

EXEUNT

Expect the Unexpected

By Bellinda Dillon

25th September 2013

A brand new autumn festival for Exeter, [Unexpected](#) presented a programme of outdoor events and performances, taking them out of the usual spaces and thrusting them into the public arena. Funded by the council, it turned the city centre into a sort of multi-ring circus, filling outdoor (and semi-outdoor) spaces usually dominated by commerce with trapeze workshops, acrobatic displays, interventions and performances, most free to access.

Three indoor ticketed events – Reckless Sleepers' *The Last Supper*, Blind Ditch's *This City's Centre 3: Here, Now*, and Joel Cahen's *Wet Sounds* (which I didn't see) – subverted the spaces they occupied (the historic Guildhall, an empty office space and a swimming pool, respectively) by their form and/or content, and each was enhanced by the knowledge of how we usually interact with and in those spaces, if we are permitted into them at all.

While there seems little doubt that these public spectacles and interventions



engaged those who sought them out (there was a sense of excitement and expectation in evidence throughout the city centre, and plenty of spectators gathered, waiting, watching), there was also the fact that you can't fail to miss a performance when it inserts itself into your daily commute to work, or one man is doing a headstand on the head of another – and both are wearing animal skins – while you're trying to get to Superdrug. Your routine is inexorably altered, your perception of a

familiar journey or place transformed. And is that enough, or is there the expectation that these events will nudge the casual observer towards a ticketed event in a theatre at some point, if not today?

Interrupting the flow of people's routines and challenging the notion of where art can and does take place has driven the work of two of the companies presenting ticketed events at Unexpected. The first was Reckless Sleepers' 2004 piece *The Last Supper*, which is built around the rituals associated with eating and dying. An immediate thrill in seeing this show was being permitted inside a building not open to the public: the historic Guildhall, parts of which are the oldest still in use in the city. More resonant – and no doubt contributing to the hush all 39 audience members automatically fell into as we filed in to take a number (13 of which correspond to the last meals of death row inmates) and were directed to our seats around a formal dining table – was the knowledge that under the stone flooring is the old city jail (more like a pit, really), where prisoners were held before trial in the space where we were to watch the performance. The walls dripping with the oiled dead, wood panelling like so much coffinware, there was as much ceremony and ritual in the location as that promised by the piece. It's gratifying to know that *The Last Supper's* performance here has led to bookings in other Guildhalls around the country.

With no pretence at characterisation – Mole Wetherell, Tim Ingram and Leen Dewilde play themselves, seated at the top table – *The Last Supper* invites us to bear witness to the last moments of the famous, the infamous, the factual and the fictional, to partake of last meals and last words, some self-aware, some mundane, all made profound by the finality of the breath that uttered them. We hear Kafka calling for morphine and Monroe calling Kennedy; Che Guevara's final utterances are manipulated depending on whose objective they serve; and all are eaten by the cast, for they are printed on rice paper. Some of those quoted, we know their lives, their achievements, their failures simply by the nature of the lives they lived or they deaths they endured; others we know only by name, prisoner number and last meal. Death is the great leveller.

Deceptively simple, there are subtle segues that create a narrative of sorts: a prisoner's last meal of deep-fried everything is placed in front of an audience member to be followed by a list of Elvis Presley's gargantuan daily diet, and details of his demise atop the toilet, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich clutched in one hand; a slice of cake accompanying another death row repast feeds Marie Antoinette's walk to the guillotine. Two scenes early on hint at horror – the entire Romanov family massacred, only a maid remaining to tell the tale; Rasputin's fierce battle with his assassins and the reaper – but mostly there is a calm delivery, a slipping away, a receding, which makes the executions all the more unsettling. What of their victims, the other deaths that lead to this one? Where are they?

Most satisfying is the piece's identification of the rituals and ceremony around food and death, inextricably linked – the last meal, the last supper, the Eucharist... When a prisoner's requested chocolate cake with candles is delivered, the audience member blows them out and we all clap unprompted, this ritual buried deep within us since childhood. How many more of these are there, hidden from awareness until called forth by a specific situation? The calling of numbers, the presentation of meals, the pause before lifting the lid of the silver serving dish, the pouring of water and wine, the toasting of the departed – all combine to create a quietly moving piece.

exeuentmagazine.com