



VISUAL ARTS VIEWPOINT

Licensed critics

JOHN YEADON'S paintings of ventriloquist dummies bear an uncanny resemblance to members of his own family. Here he explains what impelled him to paint these 'ghosts I have known'

FRANCIS BACON once said that he would have liked to have painted a smile but could not — it always ended up as a grimace.

I like that ambivalence of an innocent smile that transforms into something ominous. It relates to the grotesque, grinning, laughing heads and chimeras which form part of both the bestiary and the family portraits in my latest show.

Johnny Green and the "little girl doll" Annie were my grandmother's ventriloquist dummies and Tommy was my mother's dummy.

My grandmother was Annie Howarth whose stage name stage was Josephine Langley, aka Madame Langley, Lady Ventriloquist. She toured the music halls for more than a decade, playing at the London Coliseum and the Moss Empire theatre circuit as second on the bill from 1911 on.

Her husband Ned became her manager and ventriloquism was to provide the family with a livelihood away from the toil of the foundry and mill.

Annie Howarth learnt ventriloquism from her elder brother Jimmy, who onstage was Professor Langley — Professor being the traditional title of the Punch and Judy man.

When on tour the Howarths' home base was great uncle Jimmy's pub in Burnley, the Trafalgar Hotel.

My mother Helen, known as Little Nellie, accompanied her mum from the age of two. She was an amateur ventriloquist and continued to perform in her later years, doing her last "turn" in 1987 for the children at Knott End Working Men's Club.

Maurice (Mo) Howarth, my mum's younger brother, became a ventriloquist and magician. A member of the Magic Circle and the last in the

line of a family of ventriloquists.

My paintings of these dolls are in between autobiography and fiction. Ventriloquist dummies are the "other" and are like the zoomorphic creatures in a medieval bestiary.

The ventriloquist doll is a fake human being. It is a fraud, it is artifice, like a 3D caricature or cartoon that comes alive. Thus a painting of a ventriloquist doll is a fiction of a fiction, a copy of a copy, a fraud of a fraud, a painting of a painting.

Dolls are not sculptures of people, they are like fetishes or idols. Children speak with them and we give them personalities, even magical and supernatural capabilities. Dolls are tribal fetishes — totemic ancestral familiars.

The ventriloquist act apes the parent-child relationship, that of the carpenter and Pinocchio, of Doctor Frankenstein and his monster.



OMINOUS INNOCENCE: Tommy — the suit case act (top left), Annie — ghost of my grandmother (top right), Madame Langley 1916 (above), Is This a System? (left) and Mum with Tommy and Annie (below)



Johnny and Tommy are the naughty boys who mischievously interrupt and mock. Less malignant and tyrannical than Mr Punch or Ubu, they are more Puck-like.

The ventriloquist relinquishes responsibility for what the dummy says. It's nothing to do with



them. Like the Shakespearean fool or the "holy fool, the dummy is an "all licensed" critic.

He is also licensed to tell the truth and consequently the dummy gets the blame for the irritating truth or the unsolicited opinions and his insults conceal the true author of this rhetoric.

These laughing ventriloquist's dummies and Jolly Jack Tar automatons are echos of carnival, where carnival is lawlessness and comedy is liberty.

Such festivities and comic spectaculars had an important place in medieval life. They were the people's expression of all that was not official during which laughter reigned supreme.

These feasts offered a completely different, unofficial, anti-dogma, anti-protocol, anti-serious spectacle. They were an extra political aspect of the world of human relations which Bakhtin described as a "second world ... a second life outside officialdom."

Here the drunken Jolly Jack is the "lord of misrule." But these fools are more than social critics, they are the purveyor of free speech. The fool knows the truth as he is a social outcast.

Johnny, Tommy and Annie are like Peter Pan, they will never grow up. Johnny and Annie are over 100 years old and d Johnny is looked after by Uncle Mo who is now 89. Tommy is of pensionable age, living with me since my mum died.

Now Tommy has come to stay with me in Coventry, his language has inexplicably deteriorated and he is often quite profane. It must run in the family.

Ghosts I Have Known runs at Brown's Independent Bar, Earl Street, Coventry until April 30. Free. For opening times, call (02476) 221-100. Further information at <http://johnyeadon.com/blog/>

THEATRE

New engaging angle but the waiting set to continue

Waiting For God
West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds
★★★★☆

WAITING For Godot is famously a play in which nothing happens, twice, that can be interpreted through the prism of anything from existentialism through to religion.

On face

value it's therefore brave of Ian Brown, in his last production as artistic director for West Yorkshire Playhouse, to firmly pin the work to the issue of race and colonialism.

Teaming up with Talawa, which specialises in black-led theatre, Estragon (Patrick Robinson) and Vladimir (Jeffery Kissoon) are recast as a pair of elderly Caribbean immigrants shooting the breeze.

Dressed in ill-fitting suits they occasionally lapse into patois and the music hall traditions in Samuel Beckett's script become infused with silent calypso.

These racial elements are wisely left to stand for themselves with the danger of belabouring lines about subjugation being resisted or humorously challenged (as in Estragon's stated preference for pink, rather than black, radishes).

A straight race interpre-

tation, meanwhile, is complicated by the relationship between the foppish Pozzo (Cornell S John) and his slave Lucky (Guy Burgess). A distorted reflection of the bond between the two central characters, they're "tied" to one another by a length of rope and occupy their time with meaningless activity under the fascinated gaze of Estragon and Vladimir.

The absurdist elements to their behaviour and speech ultimately makes it unclear whether Pozzo really is the master and it's this ambiguity that makes it impossible to pin the play to any one cause.

As the characters stand and wait, argue, debate, swap hats and remove shoes they simply emphasise the commonalities of the human condition.

This is underscored by the universality of Paul Wills' sparse stage design — a single tree that could be located anywhere in the world and music hall footlights that dispel any lingering notions of naturalism.

This staginess is furthered by the

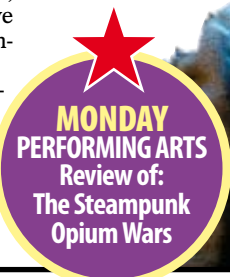
lighting which shifts without warning from midnight navy to full moon white and which is turned on the audience at key points when it's being indirectly addressed.

In this way the audience, as much as Estragon and Vladimir, wait to find out whether this really is one of the greatest plays of the 20th century.

The verdict is still out but at least the experience helped pass the time.

Showing until January 21, then touring until April 7 2012. Box office (0113) 213-770. Book online: www.wyp.org.uk

SUSAN DARLINGTON



NEW PERSPECTIVE: Estragon (Patrick Robinson, left) and Vladimir (Jeffery Kissoon, below)

