

St George and the Dragon

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Lyric Hammersmith, London
IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

As director Carl Heap acknowledges in his programme notes, things were easier with his Beggarsbelief Company's previous projects. *Ben-Hur*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and, er, *World Cup Final 1966* all had strong narratives, whereas here . . . knight, dragon, fight, bada bing. In order to flesh out the story, Heap and his co-adaptor Tom Morris conflate the figure of the dragon-slaying George with several centuries of analogues: the Christian martyr, the Crusader, the ballad hero from Coventry and the Muslim counterpart Al Khadir. As one of the company of 10 says, chatting to families in an informal prelude (after a mummers' playlet and Morris dance in the theatre bar downstairs), it's a bit of a mishmash.

Actually, at 2½ hours, including interval, it's a lot of a mishmash, especially for those at the younger end of the show's suggested seven-plus age bracket. I did not hear any youngsters getting fractious, but it is notable that after the climactic dragon battle, we cut straight to the (mummers'-style, slight return) curtain call, with none of that tedious tying up of loose ends.

Of course, the kids could simply be enjoyably tired out. In the course of the play, the audience is pressed into service as Crusaders and Saracens, with a siege of Antioch involving virtually the entire auditorium, as well as the stage, a great number of inflatable balls and some infant Crusaders who wouldn't cease fire even with both King Richard and the Muslim governor ordering them to through megaphones. Later, parents draw lots to find whose child will be sacrificed to the dragon of Tripoli.

The production values are those of inventive storytelling through "poor theatre": steel skeletons of modern-day market stalls become the ramparts of Antioch, supermarket trolleys are horses and camels, and the dragon is composed of tenting, netting, a pair of storm lamps and a trio of fire-jugglers. The ragbag of physical resources is deftly and imaginatively used to create a lively event, but bringing a similar "things to make and do" approach to the mass of various George narratives is not quite as successful, especially when trying – valiantly, but frankly ridiculously – to put an ecumenical/secular gloss on the Crusades.

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