

Stage Door, Toronto
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★★★★½

2 for Tea by the British comedy duo of Aaron Malkin and Alastair Knowles is an irresistible delight. Their unusual combination of verbal and physical comedy with improvisation involving audience members put the “play” (as in spontaneous fun) back into “play” (as in theatre). One reason for the glee that greets the performers is the way they remind an adult audience of the children they once were – and still are.

The hour-long show starts calmly enough with Jamesy (Knowles) preparing a tea party for a guest. He looks mad as a hatter in his nerdy glasses, jodhpurs, too-tight jacket and floppy top hair. He’s clearly obsessive in the way he arranges the teapot and teacups, insuring that the cups are precisely the same distance from the table edge and the in exactly the spot where a hand would drop to pick one up. The physical humour of his fussing is hilarious in itself, rather like Beckett’s Clov in *Endgame* and his stage business with the ladder and windows, except that Jamesy, unlike Clov, imagines himself as elegant and does everything with balletic fair, even using an arabesque penchée to place each cup.

We might assume the play would proceed in this silent manner of purely physical comedy, until Jamesy’s guest James (Malkin) arrives in tweeds and bowler hat, looking rather dull. With James arrives the dialogue. It turns out that Jamesy is as fussy about how James enters as he is about setting up his tea things. Once he is settled, Jamesy persists in referring to James as “Jamesy” as if they were, as Jamesy points out, two halves of the same coin. Soon James begins to address the audience directly and informs us that his weekly tea party with Jamesy is the high point of his week. When Jamesy finally asks whom James is speaking to, James takes Jamesy to the edge of the stage to view the audience.

Now that the fourth wall has been officially broken we begin to view what happens on stage even more as performance. Indeed, once the fourth wall is breeched Malkin and Knowles begin to include the audience in their playing area and if they invade our space they heartily invite us to invade theirs. During the course of the show four audience members are chosen by Malkin to join the action on stage and in costume. This would seem to be a huge risk, but what is so amazing is how easily the “volunteers” do whatever Malkin and Knowles suggest as if being on stage and in costume made them different people. Isn’t that what both children playing and actors acting is all about?

The quiet, calm beginning swiftly moves into an accumulation of absurdities that has people hugging themselves with laughter. How can a simple tea party for two suddenly escalate into a gory battle with the front row as soldiers in the front lines? How can the

same party later turn into a horrific yet still uproarious traffic accident? One of the many joys of the show is how the extraordinary erupts so unexpectedly from the ordinary.

Even more surprising is how Malkin and Knowles manage to end a show that skirts the edge of chaos with a moment of tenderness that ties everything together. Malkin founded the company Life & Depth with the express purpose “to facilitate the freeing of other people’s self-expression”. We watch that happen with the obsessive Jamesy and the dull James on stage. We watch it happen with the audience members chosen to play roles in the play. It is Malkin and Knowles’ celebration of freedom from boundaries that fills us with pleasure.

Note: The poster for 2 for Tea says, “Bring your own teacup”. This is not a joke. There is free hot tea and teacups available before the performance. If you thought a teacup was merely a teacup, just watch the show to see how deadly and life-giving it can become.