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## Review: A Spark and a Beating Heart at Trinity Centre, Bristol

11 - 13 May 2017

Theatre Theresa May should be watching: Rosemary Waugh reviews Firebird Theatre's new work about their company and how it got its name.

[Rosemary Waugh](#)

Firebird Theatre perform *A Spark and a Beating Heart*. Photo: Paul Blakemore.

Everyone I know who went into making or writing about theatre was motivated to do so because they possessed a fundamental love of the art form and a basic belief that it was important it exists. But stick around in the industry long enough and on a day-to-day basis it can be overwhelmingly easy to lose track of those underlying instincts. *A Spark and a Beating Heart* by Firebird Theatre is the production to see for anyone who is feeling cynical about theatre, or wondering why it is that they're still up at 2am clawing their way through another review, another funding application, another set of fundamentally depressing opinion pieces. More than that, *A Spark and a Beating Heart* is the production to see for anyone who is feeling exhausted from screaming their views into the face of a bitter wind, getting bashed and buffeted until they think perhaps the best course of action is being apolitical, disengaged and not voting.

This is a gorgeous piece of theatre that implicitly argues for the existence and potential of theatre, along with continued, active expressions of compassion for all members of society. The work tells the story of Firebird Theatre. The devising company of disabled actors have been making theatre in Bristol for 25 years. They started out as The Portway Players before changing their name to Firebird Theatre. *A Spark and a Beating Heart* weaves together the many myths of the firebird from cultures around the globe with the personal stories of actors from the company.

The stories told by the performers are unique to each individual, but there are some interlinking themes. All of the stories reflect on how having a disability – and being labelled as such – has affected their lives. Like everyone's life stories, the ones included in the

production are a mixture of happy and sad memories, with neither milked for emotion from the audience. Because of this, the unpleasant parts of the narrative are acutely poignant. These moments include memories by one of the older members of the cast, Christopher Wiltshire, of years spent living in a hospital, identified as a 'patient' not because of illness but because of having a disability. Patients in these hospitals, he recalls, would at times be beaten up and regularly punished by staff. They could never leave the premises. Another member of the cast, Penny Goater, revisits the time she was sent away to boarding school as it was the only school that would take disabled girls after all the local secondary schools refused to have a wheelchair-using pupil. 'But that's the past!' I can hear people cry. Nowadays we treat disabled people as equals. Not all the stories, however, are from years gone by. A younger woman, Sharlie Yea, tells about how she worked hard to gain independence and to move out into her own flat, despite her parents' worrying about not being on hand. She really liked her own space, she says, and living independently was great. But then the government cuts to disability allowance came and she couldn't afford to go on living on her own. She was forced instead to move back in with her parents. One of the problems, she explains, is that at times she is described as not

being disabled enough – as is the case with not being given a bus pass – but at others she is too disabled – most notably, Yea says, when she is told that she is too disabled to have an opinion.

On Monday, [Theresa May was questioned by Cathy Mohan](#), a woman whose disability benefits have been severely cut, during an event in Abingdon, Oxfordshire. The Prime Minister managed to slither out of the questioning with promises of 'lots of plans' and a reply that appeared to conflate learning difficulties with mental health problems. I think it would be instructive for the Prime Minister, along with any and all who are thinking of voting for the Conservatives, to see a performance of *A Spark and a Beating Heart* directly before they head into the polling booth and choose where they want to place that decisive cross.

What is worth funding and what is not is a fraught topic. Along with people struggling to make their minds up on disability benefits, *A Spark and a Beating Heart* is also vital viewing for those who consider the arts, including theatre, a simple indulgence. The irony is that the more funding for the arts is cut, the more the arts indeed

do become an indulgence – a pastime enjoyed only the wealthy. This production has at its core both the recognition and the proof of the many, many uses of theatre. The stage as a place to tell stories, communicate messages, reliving history. And the practice of performing theatre as the means of building microcosmic communities, groups that devise and create together. There's nothing to be cynical about here. But there's everything to keep working for.

*For more information on Firebird Theatre, click [here](#).*

B24/7Rina Vergano, May 16, 2017

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“What is a firebird? It's a bird that rises from flames and ashes to start a new life. Dramatic, eh? Right up our street!”

So opens the new show from [Firebird Theatre](#), a Bristol-based company of disabled actors (currently aged from 24 to 72) who have been making work for over a quarter of a century. Over the years, Firebird has invited collaboration from leading theatre-makers, writers and musicians including John Nicholson (Peepolykus), Tristan Sturrock (Kneehigh, Theatre Damfino) and Sarah Moody (The Devil's Violin) – as well as poet Claire Williamson, who has helped them shape their stories for this new show and others.

The company members enter wearing costumes in all colours of the rainbow, with a large round screen suspended above them like a giant raindrop. Actor Fionn Gill takes the role of The Storyteller and starts to tell stories inspired by the firebird, a symbol of the quest for freedom and renewal, underpinned by a determination against the odds. These are intercut by personal stories from the company, stories which show the same determination to break free of prejudice and constraint, spread wings and be whoever you truly are.

If some performers have disabilities which make it harder for them to speak, others speak on their behalf, and so the storytelling becomes a blend of testimony, live performance and moving image on the round screen. Personal detail is irresistible and creates sparks in the imagination, particularly when it's eccentric: “I have two umbrellas, I call them Lesley and Gina...”

Firebird is a company that likes to take its time unfolding an idea from its starting point, fully exploring its themes and allowing the material to grow and develop organically in the process (as with past Shakespeare-inspired shows *The Tempest*, *The Nine Lessons of Caliban* and its 'prequel' *Prospero, Duke of Milan*). After a short scratch performance as a work-in-progress at Bristol Old Vic last May as part of the theatre's 250th anniversary celebrations, *A Spark and a Beating Heart* is now right at the beginning of its journey of bedding-in and becoming familiar material for the company to perform publicly to audiences.

Words are a powerful means of sharing stories, memories, hopes and experiences as an element of live performance, and they can also act as an obstacle by creating a need to 'get it right'. Firebird's shows work best when the performers spread their theatrical wings and break out of a linear storytelling form in favour of more spontaneous movement, visual elements, playfulness, humour, sound and song. The journey they make together as a group is always as authentic and impelling as any end product.

Thanks to the commitment and energy of the cast, this brand new show in its 'baby shoes' certainly went down a storm on opening night – the outburst of clapping, cheering, waving and stamping from Firebird's many fans, friends and family in the audience felt like a suitably fiery finale, and was testimony to the power of theatre as a shared experience.

"We are a family of actors who like different audiences. We want them to be happy and see good theatre: our theatre!" Job done.

End

## **A Spark and a Beating Heart from Questionnaire Feedback**

A very moving performance, professionally staged and performed by an excellent group of actors.

Telling important stories that must not be forgotten.

Thank you for sharing”

“THIS WORK IS IMPORTANT. IT NEEDS TO continue TO BE SUPPORTED AND LISTENED TO BY PEOPLE FORM ALL AREAS OF Society.”

“BRAVE RELEVANT , A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF THEATRE. [DO IT FOR Politicians]”

“A beautifully vivid and thought-evoking performance. It was stunning to see people be so brave and tell their personal stories.

A really important piece of theatre.

Well done!”

“What a wonderful piece of theatre! Thank you for sharing your stories and creating such a beautiful piece. Imaginative, creative, political and very poignant. Thank you once again!

I will be telling all of my friends!”

“Moving, honest, evocative and brave.

A piece about love, politics, people.

I feel educated and moved to help change happen.”

“Wonderful

Important

Funny

Heartbeatingly good

Brilliant

Everyone needs to see this.

Thank you for making it.”

“Really beautiful moving piece of theatre that changed me and made me think about how far society has come but how far there is still to go.

A joyful, extraordinary group of performers with so much care and attention for each other.”

“Wonderful to see these people able to perform with great confidence and enjoyment.  
It must make a great difference to feel they can do what others do.  
K.Adams.”

“Thank you. I enjoyed this so much. Keep up the good work,  
Firebird.  
From your Number One Fan,  
Maggie xx”

“Honest  
Pure  
Open  
Really emotive and inspiring  
Thought provoking.”

“Huge congratulations to the cast and company. Telling unheard relevant stories of massive importance.  
Difficult to create a vehicle for this, care for the company and engage/ entertain the audience. Well done.  
Come and share this with others.”

“As a fellow actor I was inspired!  
Per adua ad astra!”

“Moving and beautifully woven together theatre  
Thank you.”

“It was beautiful, really enjoyed it nearly made me cry  
Was lovely to see everyone enjoying it so much and helping each other  
Really truly lovely.”

“Loved the thread of the myths and people’s personal stories. I liked the audio visuals that also held the story together.  
Overall it was stunning.  
Well done.”

“Brilliant  
Well crafted

Brave  
Great message that need to be heard by everyone.  
Professional  
Gentle  
Thank you.”

“Seriously brilliant  
I want everyone to see this – thank you to everyone who made this happen and for the stories shared.”

“An amazing piece of theatre – excellent work from everyone.  
Really through provoking and topical  
Do hope you are able to tour with it and invite some politicians to attend.  
Thank you so much.”  
“Get changed Theatre Company is a similar type of theatre group.  
I was very interested to see a show by Firebird. I found it a very moving story.  
I hope we can meet again.”

“Very moved by the powerful performance. It was extremely brave to stand and give personal performances of things that people hoped would be forgotten. We must never forget.”

“Superb performance, I did have a strong emotional response to the performance, albeit, I have been involved with the Get changed theatre company for 12 years, which promotes drama for adults with learning disabilities.”

“A message that should be told. In other words keep on performing so that the world keeps on watching Firebird Theatre.”

“Very moving and inspiring – Love it!  
However, I felt the storyteller should have also been a disabled member of the group/the storyteller should have taken a smaller role. <3”

“Fantastic!  
So moving and galvanising. I love firebird and the work that day.”

“BIG BRAVO  
ONWARDS AND UPWARDS”

“Amazing, beautiful, talented people.”

“Beautifully composed show.”

“Show really went deep.  
Plenty to think about and very clever.  
Excellent work as always.”

“The company were fantastic; I wish I knew all their stories and more of the ones I heard. It was an important piece of theatre to make and they executed it completely brilliantly.”

“Loved it – really touching, inspiring, beautiful.  
(Lovely costumes)”

“Very moving and insightful.  
Thought provoking.  
Important.  
Thank you for sharing your stories with us. Was an honour to hear them.”

“Moving, inspiring. Amazing mix of words, images, stories, humour and pathos. Well done Firebird! Burn on! Ali.”

“SET ON FIRE  
MAGICAL  
FLYING  
INSPIRED  
GLORIOUS  
SOARING  
FEELINGS

Thank you Liz camel”

“It was great. Thank you😊”

“I found the piece very inspiring and moving!  
Thank you!”

“Loved the use of photos and film to tell stories. Different  
(theatre/feature) was great.”

“So good I had to come back again to watch the performance with  
a friend. Thank you for sharing your stories with us!”

“This was fab! Everyone was so brave telling their stories and I felt  
part of the journey. Thank you!”

“I think you guys are great.  
Thank you – looking forward to the next show.”

“I’ve seen three pieces of theatre this week...  
This was my favourite.  
Thanks”

“A really beautiful piece of theatre. Such high quality. Thank you to  
all the performers. I feel very touched and thoughtful.”

“A fantastic and moving performance.  
Congratulations to all involved.”

“Lovely show 😊”

“Thank you – Having worked as a “nurse” for the past 25years this  
gave me a fresh perspective!”

“I thought this was amazing! Very powerful.  
Well done to all involved.”

“Absolutely beautiful.”

“This play was very inspiring.  
Very good,”

“The best play I’ve ever seen, definitely some rising stars.”

“An emotional, moving performance. I felt touched to hear all the stories and loved the way it was all put together.”

“It was so beautiful to hear all your stories, told with such honesty and dignity.

It made me think of my aunt and uncle who were both supported by the Home Farm Trust to live happy, fulfilled lives and marriage of 20 years – despite constant discrimination. You can achieve anything you set your heart to.

Thank you for reminding me of this <3”

“Devastating  
Beautiful  
Heart wrenching  
Gorgeously designed”

“What a beautiful show.  
Simple and profound.  
More of this  
More stories  
More people should see it.”

“Really enjoyed the individual stories and how theatre was talked about as an important part of their lives. A real sense of community, honesty and freedom of expression!  
A joy to watch. Thank you 😊”

“Thank you for an inspiring performance. We should all listen with respect and be able to tell our stories to one another; I liked all the resources incorporated too – but the actors especially.”

“Very moving and also very talented actors and live visual effects and music were wonderful too.”

“This is a large and daunting space to try to fill. I am sure given time I could write many pages about the performance which was inspirational. The format and energy of the ‘play’ was very engaging. The music took me to another place.

As a psychiatrist who worked at Stoke Park and Purdown and Hanham Hall hospital this had a special resonance about which I could write a lot more. I think that it should be remembered that although there was much to be deeply concerned about that happened in Stoke Hospital, the majority of the staff were kind and doing their best.

This play and this theatre group have a power that should be seen and heard much more widely and I know nothing about the aspirations of Firebird but please don’t hold back from “Going for it” – I’m sure you won’t!”

“Wish we had known about them sooner. An incredible though provoking experience for us and them. Will move mountains to support them again. J. Sanders.”

“Wonderful moving performances”

“IT WAS ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT  
THANK YOU! Xx”

“A brilliant performance by an amazing group of people!  
Powerful stories, movingly shared by a talented group of people.  
I think you should take the performance to schools, especially, secondary to challenge stereotypes and provoke discussion.”

“Very thought provoking – hopefully the performances will help people’s attitudes change.”

“I always leave a Firebird show uplifted and my life enhanced. I was very moved to hear the actions personal stories and loved the way they were moved woven with the Firebird stories. I was very impressed with the Design.”

“Very thought provoking. Made me want to see one of the actual plays. A really important story to have in the community.”

“Amazing and innovative play and the performers who shared their stories were wonderful!  
Thank you!”

“It was an amazing and moving piece of theatre. To see a group with such differing needs to perform so well as a team was uplifting. TO hear their stories made from you think about how lucky we are and what needs to be done to help other people.”

“Absolutely amazing performance – by all!  
Needs to be shared further a field. Thought provoking, inspirational, relevant – just amazing.  
How far we still have to come with our disabled misconception and views. Can’t wait for the best Firebird Theatre Company Production! 😊”

## **Emails**

I wanted to drop you a quick note to say that I saw the show last night - just wonderful! I was really moved by hearing the company’s stories and am overjoyed that Adrian’s musical approach fits so beautiful.

Do please pass on my best wishes to all the actors for the remaining three performances.

Speak soon,

Jonathan x

The Paraorchestra and Friends

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It was such a good show and so glad I have played a part in the development. Congratulations to you and company. X

Paul Blakemore, photographer.

Dear Daniel, Stephen, Brian, Penny, Kevin, Tina, Mary, Sarah, Marilyn, Olivia, Chris, Sharlie and Jane

Wow!!!!

I haven't stopped thinking about A Spark and a Beating Heart since I saw it. It was theatre at its best - it reached into my heart and turned it up side down!

It was utterly inspiring to hear your stories told with such courage and honesty and I was so moved to hear just how important theatre is to you.

Your performances were breathtaking!

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for making such beautiful theatre. Also for being so kind and welcoming to me - it always gives me such joy to see you all.

With respect and love

Heather xxx

Thanks again for a wonderful experience.

Sam Thorp , BSL interpreter xx

Thank you so much for a marvellous performance of A Spark and a Beating Heart at the Trinity Centre. What a powerful production!

I was extremely moved by the actors' individual stories - it must have taken a lot of courage to share such personal information - and I thought the different ways the stories were presented was very effective.

It is wonderful to witness the actors growing in confidence with each production, to see their dedication to acting and how they support each other.

Congratulations on your 25th Anniversary and wishing you continued success!

Best wishes,  
Tess

"Thank you for the wonderful programme for *A Spark and a Beating Heart*. I have to admit to crying when I read it - I think it was the words about the history of the company from way back, when I first met them, to the fantastic journey and now the positive future with new young Disabled People joining so that all the hard creative work of Firebird will go forward with it's story telling and it's important place in the Arts.

Our storytelling challenges notions of 'other', it is a reminder of what is allowed to happen to us when we are separated from society, what continues to happen when people turn away and do not listen, believing that so called professionals know what's best for us.

The young will, and must always, find ways to tell their stories, especially, facing the lack of any political will towards Disabled People. I just hope that this will always include the stories and recognition of those who have gone before, for those who have been murdered, for those who have fought, for those who continue to fight, for those who have offered hope, for those who have fought about change so that we can be here still challenging and telling our stories.

As you can see the program fired me up!! I really hope you tour."

*Linda Lawrence, Cornwall*

I absolutely loved a Spark and a Beating Heart – it was thoughtful, impactful and very professional.

Lucy Hunt, Bristol Old Vic

Hi All. Yes massive congratulations to all the members and Jane. Beautifully performed and crafted show. So moving and also uplifting. Sorry for very short reply. Jo Cuthbert, Trustee

Massive congratulations are due to Firebird - what a show.

Thanks to everyone who gave their time and support last week. It was a very moving, memorable event and it was a real privilege to be involved.

Mel, Chair of Trustees

Yes – an amazing show and I've heard nothing but good feedback from those who came to see it – the company should be hugely proud! Mel and Mia's 'targeted questionnaire approach' on Saturday was brilliant! Jane Edwards Reynolds, Trustee

### **A Spark & A Beating Heart - 12 May**

The echoes of a most memorable and raw, emotive performance will stay with those who experienced it, both on and off stage, for a very long time. Both Bill and I were totally blown away by the play, the individual stories and the variety of ways they were portrayed - as individual as the people themselves, the story of Firebird, the teamwork and mutual support shown by all involved, the beautifully haunting music and the added depth of the brilliant visual effects.

Although the play was very personal to Firebird it also did what true theatre is supposed to do in holding up a mirror to human existence and I found my thoughts and emotions careering all over the place as I watched the stories unfold. Penny's story reminded me of a little boy I worked with once who was adopted and had a sad story and deeply empathised with the evacuated children when we studied WW2. Chris's story made me think of someone in our family and also of several children I have worked with, especially when he talked about people just seeing the behaviour and not the person behind it ... and lots, lots more. Well done!

**Chris & Bill Urwin, Broadway, Somerset**

Hi Antigoni

Thank you so much for organising my comp ticket, I was thrilled and deeply impressed by the show! I thought the inter-weaving of people's personal stories and the mythical tales of the firebird was fascinating. This simple format allowed the individuals to speak directly about their lives and experiences in a way that was compelling and powerfully affecting. There are truths told in the show you are so sad to hear and yet it also reveals people's courage and capacity to make happiness with others. I thought the electronic backdrop and the music fed into the play really well, but above all it was the ensemble playing of a terrific cast that remains with me.

I'm so glad the CSR committee was able to provide some support and will report back to the committee about the show.

Please do pass on my thanks to the Firebird Theatre Company when you are next in touch with them.

Best wishes  
Christina

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England Vat No GB 461 6000 84.

I think you should all be so very proud about the work you produced. Firebird always produced wonderful work but with this play you moved the bar that much higher!  
This performance has touched me so much and will stay with me for ever. Apart from being a very professional and amazing production, the music, the script itself and the performances were just fantastic. It takes the audience on a journey of emotions and thoughts and asks some very serious questions too. It's funny, sincere, with a note of melancholy but optimistic at the same time and current! This is quite an achievement. As far as I'm concerned it is a masterclass in art and life.

Firebird has moved on to a different level now!

Just amazing! Thank you!

See you tonight

Best wishes

Antigoni, Trustee

## Tweets

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**Mel Scaffold**

@dollyrocket

May 18

'argues for the existence & potential of theatre, & continued, active expressions of compassion for all members of society' [@TheatreFirebird](#) [twitter.com/theatremagazin...](https://twitter.com/theatremagazin...)

**Mel Scaffold** @dollyrocket

May 13

It was a privilege to hear [@TheatreFirebird](#)'s stories yesterday & be reminded of the power of theatre. Last night tonight, go if you can.

**Red**

@MiaPia

May 13

[@dollyrocket](#) [@TheatreFirebird](#) It was so lovely (and important!!), really pleased to have had the chance to see it. ☐

**Emma Stenning**

@Schtanhaus

May 13

Beautiful ensemble playing from [@TheatreFirebird](#) this eve. A Spark and a Beating Heart is golden, uplifting theatre.

**becky chapman**

@beckyozproduct

May 13

Catching [@TheatreFirebird](#)'s show [@TrinityBristol](#) - full house!

**Claire Doherty**

@ccdbristol

May 12

Congrats [@TheatreFirebird](#) [@maykithappen](#) on beautiful piece of theatre

**Emily Williams**

@EmilyBronwen

May 11

Wonderful.Important.Funny.Heartbeatingly good. Everyone needs to see this. Thank you [@TheatreFirebird](#) [@maykithappen](#) [#ASparkandaBeatingHeart](#)

**STRIKE** **Strike A Light**  
**A LIGHT**  
**FESTIVAL** TTTTT [@strike a light](#)

[May 11](#)

Today talked unique happening with [@sampad\\_arts](#) [@holliesc](#)  
[@GloucesterCT](#) + excellent show [@TrinityBristol](#) by [@TheatreFirebird](#)  
[@maykithappen](#)

**James D Kent**  
[@Jdkent](#)

[May 11](#)

I saw a very brave and authentic piece of theatre today by [@TheatreFirebird](#).  
It's a story that needs to be heard but it's only on till Sat.

**emma bettridge**  
[@emmitmole](#)

[May 09](#)

[@dollyrocket](#) [@IdiotChildCo](#) [@so\\_georgemann](#) [@Chino100percent](#)  
[@TheatreFirebird](#) YESSSSSSSSSS