

A HILARIOUS SWASHBUCKLING COMEDY

Le Navet Bete & Barbican Theatre

TREASURE ISLAND



'Laugh out loud!'

West End Best Friend



Supported and funded by
ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND



exeter phoenix



WHO ARE LE NAVET BETE?

#WEARENOTFRENCH

Having been proudly based in Devon since 2011, 2022 marks 14 years of Le Navet Bete. We are a theatre company who are committed to putting the audience at the heart of our work and create utterly bonkers, hilarious and totally accessible comedy, through engaging storytelling, for children to pensioners and everyone in between throughout the UK and internationally. The core company consists of performers Nick Bunt, Al Dunn and Matt Freeman. We are supported by Technical and Production Manager Stuart Billinghurst, Stage Manager Fi Russell and performers Abi Jones and Simon Burbage.

We've driven thousands of miles in battered old tour vans, spent four weeks camping in a stupidly rainy Edinburgh, had a machine gun pointed at us by Spanish border police and, oh yes, outside Buckingham Palace as well...Despite all of this and due to an unprecedented amount of stubbornness, determination and belief in our work, we kept going and for every low there were a dozen highs.

Use this pack as you wish, whether it be for advice, research, a school project or general interest, we hope you find everything beneficial.



A BRIEF-ish HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

2004 - 2007

We met whilst studying Theatre and Performance at the University of Plymouth and officially formed following our final dissertation performance which took inspiration from clowning, bouffon theatre and the work of Jacques Lecoq, Phillipe Gaulier, Dario Fo and Jerzy Grotowski. Our first ever show under the name Le Navet Bete was a scratch performance at the Barbican Theatre Plymouth as a part of their 'In The Flesh Festival' in November 2007.



In August 2008 we took our first show *Serendipity* to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, after having previewed the show at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London in May. The show was a madcap and bonkers glimpse in to the world of five clowns which received a Total Theatre nomination and multiple five-star reviews. In 2009 we returned with *Zemblanity*, another totally absurd 60 minutes' worth of ridiculous physical nonsense, again gaining five-star reviews and a Three Weeks Editor's Award.

2010

Through contacts made in Edinburgh, we went on to perform internationally (Mexico, Spain, Gibraltar, France, Italy, Germany, Ireland, Czech Republic and many more across the following years) as well as making new contacts with venues around the UK. Performing in many non-English speaking countries, our work adapted, and we began to develop work for street theatre. This included combining elements from past shows

Serendipity and *Zemblanity*, along with new material, to create a brand-new outdoor show, *Extravaganza* (which still develops and is performed today).

2011

Following these successes, we decided to go full-time and make Exeter our base. We became Artists in Residence at the Exeter Phoenix and began creating our third show *Napoleon: A Defence*. Around the same time, we formed a relationship with the Bike Shed Theatre in Exeter. *Napoleon* premiered at the Phoenix in May 2011. The same year we approached the Barbican Theatre Plymouth and proposed that we create our first Christmas show in partnership with the venue, *The Greatest Story...Never Told*– a nativity with a difference, directed by Barbican artistic director Mark Laville. We applied for a small Arts Council grant for the Christmas show and were successful. We also received a University of Plymouth Vice Chancellors Special Commendation Award for our services to theatre.



2012 - 2013

We continued to tour across the UK to small-scale theatres and arts centres and made relationships with rural touring organisations across the South-West taking our shows to village halls and rural communities in the region. We began to start building a loyal following regionally and nationally. As well as indoor theatre we got ourselves on the books of Fool's Paradise, one of the UK's leading outdoor and street theatre agencies, enabling us to perform at city centre events and many festivals including Glastonbury, Beautiful Days and Larmer Tree. Christmas 2012 saw us back at the Barbican with *The Greatest Story...Never Told* for the second year. In March 2013 we met John Nicholson, artistic director of comedy theatre company Peepolykus, who agreed to direct our next feature-length, Arts Council funded show *Once Upon A Time In A Western* which debuted at the Exeter Phoenix in October 2013. This was the start of a very fruitful relationship between Le Navet Bete and John Nicholson who still directs for us now. For Christmas 2013 we turned our hand to *A Christmas Carol* in Plymouth.



2014 - 2015

We continued to tour *Once Upon A Time In A Western* throughout 2014, as well as a significant amount of outdoor and festival touring in the Summer, whilst also applying for another Arts Council grant to develop a new show for 2015 – *Dick Tracy*. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was the company's 4th Christmas show at the Barbican in Plymouth for 2014. *Dick Tracy* premiered at the Exeter Phoenix on April Fool's Day 2015. The adventures of *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* was the Christmas show in Plymouth for 2015. By this point the company had a huge regional fan base which was ever increasing further afield across the country.



2016 - 2017

Dick Tracy was in demand from venues up and down the country. The company applied for an Arts Council grant to re-develop and tour *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and to create a brand-new touring show for 2017, *Dracula: The Bloody Truth*. The application was successful. With each new show the scale and ambition increased, as well as that of the company's own goals, with relationships with new and bigger venues happening all the time. The high calibre of the creative team involved in the new shows was also increasing with set, lighting and costume designers, composers and choreographers being employed to heighten the quality of the work being produced.

October 2016 saw our first performance at the Exeter Northcott Theatre with *Dick Tracy*. We subsequently became Associate Artists at the theatre. Christmas 2016 saw *The Jungle Book* at the Barbican in Plymouth. *Dracula* debuted at the Northcott in April 2017 and went on an extensive nationwide tour in more mid-scale venues. The show was picked up by Nick Hern Books and is now published and licensed internationally. Due to huge demand from audiences in Plymouth, we moved our Christmas show to the Plymouth Athenaeum, a larger venue in the city, for Christmas 2017 with a re-mount of *A Christmas Carol*.



2018 and beyond

Dracula continued to tour across the UK to mid-scale venues. We applied for our largest Arts Council grant to date to create and tour a brand-new show, *The Three Musketeers: A Comedy Adventure*, of which we were successful. The show debuted at the Exeter Northcott Theatre in May 2019. *Dracula* is licensed and being performed by theatre companies in the USA, Canada, France and New Zealand. Christmas 2018 was *Aladdin* at the Athenaeum and Christmas 2019 was *Treasure Island* at the Athenaeum. Covid put a hold to our company for a while and it was touch and go whether we would ever get back to performing again, but we are back up and running, having performed *Treasure Island* at the Exeter Northcott for Christmas 2020 – socially distanced –, 400, an original show in partnership with TV personality, writer and comedian Tony Hawks, for the Plymouth Mayflower 2020 Commemorations at Theatre Royal Plymouth in 2021 and *A Christmas Carol* at the Exeter Northcott in 2021. We are currently touring *Musketeers*, *Dracula* and *Treasure Island* across the UK and are partnering up with the Northcott for Christmas 2022 to co-write *Robin Hood* with artistic director and CEO Daniel Buckroyd, seeing us perform alongside 5 other actors for the first time.



THE SERIOUS SIDE OF SILLY

Although our work is firmly rooted in ridiculousness, we take our job very seriously... (most of the time). Below you'll find more behind how we work.

THE FUN STUFF: DEVISING, DEVELOPING AND THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

The rehearsal process for a Le Navet Bete show can vary depending on how it has been funded. Le Navet Bete's Arts Council funded, or subsidised, work can afford a longer developmental and exploration period and initial conversations about a new show will start 18 months – two years in advance. The company will always have a research and development time of between 1 – 3 weeks prior to a rehearsal period. This could be a continuous block of time or it could be spread over a long period of time depending on when the company are touring. This period includes initial thoughts and ideas, drafting a script, improvisations, initial conversations with the creative team (set designer, composer, costume designer, lighting designer).

This time is crucial as it allows the company to play and experiment with a whole range of different ideas – it's a pretty open process and anything goes. Anyone can contribute an idea to be creatively explored. As the company multi-role this development stage is also vital to discover who will play who and what is practically possible on stage with multiple characters. By the end of this initial research and development time the company and creative team will have a pretty good idea of what the show will look like and will be ready for the rehearsal room.

For Arts Council funded work the rehearsal period itself usually lasts between 5-7 weeks. It generally starts with a read through of the initial script developed in the R&D period and involves the whole creative team (from the director to designers, to lighting, sound, marketing and stage management). Following this read through the company begin bringing the script to life, getting it up on its feet and focusing closely on character development. With a company who multi-role this part of the process is really important as it allows the performers to creatively explore mannerisms, vocal



range, physicality and musicality of each character – it's important that even though there are only four actors in the company it feels like there're more people on stage.

Whilst the company are rehearsing the creative team will be busy behind the scenes making and creating the world you eventually see on stage from costumes to lighting, sound and set. As well as the director in rehearsal room the company will also work with artists or practitioners from specific disciplines or with specific skills including choreographers, fight directors, magicians, animators and composers. This expertise in the rehearsal room ensures that extra skills are mixed into the show to create a real high-quality piece of work for audiences to enjoy.



THE BORING STUFF – PRODUCING, ADMINISTRATION AND RUNNING A COMPANY

Well this isn't really boring, it's as important if not more important than the fun stuff because it's what allows the company to continue and grow. Le Navet Bete are a company who do everything themselves. They're responsible for all aspects of their work from finance, to administration, marketing to tour booking.



For each show the company has its own creative team. This is always on a project by project basis and these teams can change and are only employed on a short-term basis to get the show up and running. Once the show has opened it's up to the company to tour it – this means they have to ensure the set can fit in to the van, they often have to plan overnight accommodation and make sure they're at the venue on time to put the set up themselves (called a get-in). Get-ins can take anywhere between 3-5 hours depending on the size of the set. Venues will often supply staff to help but ultimately it is the company's responsibility to ensure that the set, costumes and props are ready before the audience arrive. Not only will they then have to perform the show, they'll then have to take the set down afterwards (called a get-out), on average this takes less time than the get-in, around 1-2 hours. Depending on where the show is this means that an average work day for Le Navet Bete when they're touring is around 12-14 hours.



In between touring the company will be writing funding applications, producing the next leg of the tour, rehearsing, technical maintenance (set, lights, costumes, props), contacting venues about possible tour dates, reconciling finances and having meetings with industry contacts to help develop their work and grow the company. Ultimately, it's all about planning and the company will be looking at least 18 months ahead at projects and potential new shows.



OUR SWASHBUCKLING ADVENTURE

Why Treasure Island?

We chose this classic tale because we knew it offered a wealth of material that we could put our own comic spin on. The characters and story offer us huge potential as performers to create a loud and colourful world brimming with fun, chaos, adventure and of course humour. There's the innocence of Jim Hawkins, the story's 14-year-old protagonist with his dreams of adventure and much bigger aspirations than his surroundings of the Admiral Benbow, the pub his runs with his horrible Aunt Agnes. The 'father/son' relationship between Jim and Long John Silver, the infamous pirate, who tries to gain Jim's trust and friendship, to get hold of the treasure map, the mystery throughout the story of Captain Flint's elusive booty, as well as a good dose of our own artistic licence thrown in for good measure including a game show throwback to the 70s – the 1670s, a certain well-known fish finger loving sea captain, a sinister pirate more dastardly than any who have sailed before him, the most 'beautiful' mermaid you'll ever see and an infuriatingly irritating talking parrot called Alexa.

It's a title people recognise usually from TV or film adaptations but very few people know a lot about Robert Louis Stevenson's original text. We've tried to stay pretty faithful to this original to begin with but then we really wanted to play with it and add our own spin to it as the narrative develops. So the hunt for the treasure is the backbone to the whole show, but we've added lots of subplots and twists and turns and new characters along the way to help drive the story to it's epic conclusion.



REHEARSAL ROOM ANTICS

Here are just a few of the exercises we will be taking in to the rehearsal room with us when exploring *The Three Musketeers*.

EXERCISE ONE

Exploring Narrative - 'Telling a Tale'

We have our own way of uncovering a narrative and transferring it into a show. Why not follow these instructions and see how you get on with the same process.

1 ½ -2hr exercise. In groups of 4-6 people

- Pick a story – one you may be working on or one you all know well (a Bible story, fairy tale, a Shakespeare, or even a film plot).
- Write down in short sentences the key points of the plot. Try to get between 20 and 30 moments.
- List all of the characters and share them out amongst the group, each taking as many as needed. The more characters the more fun it will be!
- Write out your key points on a big piece of paper but shorten them from a sentence to no more than a couple of words – make a note of which characters are in each scene.
- Improvise the story, making each scene 15 seconds long – this could mean someone just coming on and describing the scene or, for example, it could be the famous balcony scene from Romeo & Juliet in quadruple speed without any of the original text.
- Quickly evaluate and then repeat, this time each scene is 30 seconds long - pay more attention to actually telling the story and developing the characters this time round.
- Quickly evaluate again and then do 1-minute scenes - if you had 25 key points in your narrative then you should have a 25-minute performance.

The focus should always be on telling the story. The quicker and faster you have to do this, the more imaginative you will find yourself being. Have fun in exploring the chaos and the moments of confusion as this is where some of the more honest and funny moments can develop from. Don't be afraid to put in some extra characters into the mix, but only if you're confident of the clarity of the narrative and the main characters.

EXERCISE TWO

Directing Emotional States

Often in the rehearsal room we use a scale of 1 to 10 to communicate the energy, emotion or physical state, giving the performer a clear scale to work to. This exercise introduces participants into this way of directing as well as encouraging the performer to engage their audience without text, using only their faces, bodies and sounds (no words) to express emotion and push themselves to their limit (in this case 10 on the scale is their maximum)

15-20 minutes. 5-30 people.

- Create an audience -the audience is hugely important. The performer needs the audience to respond to. The audience can also see what works or doesn't work, what's watchable, what's funny, what's engaging etc.
- One person takes the role of the director (this can change throughout the exercise) – this could also be a teacher.
- One person becomes the performer (or a number of performers depending on the group size).
- The director gives the performer an emotion – happy, sad, angry, shy etc. For this example, we'll say happy.
- The director then asks the performer to stand in-front of the audience in a neutral state (1) and the director then counts from 1-10 slowly.
- As the director counts from 1-10 the performer must portray their emotion growing step by step. 1=neutral 10 = the most (happy) the performer can be (fluidly rather than jerky movements following each of the numbers works best as it appears more natural).
- Once the director has reached 10, and if they don't think the performer is pushing themselves enough, then go to 11 or even 12 (some people need more encouragement than others). Once satisfied they are the most (happy) they can then pick random numbers between 1-10 making the performer jump between the states. If the performer stays controlled, then this can be really funny!
- Swap over roles and try different emotions.
- Once everyone has had a go try using two or three performers but give one a conflicting emotion, for example two performers are happy and one is sad. When there is more than one person on stage it's important that the performers don't perform to each other but to the audience (for this particular exercise).

Perform to your audience – make eye contact, engage your whole audience, not just your friends. Don't use spoken word – this is a physical exercise, use noises but text is often an 'easy way out' and detracts from the physical movements and facial expressions. Don't move around too much – focus on the face and discipline in your body to portray your emotion. Stay focused – you'll really get the best (and most comedic) results this way. Remember that this is a clowning exercise, the emotions should never be played in a naturalistic way. Think cartoon, over the top, exaggerated.

EXERCISE THREE

Exploring Tension

When clowning it is important to portray emotion/ tension with honesty so that the connection with the audience is a real one. This exercise helps us to find the real honesty behind tension and also helps to show how much we hold back as performers.

30-minute exercise, minimum 8 people.

You will need a 'reasonably' hard ball - one that hurts a little bit but not too much.

- Pick one member of the group to lead the exercise (this could be a teacher)
- Pick 3 or 4 members of the group to stand in front of the audience (the rest of the group)
- The person leading the exercise tells the performers to show the audience the tension / fear from having a rock hovering above their heads attached by a thin piece of string.
- The person leading the exercise then tells the performers to face each other with their eyes closed and tells them that at any moment he is going to drop the ball on their heads.
- Let the tension / fear build up, throwing the ball a couple of times up in the air so it lands on the heads of the performers.
- Once you can see what you think to be an honest amount of tension / fear then get the performers to face the audience and repeat point 3 with their eyes closed.
- Get the audience to comment on how the tension in the body / face changed at different stages of the exercise, note when it is at its most honest.
- Repeat this exercise with another group until everyone has had a go, it is important to believe that the ball is going to hurt you even though you know it won't.

The focus of this exercise is to communicate tension to the audience. The audience members should always take note of what works and doesn't work. The people that look honestly scared are by far the most interesting to watch and often the funniest.

FROM LE NAVET BETE THEMSELVES

WHERE DID THE NAME LE NAVET BETE COME FROM AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Al: When we were at the beginning of forming the company our old university lecturer was acting as our 'director'. When we were struggling to come up with a name, he said 'Why don't you call yourselves Le Navet Bete?' Naturally we asked what does that mean?

Nick: French isn't really our strong point!

Al: 'The Daft Turnip' he replied. We all laughed, a bit confused. He said, 'You want something that sounds all lovely and theatre-y and pretentious and when you find out the meaning it's totally ridiculous – it doesn't mean anything!'

Matt: At least no one else has it so it's the first thing that comes up in Google. It's probably grammatically incorrect too!

YOU HAVE BUILT UP A FANTASTIC REPERTOIRE OF SHOWS OVER THE YEARS. ANY PARTICULAR FAVOURITES?

Matt: I love Extravaganza. It's the one that's given us the most audience experiences and it's the show that's taken us around other countries. It took, probably, about seven years of development on and off. I think we learned things about doing that show in other countries that we wouldn't have learned here.

Nick: Probably Dick Tracy because it's just great fun to perform... I like playing the bad guy.

ONE OF THE GREATEST ASPECTS OF YOUR SHOWS IS THAT ADULTS AND KIDS CAN COME ALONG AND, A LOT OF THE TIME, ADULTS ENJOY IT MORE THAN THE CHILDREN! HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT ACHIEVING THIS?

Matt: We make stuff that isn't directed at kids; it's not kids theatre. The silliness and stupidity are always at the centre of it and that translates. It's not intellectual. It's about tapping in to that universal humour. We get away with lots of stuff; being a bit naughty, being a bit risky; I'm not always sure how! As long as it's funny, as long as it's tongue-in-cheek and done with a twinkle in our eye!

Nick: Kids love seeing adults being naughty. At school you've got all these rules you have to follow, and teachers aren't naughty. With our shows, we're adults, behaving like naughty kids and they love it!

HOW DO YOU DECIDE ON WHAT SHOWS YOU'RE GOING TO DO NEXT?

Al: It's usually just stories that interest us. We like exciting titles that we think audiences can get behind and we think we could add our own comic spin to. We like to take stories people know and love and find the humour in them.

Nick: With Dick Tracy we knew we wanted to do something in the style of a cop show, but we didn't have much more than that. We love the characters from the Dick Tracy comic book so just took them and created our own narrative around them so the story for that show is completely original.

Matt: Same with the Western actually – we knew we wanted to set a show in the Wild West and were inspired by films like the Magnificent Seven, but it's not based on any existing story, it's something we developed with director and writer John Nicholson.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF TOURING?

Nick: Aside from performing the show, touring gives us the opportunity to see places we might not have otherwise gone to. We've been lucky enough to tour internationally so have been to some amazing places like Mexico, but we've also really enjoyed seeing loads of different parts of the UK.

WHAT'S YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE PART OF TOURING?

Matt: Sat in traffic jams in the van with Simply Red on repeat because the CD's stuck in the CD slot in the van.

Al: Some days can be really long. Some days we have to drive to a venue, put the set up, perform a matinee show, re-set for the evening, perform an evening show, then take the set down and then drive home. Those days can be exhausting but it's just part of the job.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO ABOUT TOURING THE THREE MUSKETEERS?

Nick: It's one of our biggest shows yet so we're really looking forward to working with such a brilliant creative team. We've got some amazing new people working on the tour including critically an acclaimed set designer and a world class choreographer...

Matt: We're looking forward to learning some new moves...