

That's the way to do it

London-based theatre company Improbable premieres its darkly hilarious show, *The Devil and Mister Punch*. Matt Trueman chats to Improbable's Artistic Director Julian Crouch about the inspiration behind their new production.

Think of Mr Punch and you tend to conjure up a vision of traditional seaside entertainment and children's birthday parties. Comedy crocodiles and strings of felt sausages project a rather quaint – some might say cute – picture-postcard image on the mind's eye.

However, that would be to ignore the large thwacking stick with which Punch wallops his wife and antagonises the local constabulary. In fact, the figure of Mr Punch, who celebrates his 350th anniversary in 2012, has a far darker side that is all too easily forgotten.

'I don't find him cute at all,' says Julian Crouch, one of the artistic directors of Improbable Theatre, whose latest theatre piece for the company, *The Devil and Mister Punch*, comes to the Barbican Centre's Pit Theatre. 'He tends to be pretty violent, actually. I own a couple of Punch masks and when you put them on, you start to feel quite aggressive.'

A recent episode of the BBC drama series *Luther* featured a serial killer in a Punch mask picking his victims off in and around London's Smithfield Market. The location is no mere coincidence – a fact which helped bring about *The Devil and Mister Punch*, as Crouch explains: 'There was a time in the 18th century when there were some twenty little puppet theatres showing Punch, all within a square mile of the Barbican. It's the birthplace of Punch, as we know him now.'

Mr Punch is not merely a local lad, however; his lineage stretches around the world. He evolved from Italy's *commedia dell'arte* tradition, specifically as a character called Pulchinella ('Little Chicken'). Originally depicted as hunchbacked and potbellied, Pulchinella is a poor worker with nothing to lose, and consequently he demonstrates a marked disrespect for authority.

'The British couldn't say Pulchinella properly, so they turned it into Punchinella and eventually into Punch,' says Crouch. 'He's travelled to all sorts of different places under



The Devil and Mister Punch © Kevin Manko

different names.' In Russia, he's Petruska; in France, Polichinelle; and in Holland, Toonelgek, which translates as 'Crazy Scene'.

Mr Punch, however, remains the most famous incarnation, and his crooked facial features have replaced the crooked body of the original. 'There's something about that profile that's universal,' Crouch continues. 'If you look at the Kwakiutl Indians on the west coast of Canada, they have a character called Numaym [a familiar presence on totem poles] who is almost exactly the same: a great big nose and a great big chin.'

So just how did this deranged and violent figure of dissent, uproar and sexual proclivity end up as a children's favourite? 'I'm interested in that culturally,' says Crouch. 'Back in the 1800s there was no distinction between children and adults, as far as I can see. They wore the same clothes and watched the same things. Kids worked. Nowadays, we're

squeamish about these things.'

'People tend to shy away from violence in theatre for children, but in my opinion, that is exactly what theatre is for: to show you violence in a safe environment. You go and see *Macbeth* and sit in your seat while they murder each other, and somehow you dream your way through it.'

The focus on theatre's macabre qualities is a hallmark of Improbable's work, from the warped vaudeville of *Shockheaded Peter* (which won the company an Olivier award), to the grisly horror movie *Theatre of Blood* for the National Theatre.

Crouch is fascinated by the 'nostalgia of theatre'. By returning to an old-fashioned theme, *The Devil and Mister Punch* bucks the trend of contemporary puppetry, much of which currently aims to break ties with its childish, simplistic connotations. 'The glove

puppet is perceived as probably the lowliest of all theatrical forms. It's seen as a gutter art, but it can totally surprise you. It comes in under the radar.

It is something that says: "Look, I'm just a glove puppet. Nothing I say is important." But of course, it absolutely is. It may be the gutter, but you can see the moon reflected in the water. There's something heavenly about the gutter.'

Equally, there's something adult about this staple figure of childhood entertainment. Mr Punch is not merely a kid's plaything – as his encounter with the devil and Julian Crouch is bound to show.

The Devil and Mister Punch, The Pit, 2 – 25 February
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