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The Carnival of the Animals is one of the most innovative and culturally inspired pieces of new musical theatre writing to have been seen for some time. In a show that bears a nod to the grim darkness of Sondheim with a nod to Kander and Ebb's outlandish "show within a show" style and loosely derived from Saint-Saens' 1886 composition, Greenaway and Hyams have set their tale in the fictional 21eme arrondissement of Paris, where animals and people magically live side by side.

There is one human character in the piece, fashion designer Mademoiselle Parfait, played by Anita Dobson in a wonderfully game performance. Parfait is our guide to the arrondissement as the show opens, but curious occurrences in the first act hint at darker motives. When we do discover the evil that lurks beneath, it is worth reflecting that there are few actresses that can combine such talent and friendly familiarity with devilish menace. Dobson's eyes can sparkle with enticing innocence as the curtain rises on the show, and yet flash the darkest malevolence as it falls on the first act. The wicked side of her character suggests that the show is not ideal for the very youngest of children, but from 7 or 8 and up they are likely to be held rapt by the tale.

The producers have secured a cast that is, for the most part, outstanding. Clare Machin's mumsy elephant, who against type, can't remember a thing, is a delight, made all the better by a hilarious can-can routine in the finale. Allyson Ava-Brown's Lioness is a performance of calculated strength, though this talented actress has more in the tank that she could give to her act.

Other notables amongst a role call of excellence were Alistair Brookshaw's Mynah bird, a perfect portrayal of arrogant smugness whose tap dance routine with Matthew Gent's Parrot, cheekily and classily evoked Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Cassandra Compton and Stephen Webb as Flamenco inspired Latin donkeys is another fine example of comic acting and timing, beautifully voiced and choreographed, whilst veteran Paul Grunert's Tortoise is a treat of understated wisdom from an actor who knows just how to maximise his impact.

Anita Dobson may well be billed as the star of the show, but amongst this menagerie, it is Bronte Barbe's cygnet who steals the show. Her perfectly performed and vocally exquisite character is a delight and this already accomplished young woman simply has to be a leading lady of the future. (When Evita next returns she would look wonderful on the Casa Rosada balcony...). Barbe's metamorphosis into a swan is one of the most brilliant yet simple pieces of physical theatre to be found in London and when, transformed, she gracefully flew over Paris, I sobbed.

Thom Southerland is back with an inspired hand at the helm of this show, whilst John Risebero's set design that brilliantly evokes Paris and maestro Howard Hudson's lighting, ensure that the show is built upon foundations of creative genius.

This production should deserve five stars and perhaps with: a re-casting of the Chimpanzee, Liam Doyle seen here in a role that vocally stretched him; a trimming of the first half; and mic'ing up the cast which is crucial if their voices are to achieve parity with, or even dominate, the magnificent sound from David Randall's four piece band, it may yet achieve them. Greenaway and Hyams have unveiled a treat here. With a few tweaks they may yet have crafted a perfect family trip to the theatre.

**Reviewed 11/07/2013 at 2.30pm**

**Reviewer – Jonathan Baz**

**Blogger**