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Mark Thomas: Bravo Figaro!



Tobacco Factory, Bristol (Fri 1 Feb)

As our foremost political comic Mark Thomas has walked the wall in the West Bank, chased international arms dealers around the country, become a Guinness World Record holder for the number of political protests held in 24 hours, steered a tank through McDonald's, hijacked a nuclear train and driven a rapier missile through the streets of London. And

that's just for starters.

Thomas is a prolific thorn in the side of establishment wrongdoing, of big business corruption and human rights abuses; he literally practises what he preaches and his adventures and campaigns provide the material for his mostly quite brilliant stage shows. With this present tour though he delves into far more personal territory - that of his relationship with his father who is dying from a degenerative illness, Progressive Supranuclear Palsy. After a half-hour 'warm-up' slot taking in his new habit of 'book heckling' (slipping furtive labels into crap books in high end bookshops to give away the endings), inventive 'policies' suggested by the audience on recent tours, and a vintage Thomas-ian rant about re-nationalising the railways, the comedy switches into gripping theatrical confessional.

This is Thomas's tragi-comic tale of a domineering father, a self-employed workaholic builder, handy with his hands - and fists - both in and out of the home, but with a passion and a love for opera. A massive photo of his father's big figure looms appropriately over the stage as Thomas re-enacts conversations with him and his mother, asking the questions to the actual recorded replies. His brother's voice interjects from within a wooden toy ark that his father made for him when he was a child.

A tremendously moving story with no holds barred unfolds about his complex relationship with a father who, for all his overbearing ways, had an innate love of what is perceived as a very middle class culture. To the teenage Mark Thomas's acute embarrassment his dad would sing arias from atop his scaffolding across the rooftops of their native South London. A workmate who dared question his passion was told in no uncertain terms that he was an "uncultured prick".

Thomas pulls no punches about his ambivalent feelings for his father - a man who would proudly assert that he was as good as anyone and defiantly asserted his working class status by telling his son "No we are fucking not!" when asked by the boy if they were middle class, and whose non-stop swearing he compares to a jazz bebop player ('Cleo Lane with tourettes') but who was, in the comic's eyes, "a cunt". There's a deep collective intake of breath when Thomas comes out with this line. At this point of the performance, he says, we the audience probably see his father as "...a character: a rough diamond, a wild card, a ruffian but with an inner heart of art and beauty, as he likes opera. In reality he was a cunt." It's an honest, moving and revealing moment, a moment like a few others, that sees him extremely affected by this painful clarity as he goes on to explain the difficulty of living in the shadow of this often violent hard-drinking man. With his trademark gusto and enthusiasm Thomas relates tales of this giant who came home from work, dropping his trousers to his ankles so as not to soil the furniture, to laugh at Steptoe and Son (ironically "...a sitcom about a father and son trapped in a relationship of mutual mistrust and embarrassment...") and then swoops into the quite bittersweet and dark memories.

Thomas's story is ultimately one of a gift, of surmounting his own dislike of opera by forcing himself to go and see it and getting to like it - revelling in modern opera like 'Nixon in China' and the 'Death of Klinghoffer', and feeling he has been "run over by a steamroller" by 'Madam Butterfly' - in order to connect with his befuddled, dying

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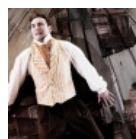


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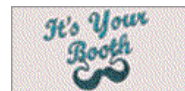
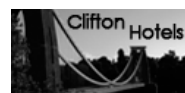
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Bath Comedy Festival 2013 Part One

Various venues, Bath (from Fri 29 Mar) This year's Comedy Fest got off



EXTERNAL LINKS



father. Through a commissioning meeting with director Mike Figgis he manages to get Royal Opera House singers to perform in his parents' living room in grey Bournemouth, where, in a fitting finale, for a brief but glorious time his father comes figuratively back into the room impassioned by the arias from Verdi, Puccini, Tosca and La Boheme. The gift had been delivered, the portal opened briefly so that Thomas could connect probably for the last time with his father to say goodbye. Operatic voices soar, tears of laughter and sadness are shed. This is profound, powerful and searingly honest stuff by a unique talent. (Elfyn Griffith)

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Mark Thomas: Bravo Figaro!

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