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Travels in the Underworld and beyond: The Toad Knew and other EIF theatre reviews

5 days ago / [Mark Brown](#)

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The Toad Knew

KING'S THEATRE

Ends today

Anything That Gives Off Light

EICC

Run ended

The View From Castle Rock

ART SPACE @ ST MARK'S

Until tomorrow

Camille

SUMMERHALL

Ends today

Reviewed by Mark Brown

A SPIRAL staircase builds itself before our eyes, clinking into shape, step by enchanted step, as if ordered by some unseen magician. Illuminating, red constructions in glass and metal swirl and swoop from the ceiling like upturned, industrial umbrellas.

Meanwhile, below, on stage a young woman sits, slumped at a pianola, which plays itself demonically, while steam rises from a pool of disconcertingly green water contained within a large, glass box with a huge, rusting iron lid. Into this strange and disquieting underworld steps an unkempt, barefooted master-of-ceremonies.

So begins The Toad Knew, the extraordinary production which circus theatre master James Thierree and his Compagnie du Hanneton have brought to the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF).

Thierree's parents established a number of France's most important circus troupes. His mother,

Victoria, is the daughter of Charlie Chaplin, to whom Thierree himself bears a remarkable physical resemblance.

The artist's fascinating heritage shows in the production for which he has conceived, designed and composed the music. Joined by five other talented performers, he creates a weird and wonderful world in which the skills of "cirque nouveau" explode within a surrealist dreamscape.

The wonderfully acrobatic Valerie Doucet and Thi Mai Nguyen appear like an apparition from a film by Tim Burton or Jean-Pierre Jeunet as they transform into one, comically triple (or, perhaps, quadruple) jointed woman. Thierree himself performs moments of great visual spectacle and Chaplinesque physical comedy, often with the assistance of his diminutive, clownish sidekick Yann Nedelec.

A show of immense visual imagination and breathtakingly skilled performance is given emotional atmosphere by the affecting song of Sierra Leonean-German performer Mariama. The piece, which comes together beautifully as a complete, if deliberately outlandish, whole, relies heavily on the work of its unseen technical team, who, quite rightly, took their bows before a genuinely ecstatic King's audience on Wednesday night.

Confusion and disappointment, rather than ecstasy, were, one suspects, the principle audience reactions to *Anything That Gives Off Light*, the contribution to the EIF of the National Theatre of Scotland, in co-production with acclaimed United States company The TEAM (Theatre of the Emerging American Moment).

The piece is co-authored by five writers, including its three performers, leading Scottish actors Brian Ferguson and Sandy Grierson and their accomplished American colleague Jessica Almasy. It seems like a modishly fragmented, yet also unfinished, attempt at a 21st-century sequel to *The Cheviot, The Stag And The Black, Black Oil*, the late 7:84 Theatre Company's iconic 1970s play of Scottish history, politics and national identity.

In any Scottish pub, Brian (played by Ferguson) and Iain (Grierson) meet somewhat clichéd West Virginian "Red" (Almasy); the Scotsmen confer this nickname (the colour, paradoxically, both of socialism and the US Republican Party) upon her on account of the scarlet daiquiris she drinks. What ensues is a road trip in which the men unfold key events in Scottish history (such as the Jacobite Uprising and the Highland Clearances) for their American guest, while they are pulled, imaginatively, into a US history and a global present that reinforces the obvious truth that we are all, on this planet, interconnected.

However, neither the exceptional abilities of all three actors nor the best efforts of a fine band (who play a folk-rock infused with Scottish and American traditional musics) can hide the show's weaknesses. Director Rachel Chavkin (of The TEAM) and associate director Davey Anderson (of the NTS) have failed to create a cohesive play out of an assemblage of texts which have little new or interesting to say about Scottish or American identities, or the relationship between the two.

Ironically, Linda McLean's far more conventional play *The View From Castle Rock* (adapted from the stories of Alice Munro) achieves a much greater resonance in its reflection on the combined histories of Scotland and North America. Directed by Marilyn Imrie for the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Scotland's women's theatre company Stellar Quines, the piece follows the 19th-century journey from Leith to Nova Scotia of the Laidlaws, a family of refugees from the Lowland Clearances.

Against a torrent of dehumanising tabloid headlines, many of us struggle to put human stories to the journeys of refugees stuck in Turkish camps or festering in "The Jungle" on the outskirts of Calais. McLean's play puts Scottish names and faces to the search for refuge.

"Old James" (Lewis Howden on superb form) is the formidable, Calvinist patriarch who, having led his little tribe to the promised land, cannot tear his heart from his beloved Etrick Valley. His pregnant daughter-in-law Agnes (the excellent Sally Reid) faces a mid-Atlantic birth with the stoicism of the Lowland weaving stock from which she comes.

Their stories, and those of Old James's two sons, daughter and grandson, who also travel from Leith, are told in a combination of dialogue, narration, physical performance and music (both

live and recorded). In the hands of a lesser writer, and a lesser cast, such theatrical adaptations of prose fictions can become dull and stilted.

Here, however, amidst the splendid surroundings (and fine acoustics) of the St Mark's Unitarian Church, Munro's stories take on a vivid, theatrical life. Beautifully acted throughout, and with a minimal design that relies only on period costume, the production concludes with a single, powerful image that articulates the agonising reality of forced mass migration, both in Scotland's past and our world today.

Camille, by Polish theatre artist Kamila Klamut, in association with composer and assistant director Mariana Sadowska, begins with an image of emotional and psychological agony. The sculptor Camille Claudel, long-time collaborator and lover of Auguste Rodin, sits, impervious to her friend's attempts to comfort her, in the lunatic asylum to which her brother, Paul, consigned her for three decades.

The show's creator and primary performer (with actor/musician Ewa Pasikowska), Klamut is co-founder of the outstanding Polish company Theatr ZAR (which stands in the great tradition of theatre master Jerzy Grotowski). This intense and compelling bio-play is testament to the rigour and profundity of Klamut's Grotowskian practice.

Dialogue, spoken in English, articulates Claudel's painful and outrageous personal history. However, it is Klamut's exquisite movement and arresting stage imagery that give greatest expression to the anguish of her incarceration in a prison built of misogyny and bourgeois family pride.

Blessed with brilliantly subtle stage and lighting design, this deeply poignant studio piece reminds us why Poland remains a powerhouse in world theatre. It reminds us, too, why the emergence of Robert McDowell's Summerhall venue has been so crucially important to the artistic integrity of the Edinburgh Fringe.