Down/Out by Cardboard Citizens was a show *business* success and very well thought out played out and well received. It must be also stressed that transferring a hugely populated book as Down and Out in Paris and London, along with People of the Abyss, onto the stage is a logical impossibility. Much will be disregarded of course and a smaller vision extracted from the larger sprawl of sights and stories in the two books.

This nevertheless is your humble reviewers quibble with how the process of collaboration between the homeless and ex-homeless actors and the professional theatre people involved carved out their own narrative from the huge amount of source material. In the first chapter of the book Down and Out there is a character called Charlie who is clearly a little unhinged and tells stories about himself in Paris bars to all and sundry. George Orwell relays one of these stories and it is about a terrible tale of sexual violence against a young prostitute and you do find yourself wondering why he has seen fit to include it. Orwell explains at the end of the chapter; "He was a curious specimen Charlie. I describe him just to show what diverse characters could be found flourishing in the Coq d'Or quarter." Charlie, who arguably is the most bizarre figure in Down and Out, got cut completely in Cardboard Citizens and I found this piece of editing to be more a piece of censorship.

Sensitive censorship it's true since the rest of the play earnestly urged us to look long and hard at poverty and the people affected by it. What I feel is that Charlie and his ridiculous story (or is it ridiculous?) of sadism did not fit with Cardboard Citizens' overall bias of showing homeless people in a favourable light. Charlie in the book is either too mad or too bad for Cardboard Citizens. Personally, I think Charlie just makes this story up to scandalise the nice drinkers in the bistro. But, of course, this is unclear. If I had been the director of Down/Out or one of the actors it's precisely this blurred line between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood drawn by the character of Charlie that I would have tried very hard to justify inclusion.

By sidestepping the utter weirdness and possible unpleasantness of Charlie I feel the show somehow tried to prettify or airbrush out the madness and ugliness of being homeless and excluded from society. I understand that such an approach is natural when the cast are homeless or ex-homeless themselves, but were we not supposed to be seeing them in a double life of homelessness, or ex-homelessness, persons and also artists, interpreters of their own experience? I suppose I'm making a rather subtle point, but I hope its significance does not escape all my readers, all my homies, all my bitches!

The play was very good on food and the effects of hunger on a person's wellbeing and energy. And it did regurgitate a great deal of the original text using multi-media technology in places to "bring the book to life." One such was projecting Boris and Vita Mikailov's photographs of homeless people in Russia. Truly uncanny photographs that I'm sure Charlie would totteringly approved of as charmingly idyllic, a slice of Eden (Eden not Edam, although I sometimes wonder what's the difference).

By the end of the play, which didn't have an interval for some reason, Cardboard Citizens could not resist the lure, or allure, of Big Brother. Big Brother as both almost inescapable reality television show and Orwells' imagined means of state control. Let's be honest we seldom go to the theatre expecting profundity and tonight we didn't see it, although when referencing Channel 4's Big Brother the "who's the next housemate to face eviction?" question took on a nasty flavour.

Philosophically I think pessimism won out. When Orwell wrote at the end of the book "It's a fairly trivial story" I feel the cast of Down/Out chose to take him literally and conclude their play in a spirit of competitive celebration. Or maybe I took the jokes too seriously and when the cast, like at the end of the Kubrick flick Spartacus, all began saying "I'd make the best Orwell- I am Orwell!" and shoving each other off the "B.B" sofa all it meant was they were beginning to feel that writing an account of their own personal experiences of being homeless would render that hard experience more meaningful. Ah, therein lies a question!