

## fringereviews

## Roll up for the fairground attractions

The circus acts have come to town but which ones come out tops, asks Kelly Apter



DANCE, PHYSICAL  
THEATRE & CIRCUS  
UNDERBELLY CIRCUS HUB

**BARBU ELECTRO  
TRAD CABARET**

★★★★

**ELEPHANT IN THE  
ROOM**

★★

**DOLLS**

★★

**OCKHAM'S RAZOR:  
ARC & EVERY ACTION**

★★★★

**LES INOUI**

★★★★

**B-ORDERS**

★★★

**THE HOGWALLOPS**

★★★

**LA MEUTE**

★★

their hips or prancing in a camp disco ball costume. Sometimes it's dangerous (a woman in roller skates, spun round by a bearded, her head almost hitting the floor), sometimes it's ridiculous (a mind-reading section with hilarious film footage), often it's both.

With a nod to Victorian circus, Cirque Alfonse is the new wave of the old guard, all backed by a fantastic live band who'll have you humming their tunes into the night.

I'll confess to having seen *BARBU* twice already, and the chances of me making it to the end of the Fringe without a return visit are slim.

Conversely, nothing would induce me back into *Dolls* or *Elephant in the Room* – both of which are a triumph of style over content. A beautiful set, inspired by film noir, is really all *Elephant in the Room* has to offer, which is a crying shame. The four members of Cirque Le Roux have talent and skill in abundance, wasted here on a terrible script, bad direction and woefully few opportunities for them to actually do anything of merit. Some nice Chinese pole rounds off the show, but it's too little too late.

Likewise *Dolls*, from Czech company La Putyka has an incredibly promising start. An intriguing set sits ripe with potential, and the opening images – including a strong aerial display in a long yellow dress – lead you to the mistaken impression you're about to witness a profound piece of theatre. Then it dissolves into something reminiscent of the first day of rehearsals – when you throw around ideas to see what's worth keeping. Bold images emerge: a body wrapped entirely in cling film; a hand balancing act with two people bound together – but so much here should have ended up on the cutting room floor.

Awe is often the only emotion you experience during a circus show, but *Ockham's Razor* invite you to feel a

whole lot more than that. Their hugely enjoyable double bill proves just how intrinsically linked drama and circus skills can be, and how you can generate laughs without dumbing down.

In *Arc*, three people balance on a raft high above the ground.



Clockwise from top: The bearded men of *BARBU* fuse the sublime with the ridiculous; family-friendly kitchen capers are the preserve of *The Hogwallops*; *Ockham's Razor* bring every emotion to their awe-inspiring show. Below left, *Dolls* from Czech company La Putyka is ripe with potential but ultimately misses its mark



A TRIP to the circus used to have more in common with a day at the zoo than a night at the theatre. Not any more. The arrival of contemporary circus – or “Cirque Nouveau” as it's known – has seen a steady evolution away from ringleaders, animals and clowns to something more rooted in theatricality and, if you're lucky, emotional depth.

Most of the companies springing up feature the same basic line-up of skills: aerial hoops, silks or ropes; hand balancing on sticks or each other; Chinese pole; Cyr wheel; and general acrobatics. Which means pressure is mounting by the hour to present these skills in new and inventive ways.

Regardless of the end result, you've got to hand it to every single one of the companies taking up residence at Underbelly's new Circus Hub on the Meadows – they've each found a different way to package themselves.

So deliciously bizarre is the world of Canada's Cirque Alfonse, you may well want to run away with them. *BARBU* is the most fun you'll have in a tent this year. Big bearded men wearing little black pants, balancing on top of each other in a display of macho strength – then wiggling



Inevitably, sharing such a small space leads to conflict, but soon romantic feelings emerge which lead to resentment. There's also a genuine sense of peril, when the structure loses its stability. In the second half, *Every Action* offers a delightful contrast. Three men vying for the attention of one woman, and lots of comic potential alongside some daring aerial work.

French company T1J has no shortage of emotional integrity in its powerful work, *Les Inouïs*. Strictly for grown-ups, this engaging mix of film, puppetry and circus explores the plight of a migrant trying to make safe passage across

a border. A number of truly striking images stay with you long after the show, leaving you intrigued by the symbolism of it all. At turns gentle, athletic and bloody, this is the true frontier where circus and theatre meets.

Ashtar Muallem and Fadi Zmorrod of the Palestinian Circus Company also have a poignant message to communicate in *B-Orders*. Words and phrases, spoken through a voiceover and translated on-screen, give us an insight to life growing up in Palestine. Not the conflict with Israel we see on the news, but the home life, parental expectations and social mores.

And once again, storytelling and circus skills are beautifully combined.

If all this sounds a bit “adult”, then *Lost in Translation Circus* has the answer with *The Hogwallops*. Ideal for family audiences, this fun caper set in a family kitchen features exciting trapeze work, acrobatics, juggling and a whole lot of bakery mess. If the humour feels a little tired in places, they make up for it with charm, skill and a silly but fun storyline about a cherished banana.

And the less said about *La Meute* (The Wolf Pack) the better. Aside from some incredibly high flying up

into the rafters, the like of which I've never seen, this group from France has little to offer. A complete absence of progression (the same skill is played, and re-played) leaves them filling time with a seemingly endless obsession with hurting each other's private parts. Yawn.

*BARBU Electro Trad Cabaret* until 29 August; tomorrow 9:50pm. *Dolls* until 29 August; tomorrow 3:25pm. *Elephant in the Room* until 29 August; today 8:35pm. *Ockham's Razor: Arc and Every Action* until 26 August; today 1:25pm. *Les Inouïs* until 29 August; today 2:25pm. *B-Orders* until 29 August; today 4:25pm. *The Hogwallops* until 29 August; today 11:25am. *La Meute* until 29 August; tomorrow 5:25pm.