

Thursday 15th June, 11am. Downstairs @ The New Theatre.

Offbeat festival is an ever-growing, evolving and encompassing event. Packed full of shows, games, exhibitions and more, it's like the cultural highlight of late Spring. Blooming like a flower all over the city, its roots are firmly planted at The Old Fire Station, yet every year new shoots pop up at different venues, like pollination.

WhatNot Theatre (Emma Blythe and Lucy Holt) create original, inspirational and quality theatre for children and their families. Their work encourages play and participation while managing to be invaluable, interesting and accessible. They make shows for kids that can be appreciated by adults: full-on family fun that genuinely engages and entertains across the generations.

The New Theatre is somewhere that I've walked past many times, but have never before been inside. Not really. I might have snuck in once with an ex to purview an opera that, culture clubbed and clueless, we soon skulked out of.

We are in the middle of the heatwave that always seems to coincide, year on year, with Offbeat. The streets swelter day, night and morning. But downstairs at the New Theatre is thankfully, blissfully cool. This is like a kiss from God for me and my five month old who've both been melting over the past few days. It means we can watch the show in comfort, making for a generally tear and tantrum-free experience.

The area is soft and padded, kind of womb-like. It bursts with boxes of all sizes, opened up like caves or dens or whatever you want them to be. Play is permitted. You've got to watch your feet for all the little ones scrambling in and out of boxes and weaving whimsically through chairs and cushions. The under five demographic is actually quite broad. It includes those at the older end of the spectrum, basically running the gig, and those at the very youngest (like mine) who require an adult's lap and lots of assistance. WhatNot are sensitive to this range and cater to all the youngsters equally and individually. As the older kids run around and take part on their own terms, Blythe and Holt approach babies and shy members of the audience, enabling them to explore all the goodies that the boxes have churned up.

No one is left out. It's a sensitive sensory explosion that hums with happiness and jiggles with joy. The premise is simple. It's not complicated by characters or a plot. There's no real dialogue to derail it. Words are condensed into 'oohs', 'aahs' and giggling. Boxes transcends language. It is purely about play. Anything else is unnecessary. In this way, Blythe and Holt connect with their audience by essentially becoming big kids themselves. They introduce and expand upon the magic of the imagination: something that could arguably be gradually disappearing in our evermore technical and digital age (where babies are practically born with the ability to scroll the web). After all, what poses more possibilities than an empty box? Perhaps the snatches of glee they pull out from them. All senses are satiated (except for taste, but my babe tried that anyhow). There are bubbles and there are balloons (in all states of expansion). There are handheld instruments and homemade, scented flowers. There are swathes of gauzy fabric. There are tubes of flashing lights.

Everyone was into it, including me and my little babe. I think, if he could speak, he'd say the only downsides developed when he inevitably dropped the props (or mummy, being a pure killjoy, wrestled them from his grasping fingers to veer away from his gaping mouth).

Boxes explores the treasure of everyday equipment. A frolicsome half hour or so, it invites kiddies and their adults to think outside four straight lines and find the fun in everything.