

Reviews Gate

The Spinning Wheel

November 24, 2014
Posted by RodDungate

London

22 November

THE SPINNING WHEEL

collaboration between Baba Israel and Leo Kay

The Albany, Douglas Way, Deptford, London SE8 4AG on 22 September 2014 & Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham on 25 November 2014.

Runs 1 hr 35 mins No interval

TICKETS: 0121 446 3232 (Midlands Arts Centre)

www.macbirmingham.co.uk

Review: William Russell 22 November

A Voyage Round My Father: Beautifully performed.

Steve Ben Israel was a New York jazz musician, a stand up comic, a rebel with a cause, a pacifist and a member of an activist company called Living Theatre. This tribute by his son with music provided by Yako 440 probably makes more sense if you are a New Yorker, but it is so beautifully performed by Baba Israel that even in downtown Deptford, which is about as far from New York's South Side as one can get, it works perfectly.

Baba, a chunky thirty something who greets the audience as if they were old friends, and offers them free vegetarian soup to drink, recounts the family life in an area which was then Italian dominated with the local Mafia running things, which has since changed as the smart set move in – he can no longer afford to live in the house he grew up in – and his father's tempestuous marriage and lack of a secure career.

It is touching to say the least and the plight of plain folks who find their part of town going up in the world while they stay put certainly struck a chord in Deptford where right beside The Albany is a brand new development for the upwardly mobile. He also laments the passing of all those activists of the fifty years ago and questions where it was all worth it, whether they changed anything. The play, because it is not a stand up comedy performance, takes place in a set created from cardboard boxes on to which some stunning visuals, performances by Steve Ben Israel, and a repeated motif of birds are projected. On the basis of the video clips Israel senior was clearly a comedian of style and charm and the son has it in spades.

At the end he performs a brilliant rap inspired, although clearly he had heard quite a lot of the suggestions before as the show has already played Bradford and Reading, by the audience. What irked them? He got them first to recite his father's closing catchphrase in his act – "Unfuckit", which they did with relish. As for the irksome things – greed, bankers, privatisation of the National Health Service, Michael Gove, gentrification, stretch limos. No surprises there. But surprises in plenty on the stage.

The soup was good too.

Baba Israel

Director: Leo Kay

Music and Sound Design: Yako 440

Video Artist: Richard Ramchurn (AlbinoMosquito)

Dramaturg: Talvin Wilks

Lighting Design: Mark Distin

Visual Artist: Eric Drooker

<http://www.reviewsgate.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=7723>

BRITISH THEATRE GUIDE

The Spinning Wheel

November 19, 2014
Review by Liz Allum



The audience of *The Spinning Wheel* are greeted warmly as they enter the theatre space, quite literally, with a cup of hot vegetable soup and a friendly, approachable Baba Israel.

He then takes us on a journey, his father's journey, from a '50s New York apartment building, out into the world, through the streets and parks, the prisons of Brazil and back home again. But home has changed, as has America and his father. We experience this journey through poetry, music, recorded audio and video, projected animation and visuals and direct conversation.

Steve Ben Israel, who died in 2012, was an integral part of The Living Theatre, a New York based avant garde theatre company founded by Judith Molina and Julian Beck to revolutionise the way that theatre performed the spoken word. Over the years, the company has naturally shifted into a movement for social and political change, particularly during the revolutionary artistic decades of the 60s and 70s.

At the same time, in the clubs and streets of Brooklyn and the Bronx, hip hop was being born. It is the combination of these two that Steve's son Baba has grown up within, and that this piece aims to bring together.

Through rhythmic, beat boxed, performance poetry, a gentle underscore of live music and a patchwork of visual projection, we are guided through the story of his father, a plea to lighten the world and look at one another on the subway, and a snapshot of the performer himself, his hopes and fears. It's a story of jazz, of counterculture, of revolution and of the cycle of life.

The whole piece takes place in front of a backdrop of cardboard boxes, stacked like a tall Bronx apartment building, and providing the surface for the visuals that flicker and chase across the space.

The boxes, and their many representations, creep back into the piece from time to time. They are the windows of the building, they are the Aladdin's cave of creativity that was his father's den, they are the restrictive worlds we place ourselves in, the office cubicle, the hot packed train, the rat race. Finally, they are the place within which his father's things, books, badges, life, are packed away, to be treasured but kept to one side.

This is a piece about himself, his father and the world around him then and us now and, at times, the multiple threads of story leave us wondering what his message is, what is it that he really wants to say?

One story is the moving and endearing portrait of his inspirational and unusual father and the man that Steve shaped his son into. The other is one of counterculture and social change, of the power of the spoken word to shake the habitual. Both stories are important and they inherently interweave, but at times the transition from one to the other feels like an add-on, one scene too many beyond the natural end of the piece.

It's a minor criticism in a performance that is warm and engaging, well delivered and charmingly humorous. The devices used, lighting, music and projection in particular, are well layered. When the performer physically interacts with the visual projection, it is particularly powerful.

A scene in which he uses gesture and tracing, flashing lights to symbolise the terrifying imprisonment of his father and fellow performers in Brazil, alongside recorded audio, clearly delivers a significant mood change. The live music and beat boxing is skilful and breaks the narrative well, to lighten up, as Baba's father would say, the whole shape of the piece.

It is beat poetry; it recreates the feel of a '90s jazz club on open mic, spoken word night. The only thing missing is the cigarette smoke. It is a culture and a community that Baba Israel clearly holds dear.

At the end of the piece, it is obvious that his father and New York city itself are inextricably intertwined in his experience. It is both his father he is saying good bye to with this piece, and the community and culture that he knew as a child. New York has changed, he has changed, it is inevitable, because the wheel keeps on spinning.

The need for artists and performers to use their voices to strive to make the world a better place, however, will never change, and we are left with this call ringing in our ears. It is a legacy that the performer's father has left him, and it is one that he intends to pass on to us, his audience. I imagine it is something his father would be proud of.

The performance will go to The Albany and Midlands Arts Centre, before a full tour in 2015.

<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/the-spinning-wh-south-street-ar-10923>

The Spinning Wheel – Theatre in the Mill, Bradford Posted by TPR Yorkshire_North East

November 16, 2014
Reviewer : Rich Jevons



The Spinning Wheel is co-created by Unfinished Business' Leo Kay and Baba Israel with music and sound design by Yako 440 and visual design by Richard Ramchum with certain images provided by New York artist Eric Drooker. It is a loving, if at times sharp and acerbic, tribute to the late Steve Ben Israel, Baba's father and core member of New York City-based legendary Living Theatre. The performance combines spoken word, hip hop and experimental performative techniques in a way that is both revolutionary yet utterly endearing.

One lovely touch is that before the performance we are given a cup of vegetable soup, a recollection of Living Theatre's personal, pragmatic and inclusive approach. They have also been known to pass out psychedelics to their audiences and at one particularly immersive and mind-blowing point in the programme one thought there may have been a continuation of that tradition!

But rather than any chemical stimulus, this brief flashback is achieved with stunning kaleidoscopic visual projections, breath-taking beatboxing, stream of consciousness poetry and live hypnotic music. It is simply a privilege to see such rare documentary film of The Living Theatre cut in with Baba's family footage.

Baba tells us lucidly of his early childhood and upbringing, about as far-out, extreme and anarchic as you can imagine. And he doesn't brush over the difficulties of this as well as its sheer pleasure and wonderful magic. On stage he is totally natural and candid and his presentation of his father's stand-up routines is absolutely hilarious.

This hilarity is often deliberately overshadowed by a more serious message of how capitalism is destroying the planet, but, rather than lash out at easy targets, the piece reminds us of the much-forgotten fact that the revolution starts with our selves. And the work creates such a sense of unity and openness within the audience to the point that when Baba comes to the 'unf***ing' section (essentially putting the world to rights) many of us can shout out our particular bugbears without embarrassment.

These are then put into a rap that improvises around the issues mentioned – from prisons to privatisation, family to nationalism – and at this point Baba's gift becomes clearer than ever, simply astounding with a direct simplicity that is extremely effective. There are many shows that are life-affirming and exhilarating, *The Spinning Wheel* is both. But more, it manages to encourage life-changing action, with the gentle provocation that The Living Theatre excels at, without preaching or condescending.

Reviewed on: 15 November at Theatre in the Mill, Bradford who also supported the R&D of the show. Tours this month to London, Reading and Birmingham.

<http://www.thepublicreviews.com/the-spinning-wheel-theatre-in-the-mill-bradford/>



The Spinning Wheel – The Albany and on tour

PRESENTED by Unfinished Business in association with Baba Israel, **The Spinning Wheel** will visit The Albany (November 22, 2014) as part of a four venue tour.

Told through a blend of spoken word, hip hop, live music and video art, theatre makers Baba Israel and Leo Kay create a portrait of the unique and vibrant life of Baba's father Steve Ben Israel; the New York-based Beat poet, jazz musician, countercultural activist, stand-up comedian and core member of the iconic performance collective The Living Theatre.

Drawn from his extensive archive, conversations with his collaborators and research into his favourite haunts, the work explores the resonance of Steve Ben's pacifist politics and beliefs, in relation to today's culture, examining the significance of legacy inherited by a second generation.

Steve Ben practiced what he called performance life and found his inspiration by bringing his politics and comedy into the streets, subways, and protests of New York.

One of his stand out 'performance life' moments came when he escaped 1970's Brazil dressed as a woman and improvised his way through airport security to return to NY, where he worked to organise the release of the members of The Living Theatre who were still in jail there. His was a life committed to liberation.

The Spinning Wheel is co-created and performed by **Baba Israel**, who said: "Our process has taken us to New York, England, and back. *The Spinning Wheel* animates a 50 year archive of poetic, humorous, and politically charged material and brings it into dialogue with a stripped back exploration of grieving and the relationship between a father and a son."

Baba Israel is a theatre maker and hip-hop artist, born and raised in New York. His varied career has seen him on stage with the likes of Outkast, The Roots, Rahzel, Lester Bowie, Afrika Bambaataa, Vernon Reid and Bill Cosby. He was co-founder and Artistic Director of Playback NYC Theatre Company, which brought theatre to prisons, hospitals, shelters, and arts venues, and was Artistic Director of Contact before returning to New York in 2012. His directorial work includes *Project 2050* (New World Theatre), *Countryboy Struggle* (Maxwell Golden) and *The Adventures of Carl Brogan* (SharpeningSAWDS).

The Spinning Wheel was developed in April this year with support from both the UK and the US, and features live music from hip-hop artist Yako 440, video art from Richard Ramchurn, creative director of AV design company AlbinoMosquito, and visual art by painter and graphic artist Eric Drooker.

Co-creator and director Leo Kay said: "Baba and I share a strong cultural and political affinity, and it's been incredibly exciting to explore how we can integrate our practices to create an original and authentic voice for this work. *The Spinning Wheel* integrates the autobiographical and intimate performance style present in current Unfinished Business practice, with Baba's spoken word prowess, Hip Hop inspired performance and improvisation experience." *The Spinning Wheel* is suitable for ages 12+.

Tickets: £12, £10 concessions – available from the box office on 020 8692 4446 or online at www.thealbany.org.uk/.

Time: 7.30pm.

Running Time: Approximately 70 minutes.

The Spinning Wheel will also visit Theatre in the Mill, Bradford (November 13 – 15), South Street Arts Centre, Reading (November 19) and mac birmingham (November 25).

<http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Theatre-Review/the-spinning-wheel-the-albany-and-on-tour>