

High Tea review

Christopher Hoile, Stage Door Toronto

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Jamesy: “Thank you all for playing with us!”

Anyone who saw James (Aaron Malkin) and Jamesy (Alastair Knowles) in *2 for Tea*, should rush to see their follow-up to that show – *High Tea*. The new show expands their comedic celebration of the imagination and takes it to the nth degree. If William Blake wrote of the joy “To see a World in a Grain of Sand,” James and Jamesy act out the wonder of discovering an ocean and everything in it inside a teapot. *High Tea* is about the primal pleasure of playing in every sense of the word. I can’t think of a show that will make you more profoundly happy than this.

One of the joys of the show is how it seems to be completely improvised. In fact, director David MacMurray Smith has carefully orchestrated the events of the action to form a gradual but unstoppable crescendo. You will have no idea from the simple way the play begins to what delirious heights James and Jamesy will take you in the course of only one hour.

The first thing to appear from behind the curtain is, suitably enough, a teapot. Jamesy carries on in an undulating fashion as if it were sailing to its resting spot on the table. In a recap of *2 for Tea*, Jamesy has invited James over for one of their weekly teas. James arrives at the invisible door to Jamesy’s place and phones to say he is there. The lid of the teapot rattles and Jamesy answers it, the teapot instantly transforming into a telephone with the lid as the mouthpiece.

After much confusion about who is where when, James finally sits down for tea and begins to fill the audience in on the background story. Jamesy, however, objects, since he can’t see who James is talking to. To have two characters on stage – one who believes there is a fourth wall, and one who does not – is a wonderfully paradoxical situation that sets in motion the show’s theme of the role of imagination in theatre. James, the realist with the shaved head, eventually proves that we the audience are out there, but not before Jamesy, the fantasist with the exuberant hair, proves that a wall or door can exist wherever he says there is one. What we see enacted is how the restrained James, as a representative of the audience,

comes to see how the flamboyant Jamesy’s world works and how James comes to enjoy the adventure that Jamesy’s world offers.

When the two settle down to having tea, something terrible happens. The (invisible) tea pouring out of the teapot first fills up Jamesy’s room behind the fourth wall, plunging both undersea (or, more correctly, undertea), and then bursts through the wall to engulf the entire audience. The audience is now fully part of the world of imagination and with surprising enthusiasm follows its rules.

I don’t want to give away the series of increasing magical effects that occur from this point on except to say that James and Jamesy do nothing less than bring about a completely different way of thinking in the audience. It was amazing to witness how easily people could transform themselves into sea creatures simply by James or Jamesy telling them that is what they were. It was beyond amazing to see the entire audience happily become the inhabitants of a second Noah’s ark floating on this new flood. Following their example and encouragement, the theatre of people transformed into a playhouse of children who just happen to be in adult form. The solution to this second flood is unbelievably hilarious and involves, among other personages chosen from the audience, the Captain of the ark, his First Mate, the Queen and, well why not, even God.

I remember when playing with my brother and sister that our ordinary back yard could become a jungle in Africa, a plain in the West, another planet or a forest full of spies just by our deciding what it was. As adults we praise the imagination that children have in playing and creating as if we no longer have it. Just an hour at *High Tea* proves we have not lost that imagination. We simply haven’t been given the space, encouragement or freedom to exercise it. That space, that encouragement and that freedom are exactly what James and Jamesy give us. The immense pleasure we feel comes from realizing that a power we thought was lost has only been dormant. James and Jamesy’s *High Tea* awakens us.

– Christopher Hoile, *Stage Door Toronto*