

# Dancing hysterics come to Bedford!

## Theatre Review: "M.E.H" by The Outbound Project

Reviewed by Alex F – 10W



The Outbound Project's quirky production of 'M.E.H' (Mass Epidemic Hysteria) was brought to the Place Theatre, storytelling through expressive dance and physical theatre. The actors told the story of the dancing plague of 1518, when hundreds of people felt an uncontrollable urge to relentlessly dance on the streets of Strasbourg. Intertwined with this was the re-enactment of French neurologist Dr Jean-Martin Charcot's hypnosis demonstrations with 'hysterics' in 1877, and the play finished with a monologue dripping with existential questions, causing me to leave the theatre with an open, active mind.

As I entered the theatre, the actors were already on stage warming up in front of the audience, communicating that we were indeed watching a theatre company tell a story, and not a realism piece hiding behind characters. This idea was sustained when one of the actors became the director of the theatre company, and began directly addressing the audience. This immediately pierced the fourth wall and was unexpected – before this, a beautifully spotlit solo dance piece had the full attention of the audience, meaning the mood dramatically changed. Whilst the actor's improvisation skills were second to none as she questioned the audience in a witty way, it may have been perceived as almost intimidating at times, and made the less-confident of the audience feel uneasy – was it their aim to make some of us feel confused? Whilst the storylines were intriguing, clarity would've been appreciated at some points: there were ambiguous moments and an audience member with no prior knowledge to the incidents (like me) may have felt slightly confused. Having said that, the play was aesthetically exquisite to

watch, and the dancing stood out for me. The aggression and desperation of the actors synchronised by the lighting and sound made the dance powerful and compelling. One particularly potent moment was when one of the actors was having a fit – her tense, rigid movements were so convincing that I wanted to leap out of my seat to help her! The skill of the actors was apparent through accent, physicality and utter dedication to their craft. The physical theatre used by the actors adapted a particular style whereby the actors moved as one with their props, adapting a certain controlled lightness to their physicality – this was another detail that made the small vignettes of each interwoven story so spellbinding to watch. Another stand-out moment was the hypnosis demonstrations: the actor portraying the doctor would forcefully move the limbs and head of the actor playing the ‘hysteric’, who I must commend for her ability to switch between contrasting emotions seamlessly. The poignant ending was what everything was building up to – the philosophical monologue delivered by the actor who’d been dancing in a clear plastic structure for the duration of the show. After the show’s director had reached the end of her tether with the actors *and* the audience (this part had me laughing out loud), the mood was brought right back down as the monologue was performed with curiosity, emotion and desperation, followed by an effective ensemble dance piece which closed this unconventional production. I was laughing, cringing, gasping and lost in thought – a bohemian, well-executed piece of other-worldly theatre.