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## Review: Father at the Barbican

Knowing that this puzzling piece of physical theatre is not supposed to make strict sense is all you really need

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Father at the Barbican, in which the action is filtered through the loosening logic of the old man  
Marilyn Kingwill

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This is the sort of impressive, enjoyable, sometimes puzzling piece of physical theatre that makes you check the programme to see if there is some crucial detail that might unlock its secret meaning. Do that with this show by the Belgian company Peeping Tom, appearing here as a centrepiece of the London International Mime Festival, and you get a useful pointer. “The directors create an unstable universe,” we’re told, “that defies the logic of time and space.”

Aha! Knowing that it’s not supposed to make strict sense is all you really need. It explains why first one, then two, then half a dozen caretakers emerge, brooms out, through the double doors to sweep a high-walled set that semi-realistically replicates the living room in a rest home. Why an erratic rest-home worker wields a bendy 20ft broom that she hoists up to reach a skylight over the audience. Why Leo, the old man in a wheelchair at the heart of the story, entertains his fellow residents by singing *Feelings* at the piano, before his harried middle-aged son comes and talks to him as if he were in a world of his own. Why that son suddenly becomes the infirm old man himself. Why the lights suddenly come up on a stage at

the back of the room where a young woman sings some bossa nova before gyrating with double-jointed dexterity around the stage.

The action is filtered through the loosening logic of the old man. It does not rope us into that protagonist's mindset to take us from the bizarre to the explicable as, say, Florian Zeller's *The Father* does. If it's a big statement on ageing or dementia, it's a wilfully wonky one. What this devised show, directed by Franck Chartier — assisted by his fellow artistic director Gabriela Carrizo, who took the lead on the company's previous show, *The Mother* — does is to beguile far more than it bewilders.

Peeping Tom's dynamic, jelly-boned style of movement makes you gasp. The plucked strings, mimed vocals and bursts of jazz create an eerily beautiful mood. Does it veer towards melodrama, as a son shouts at his father for his copious sins? You start to think so. And then a second later it goes from intense to funny as that son is handed an award for his acting.

Full of ingenious effects, it's one step ahead of you: hard to grasp, harder still to forget.  
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