

## The Independent

Caravan Aurora Nova @ St Stephen's, Edinburgh

By Sarah Jones

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Mr Punch may have been a naughty boy (mass murder, possession of exotic animals without a licence, irritating voice), but he had nothing on the puppet lowlifes that roll into town in Black Hole Theatre's Caravan. Where Mr Punch resorted to a large wooden stick to boink his victims over the head, these puppets use guns, meat cleavers and cigarettes.

It's Hell down in Puppet Land, all sin and fornication, violence and good tunes. Skeletal and rough hewn, the puppets' sins are imprinted on their faces, gouged out by the puppet maker's skilful knife; beneath hang sinuous bodies, built for sex and violence. On a stunning scaled-down set of caravans, sleazy back alleys and hastily erected festoon lighting, perfect mini moths flit around street-lamps, and cats worry dogs. Acrobat Leo falls for Cherry, who disrobes for all-comers in a strip joint, the Devil's Lair, but is a little more picky outside the office.

A corrupt policeman - a puppeteer with a pig snout - runs over a pedestrian on his way to a drug deal with a sinister clown. "Sorry," he calls over his shoulder, with a Punch-like sneer. Puppets find religion in a warped church setting, where drugs are sold in return for confessions. With every death, fake blood trickles over the screen where puppet dreams are projected (Leo pictures Cherry in a wedding veil; the clown, mid drug-induced hallucination, pictures himself in a convertible with two "perfect" Barbie dolls). On the periphery, a figure with a broom relentlessly sweeps at the dirt and the filth and the increasing number of bodies.

But before this tiny, dark world is skilfully brought to life, the scene is set by the Melbourne-based Black Hole practitioners who pull the strings (although in this case, there are no strings - the puppets are manipulated like dolls, their arms on counterweight pins). Into the spotlight, watched over by two argumentative grubby-faced puppeteers, a woman brightly performs an energetically salacious striptease. Caravan is multi-layered, dark, gratuitous, theatre noir, a blend of physical theatre, puppetry and film which explores the dark and the affectionate sides to the puppet-master relationship - puppeteers as creators, parent figures and objectifiers. When the puppeteers manipulate a super-sized Cherry in her sex show routine, an uncomfortable new genre is born. Welcome to puppetsploitation.

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