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## Review: *Flesh*, Barbican

Author: Mary Pollard | in Off West End, Physical theatre, Reviews | 28 January 2023 | 0 | 472 Views

### London Mime Festival 2023

#### Summary

Rating

Excellent

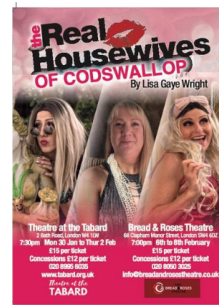
**Cleverly captivating and refreshingly funny, this production makes the ordinariness of being human sublime, communicating its stories using only bodies and totally without words.**

**Still Life** are an extraordinary Belgian theatre company, bringing *Flesh* to London for the first time as part of the **London Mime Festival**. Clearly, there is a gap in understanding between the largely English-speaking audience and the French-speaking creators. So the question naturally arises of how to communicate, to tell a story, when we don't share common words. *Flesh* skilfully and inventively demonstrates a multitude of ways that this can happen.

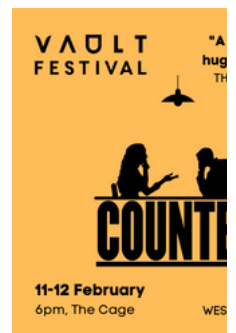
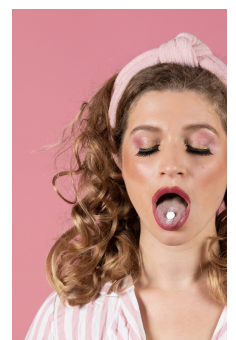
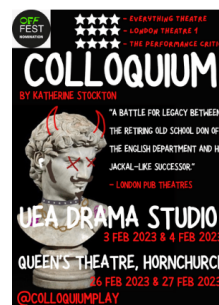
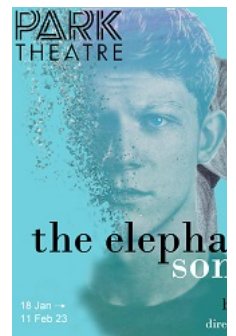
The show's title suggests how it looks beneath the skin of being human, examining it from different perspectives. It comprises four exquisitely observed vignettes that capture very different stories, telling them with delicious richness and without the need for any spoken language.

As the show begins, electronic music fills the air, resonating throughout the theatre and our bodies: already the audience understand corporeally that something is happening. The enormous **Barbican** stage is totally black, with a central cube of curtains. This fabulously epic space then frames and gives spectacular consequence to the ordinary, recognisable stories depicted, which might otherwise be mundane or overlooked. The sets are sharp, straightforward, and change rapidly to move us between snapshots

In the first scene a man visits his dying father in hospital. Heavy breaths and the beep of the monitor signify life, although the body we see is dormant, and is in truth a puppet: not flesh at all. Nothing about the actors' performances is exaggerated or oversized yet the narrative is impressively delivered with enormous power. Instructions are offered, and a multitude of emotions such as confusion, embarrassment and deep grief are silently signalled. Laughter ensues immediately, as we recognise the familiar, repeated ritual of hand sanitising, donning PPE, and bagging of property to ensure human safety. Ultimately these



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behaviours are seen to be meaningless, the father's body a limp, empty object as our laughter turns to deep, moving sorrow.

Next, a silent comic horror story considers the consequences of plastic surgery and reveals the fragility of human vanity. **Sophie Linsmaux** and **Aurelio Mergola** are superb as the cheesy lovers whose body language speaks of romance and vanity until Mergola's artificial face melts and morphs into disgusting shapelessness. Normality, depicted in the everyday living room, underscores the complete absurdity. Again, it's beautifully performed with perfect comic timing, creating a vividly ominous sense of the unnatural and cleverly questioning illusory concepts of the beautiful body.

**Muriel Legrand's** hugely entertaining display of carnal enjoyment, as she immerses herself totally in a VR game of the film *Titanic* is a tour de force performance. The audience sees nothing of what she views, but understands it exactly through her passionate, meticulous movement. Legrand's bodily animation is delightfully counterpoised by the geeky shop attendant (**Jonas Wertz**) who sits flatly by, unmoved, as she plunges in to her new reality, relishing it utterly, before crashing back to real life in tragic disappointment as the game ends.

Finally, at an awkward funeral, four siblings meet to remember their deceased mother and share her ashes, with devastatingly funny results. The detail of this unspoken performance is magnificently observed: so much is said about respect, power, status and ritual without a word used. A half kiss, smoke in the face, inappropriate greed and selfishness all feed in to a complex story of family feuding. And yet despite its negative possibilities, human life is seen to endure in a spectacular ending with an amazing special effect.

*Flesh* is a fascinating and wonderfully entertaining work, both beautifully understated yet epically impressive, and crafted with meticulous precision. This production makes the ordinariness of being human both sublime and interesting and it will certainly have you laughing your socks off!

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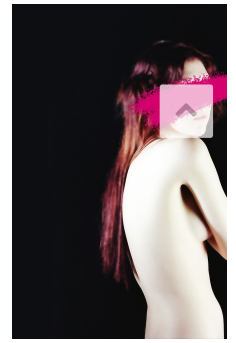
Conception and Direction: Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola

Scenario: Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola & Thomas van Zuylen

Spatial Installation: Sophie Leso

Set Design: Aurélie Deloche assisted by Rudi Bovy & Sophie Hazebrouck

Flesh plays as part of London Mime Festival 2023 until 28 January. Further information and bookings can be found [here](#).



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## ABOUT MARY POLLARD



By her own admission Mary goes to the theatre far too much, and will watch just about anything. Her favourite musical is *Matilda*, which she has seen 14 times, but she's also an Anthony Neilson and Shakespeare fan - go figure. She has a long history with Richmond Theatre, but is currently helping at Shakespeare's Globe as a steward and in the archive. She's also having fun being ET's specialist in children's theatre and puppetry, and being an Assessor for the Offies! Mary now insists on being called The Master having used the Covid pandemic to achieve an award winning MA in London's Theatre and Performance.

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