

Theatre: Absent

The hotel guest who wouldn't leave

Theatre company dreamthinkspeak's latest project is Absent, a 'promenade installation' which turns the basement of Shoreditch Town Hall into a hotel. Its creator, Tristan Sharps, tells **Anna Behrmann** about the mysterious Duchess who inspired the show

An invitation to an immersive theatre production – or a “promenade installation”, as theatre maker Tristan Sharps would prefer it to be called – is always mysterious.

This invitation is perhaps even more curious than most; Absent, which will take place at Shoreditch Town Hall, is in part defined by the absence of its central character.

Inspired by the Duchess of Argyll, who booked into a London hotel in 1978 and was finally forced out several years later, having run out of money, the young woman in Absent books into her hotel and lives there on credit for a lifetime.

“You never really meet her; you're aware of her through her absence,” Sharps, from dreamthinkspeak, explains. “It's a journey through the space; it's like a viewing of a hotel which is currently in renovation, so you have to be a little bit careful.

“You are aware of a residue of a person who has lived in these corridors and rooms and whose life has been played out – you're given fleeting glimpses of that.”

With his Brighton-based company, dreamthinkspeak, Sharps has previously created Orpheus in a Moscow paper factory and a Leonardo Da Vinci-inspired show taking part in the passageways beneath King's College and Somerset House.

Originally an actor and having trained at Jacques Lecoq school in Paris, the theatre maker is now concerned with challenging people's perceptions of spaces and with “writing in visual images.” Much of Absent will take place in the basements of Shoreditch Town Hall, which Sharps defines as “dilapidated and beautiful.”



■ Absent by dreamthinkspeak. Picture: Jim Stephenson

In Sharps' re-imagining of the Duchess' story, she enters the hotel as a young woman in the hotel's grand Old World heyday, and gets evicted in the present day. The new owners are the fictional Shoreditch Group, who decide to rebuild the interior of the hotel and put in many more rooms that all look the same, in order to make more profit.

“The world around us is

becoming more homogenised,” Sharps says. “The big brands buy up the small brands; all the coffee shops look the same with slightly different coloured branding. It's a world that delivers things on a mass scale that we need to consume and it creates jobs. Globalisation is the new philosophy. You could argue that that's out of necessity, or that we just haven't created

anything better.”

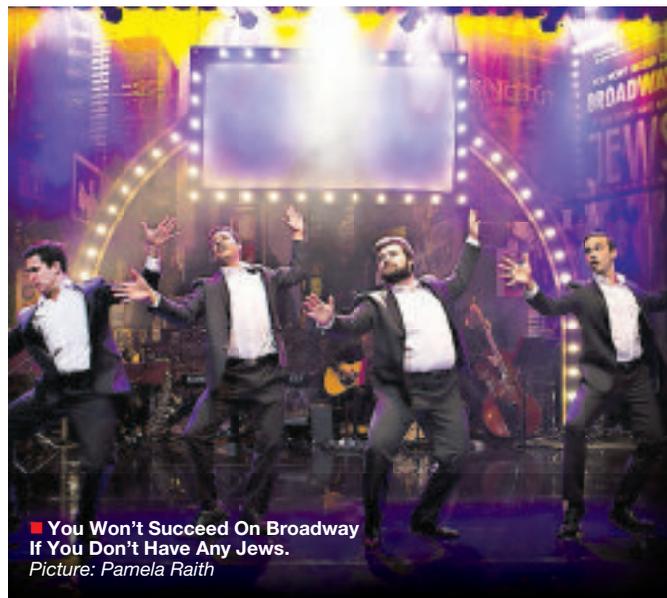
Sharps mentions the controversial redevelopment of Bishopsgate, and the skyscraper office space, homes and shopping centres that are currently being planned around the Square Mile and at the Goods Yard in Shoreditch.

If this sounds political, Sharps insists that it is not. “My work is about feeling and emotion; about

somehow creating a world which you can feel, and a space that will allow you to think for yourself,” he says.

“It's about trying to find the right way of asking, rather than answering questions.”

■ Until October 25. Visit shoreditchtownhall.com/theatre-performance/whats-on/event/absent



Clumsy look at Broadway's Jewish history

YOU WON'T SUCCEED ON BROADWAY IF YOU DON'T HAVE ANY JEWS

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Lacking the shrewd lampooning instincts of Spamalot, from which it takes its name, this revue is a muddle: too solemn for satire, too grandiloquent for cabaret, and too fractured for musical theatre.

Cheap video clips – essentially a school project cribbed from Wikipedia – skate over Broadway history, from the 1930s to present day, and its gifted Jewish composers. Without those guys, there'd probably be no showbusiness, is the hazy conclusion.

The premise reaches breaking point in later years, turning to Disney and cancelled TV drama Smash – hardly comparable with Gershwin or Irving Berlin.

So, best to ignore creator/directors Michaela Stern and Daniel Donskoy's ill-conceived framing altogether and focus on the affectionate delivery of indelible standards from a mostly young, up-and-coming cast.

Granted, removing songs from narrative context does result in some soulless, Glee-like renditions, all big smiles and jazz hands, and the decision to separate disciplines – static singers competing with distracting dancers – seems odd for what should be a celebration of the triple threat.

But there are some gems. Natalie Lippin is light, bright and witty in “The Lady is a Tramp”, while

Sophie Evans (runner-up in Lloyd Webber's Dorothy talent search) produces a pensive, folksy “Over the Rainbow” – though focus is pulled by a clunky pas de deux.

Mama Rose is inexplicably cross-cast, but Danny Lane commits impressively. Sarah Earnshaw gives a comic masterclass in Sondheim's mile-a-minute “Getting Married Today”, and the veterans show how it's done: original Les Mis cast member Jackie Marks still has chops, while assured John Barr provides the evening's highpoint in “Be Our Guest”.

There's little invention, with workmanlike pastiche from choreographer Chris Whittaker, and no insight into Jewish creative history, but toe-tapping nostalgia decently delivered by a promising company.

Marianka Swain

■ You Won't Succeed On Broadway If You Don't Have Any Jews. Picture: Pamela Raith