



Method Lab 2011 presented by Greenroom
Reviewed by Fat Roland April 2011

Two Peas Without A Pod (Levantes Dance Theatre)
I Belong To This Band (Kings Of England)
plus: single.com (Sian Williams)

I had nearly sown up this review of the Greenroom's regular showcase night Method Lab. Sown it up and tied a little ribbon on top.

But as the review festered in my editing lab, a rumbling began. The Greenroom was about to face a massive crisis: how to deal with the £300,00 hole where their Arts Council funding used to be.

The solution was brutally simple: this classic fringe theatre fell down the funding hole. A few days after my trip there, they announced their closure after two and a half decades.

What was left was an almost limitless pool of anger and upset shouted at the government, at the Arts Council and at the brick walls that encase the Whitworth Street West venue. Tears streamed in the Greenroom, Twitter cried out in protest and, in the evening, beer flowed as a necessary release after the worst day in the Greenroom's history.



The Greenroom is a home to me, as it was to many other punters and performers. I'd even consented to perform as a gorilla at one of their cabarets in what I still rate as my most challenging and prestigious stage role to date. The thoughts of the many tributes on greenroomarts.tumblr.com are also the thoughts of this humble gorilla.

As a hack who now found it almost impossible to think straight amid the knee-jerk upset, it left me with a useless review which I'm now frantically rewriting before the Manchester Salon freelance commissioners send the bailiffs round.

However, we're going to talk about Method Lab, dear reader, because raging against the cuts and the difficult decisions government bodies face is doing no-one any good – despite the fact that some of the things printed in the press from the Arts Council PR machine have been a whitewash of absolute guff. We're going to talk about Method Lab because now, more than ever, the only thing matters is the art.

And what art. Method Lab was a dual header from two very different groups. We had a beguiling and delightful performance piece from Levantes Dance Theatre, described as one punter as “like the Two Ronnies, only sexier and dancier”, and a raucous folk piece from the Kings Of England, who raised a toast to dead children in front of a slightly startled crowd.

Levantes Dance Theatre gave us Two Peas Without A Pod, a surreal celebration of routine and synchronicity. We followed Bethanie and Eleni as they booked a taxi, rode on an aeroplane and forgot where they were. We were constantly stuck in a moment where nothing and everything is happening, like that snatch of time after déjà vu where you look for signs around you that the déjà vu is still happening.

On first glance, it seemed like a series of surprisingly fluid non-sequiturs: snippets of conversation (“I can't help it if I can't see you”; “love you, bye”), uneasy interaction with everyday props such as phones and chairs, and dance moves played out in a strange, mental hall of mirrors.

Look deeper, however, and you can tease out themes of relationship and coupling. Bethanie and Eleni seemed to be a pair of skittish love birds, two halves of the same mind, but with an added tension pulling them apart because one of them drops a suitcase / finds a man / forgets where she is / can't get a taxi firm to understand her.

Two Peas Without A Pod was also hilarious. The physical comedy was very precise: not too

much and just enough. The woozy, tumbling choreography flowed magnificently, and Levantes knew when to add in a slightly exaggerated angling of the hips or a comedic power-walk when one of them was teaching a member of the audience to dance.

The jokes planted into the script (“she’s a vegetarian so she’ll have a sandwich”) brought to mind Miranda Hart or Victoria Wood, all brought with a lightness that was less obvious in the Kings Of England’s I Belong To This Band.

You could tell the Kings were going to be different the moment they raised their wine glasses (a surprising touch of finesse: it seems tankards would have been more appropriate) and toasted “dead dogs, dead children, dead lovers, dead heroes and how good it is to be alive”.

I Belong To This Band is an endlessly morphing folk performance with so many members, the idea is it can be performed anywhere in the country at any time. On this occasion, there were seven musicians and singers to give us the story of Henry, a villainous chimney sweep who poached and robbed his way to an early grave.



The narrative was explained with repetitive calls to “listen up!” and then extrapolated through representations of the story in song and performance. Stripped to the waist and looking ready

for a fight, Kings Of England co-founder Simon Bowes led us in rumbustious folk anthems peppered with DIY vignettes involving, among other things, cardboard dogs with snarly red fangs and crosses for eyes, a cheeky but touching funeral speech proclaiming “oy! oy! oy!”, and a strangely affecting parade of homemade antlers.

The only disappointment was the nagging feeling that, as in previous Simon Bowes performances, the audience should have been singing along to the very bottom of their lungs but weren't. All the Kings got was appreciative laughter and applause, which would have been enough in any other theatre. That didn't stop I Belong To This Band being earthy, dirty and sweet, and all the more impressive considering the performers only had an hour to rehearse together.

What makes the Greenroom unique is the mix of theatre spaces, allowing a chance for a bonus show while the main room was being prepared for Kings Of England. This was the hÅb-supported 'single.com' by Sian Williams, a portrait of a young woman so desperate to connect, she brought along her “single and desperate” friend Claire.

What we were given was a low-key guide to how not to be single. For example, they had guides on setting up a fake Facebook account for a pretend Darcy (“don't forget to press Save Changes”) and how to deal with a date, in which I was dragged on stage as a 'token man'. And they got the intimacies and drudgeries of relationships down to a tee, especially when they described Romeo And Juliet's balcony scene as “love, just a bit higher up”.

Two Peas Without A Pod and I Belong To This Band exist because of the Greenroom. Chosen through the theatre's Emergency project, the artists get rehearsal space and a whole package of support to allow their pieces to happen. Knowing that doesn't add to the sadness of the closure, but adds to the celebration of its legacy.

The only hope now is that the Greenroom can continue to find ways to nurture the experimental theatre it has proved so successful in creating, if only to provide me with another platform in which to release my inner gorilla.