

Street Theatre: "Wet Sheets–Voyage into The Future"

Natural Theatre Company

Monday, September 10, 1984, 4.30 p.m.
Linzer Hauptplatz

The Natural Theatre Company, famous for its bizarre and funny street shows that are full of surprises, will take its Linz audience on a "Voyage into the Future". The course this voyage is going to take is to be a surprise, we only know that a great sailing ship will be used, that seagulls may explode suddenly, and that the voyage consists of hilarious scenes, reminiscent of Hollywood episodes and adventure stories.

The Natural Theatre Company will perform on various streets and squares in Linz twice daily between September 8 to 11, and in several scenes using surreal characters they will present glimpses into the very near future based on the theme of "Things to Come". These scenes will be played at set times, but unannounced, with the passers-by becoming as much part of the theatre as the actors.

The Natural Theatre Company, "Britain's leading touring comedy theatre", has been a popular success since 1970 at such varying venues as: the Theatre of Nations, the Festival of Fools, the Copenhagen, Dublin, Munich, Ljubljana, Hannover, Hamburg and Vienna Theatre Festivals. The strong visual content ensures that the work is enjoyed by audiences of all ages and types, even those with a limited knowledge of English. The company has been described by the Guardian newspaper as "quite the best of their kind" and by the Times as "total street theatre".

"Wet Sheets"

An outdoor version for Ars Electronica Linz

Wet Sheets is a maritime expression meaning "wet sails" or, the boat is once more at sea. In our story it also means a wet bed because the man is dreaming of his impending death.

The story begins in an old folks home where the old man is making a model ship...

As the nurse goes about her impersonal duties, the old man falls asleep and dreams that he is the admiral of a beautiful ship... Here sits an ancient mariner

Who once was brave and bold
But now laid up in dry dock
In the Rest-Awhyle home for the Old.

Each day passed in strict routine
For Matron knew her rules
Her ship was tight–just so, just right
And not a ship of fools.

And yet upon that fateful day
Twixt cocoa time and tea
Our hero raised his wet sheets
And once more took to sea.

The ship is on wheels and so the audience follows the admiral as he sails around the streets in his dream. The nurse acts as the narrator as the voyage takes everyone on several adventures to a "Treasure Island". The various scenes are acted out by the cast at the most bizarre and inappropriate places (chosen during the days of preparation). For instance: Robinson Crusoe might be discovered cast away in a phone booth; a mermaid in a fish shop; the treasure in a display window. Although we don't wish to reveal all the story to you, we will say that the admiral sees his own death in a climactic confrontation—but can he keep the treasure...?

We try to take the simplest of stories, preferably one that an audience will recognize, and superimpose on the layout of the area we are booked to play in. A lot of the fun for us is in choosing the particular locations for each element of the story but also there is a lot of amusement provided by passers-by who sometimes join in much more than is expected. We use easily recognized stock characters with realistic costumes so that people know how to react when confronted by them even if they don't always understand the English spoken. We always use realistic, rather than fantastical, characters in strange situations—a technique we have found proves funny and appealing time after time. In this way it is quite possible for a passer-by to become involved with the voyage by accident and yet still be able to follow the plot.

Street Surprises

Our "street surprises" involve several recognizable, usually rather "British" characters who might at first appear very normal. In fact you might take some time to spot them in a crowd. However they soon draw attention to themselves by acting in a strange surreal way sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically, sometimes briefly, sometimes at length, always involving an idea of what the character might become if his particular eccentricities got out of control. The surprises often have a startling effect on the audience of passers-by who very often find themselves acting out their own eccentricities almost involuntarily as the general mood of conventional behaviour is lifted. Our policy is never to annoy people for our own satisfaction as this is obviously a negative attitude. We prefer to stimulate people in a way they find they can easily respond. This is not always immediately grasped by local police officers who cannot afford the time necessarily to distinguish between "art" and excessive behaviour. Nevertheless, although we have often been questioned about our street work, we have never been prosecuted as a result of any complaint.

Thursday, September 13th, 1984 6.00 p.m.
Linzer Hauptplatz