

## The Breadhorse at [Bristol Old Vic Studio](#)

14th-16th March 2013

Reviewed by [Geraldine Giddings](#)



Kaleidoscopic contemplation.

*The Breadhorse* is a work of performance without a creative hierarchy: an unusual and brave experiment in equality in collaboration. There is no writer or director, but a 16-strong company of actors who have been working together on this for a year. Alan Garner's poem, on which this production is based, takes as its narrative a playground game in which a child is picked to be the Horse, having to carry another on his back as the other children chant. There's one child that gets chosen to be the Horse more often than the rest, and though the rules state that the rider must be gentle, the suggestion is that this is not always the case. Firebird Theatre have taken the poem, examined and deconstructed it, to produce a 40 minute piece that's abstract, layered and evocative.

Playground teasing and carrying the burden of growing up are obvious themes, but as the performance progresses, deeper consideration of the concept of 'breadhorse' causes us to think about the way we relate to our own

emotional, social, and physical difficulties. The fact that Firebird Theatre is a company of disabled actors, and that the Breadhorse game is essentially physical, necessarily emphasises the idea of bullying and of the difficulty of being different – though this is not overtly stated. This is a performance where many, many themes are offered, but conclusions are not drawn.

*The Breadhorse* is made up of words rather than actions – and is captioned and signed. The actors share their devised text equally, often repeating phrases or words to build up or highlight an idea or a theme. The effect is like viewing an abstract expressionist painting. You are somehow removed from the substance of the portrait, but instead are involved in a multifaceted, multicoloured portrayal of the subject, that requires more interpretation than expected but potentially offers greater reward. This piece eventually builds to a climax of sorts, but what exactly it was, I couldn't tell you, though the feeling was good and strong.

An impressive band of 'community' musicians and choir provide another dimension to the spoken word aspect of the performance, evoking the playground chanting that is the backing to the game when they pick up on a Romany poem that has made its way into the performance text. It's a horse-whisper; a command and an endearment from a rider to a horse, in a culture where a horse is a precious commodity and a cultural emblem. It subtly adds so many more dimensions to this performance. If you don't read the Romany words' meanings in the show's programme, you won't know what they are, and at times during the performance it feels as if the actors have themselves forgotten what the words mean and why they're saying them – they become simply a rhythm.

Rhythm and timing is something that is very strong in this show. The actors have a huge confidence and presence, and are visibly proud of their work. In fact, pride is the strongest and clearest emotion transmitted by *The Breadhorse*, and it rubs off on the audience, the musicians and the singers – everyone sitting up straight, connected to one another, as if having received a call to arms.

The decision to include everyone equally was a laudable one, and perhaps the decision to follow so many different ideas on a single theme came from the same place. The product is a fascinating, kaleidoscopic contemplation on some vital themes – but a director or some stricter editing could have helped to pull this show together and enable it to speak more directly to its audience.

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## **[The Breadhorse – Bristol Old Vic](#)**

**Writer: Alan Garner (adapted by Firebird Theatre Company)**

**Music: Mark Laurence**

**Reviewer: Samuel Shelton**

The Public Reviews Rating: ★★★★★

This single act piece has charm, back bone and most of all a kind of pert gallop. With a cast of sixteen, most of which disabled, it's smiles all round as the deserved compliments flood the stage. *The Breadhorse* is an adaptation from the 1975 poem/short story by Alan Garner and Albin Trowski about a children's game that gets out of hand. This piece is bravely taken on by the long established Firebird Theatre Company.

The stage resembles a playground, in which the rules of the Breadhorse are announced. Each child hops onto the back of another child and that child is now "it" or "the horse". However, the game takes a downwards turn as the other children begin to bully and gang up on an individual child who is always "it". That child then begins their own journey of empowerment and transformation to overcome the bullying and resolve harm they have undergone. This multimedia platform uses a projector that beams the words of the play onto a soft black cloth, behind which are several dangling metal horse shoes creating a wonderful faint shimmer as the lighting changes. Above the words are the paintings and drawings beautiful composed by Carol Chilcott. Each piece by the artist has an individual expression that resembles the stress of the protagonist through to their transformation in this piece.

The cast is accompanied by a fantastic choir. During a scene one of the actors begins to sing an enigmatic incantation alone centre stage, she is gracefully picked up on her final note by a crescendo of voices and instruments conducted by the experienced Mark Lawrence. This incantation is repeated throughout the piece and alters in its musical expression as the play shifts in emotion. The stage play is adapted in a way that suited all members of the cast and filters through the individual's abilities. Firebird adapted *The Breadhorse* with complete freedom and permission by Alan Garner. The only negative for this piece would be its length, 45 minutes just isn't enough time to spend with such an original cast.

The combination of the meticulousness of this piece, which was two years in the making, and the passion in each line that resonates from every cast member, reminds the audience of a kind of quality that is becoming rarer every day and that is pure spirit to perform. This will not disappoint anybody and is arguable one of the most rehearsed pieces performed at the Bristol Old Vic so far.

**Runs until 16th March 2013.**

The Breadhorse - Bristol Old Vic, 5.0 out of 5 based on 1 rating

This entry was posted on March 15th, 2013 at 6:45 pm and is filed under [Drama](#).

## **[The Breadhorse \(Bristol\)](#)**

Venue: [Bristol Old Vic](#)

Where: Bristol

Date Reviewed: 14 March 2013

WOS Rating: ★★★

Reader Reviews: [View and add to our user reviews](#)

Bristol Old Vic Associate Company Firebird have taken [Alan Garner](#)'s short story about childhood hijinx and antics and adapted it for the stage as part of their tenure at Bristol Old Vic.

With a company of 16 actors and a community chorus and musicians, this show certainly has big ambitions and a cast willing to match the heights they are aiming for.

Dealing with issues such as isolation, bullying and identity, the cast, all of whom are disabled, tackle the story and the 40 minute running time with limitless energy and focus. The musicians also fill the space pre-show and during with an original score by [Sarah Moody](#).

The show stumbles however largely down to the fact that the actors are stymied by stringent direction. Each of the actors has moments where their personalities shine through however those moments are few and far between. For a story about play, there is very little fun to be had. The Breadhorse is based on a playground game for children and in playing it safe, the game appears too earnest so when the bullying or the isolation is on display, there isn't enough at stake to warrant real engagement.

The actors command the stage. What they need is greater license to play and challenge which their instinct so clearly wants them to do. - [by Shane Morgan](#)

## Review: The Breadhorse, Bristol Old Vic

1503<sub>2013</sub>

As the company of [Firebird Theatre](#) walked in single file onto the studio stage at the Bristol Old Vic, you realise that this is not a typical group of actors. Typical they may not be – made up of 16 disabled men and women with a range of ages and disabilities – but actors they most certainly are and this premiere of a new stage adaptation of The Breadhorse was captivating.

Alan Garner's short story is about a boisterous playground game where children carry each other on their backs, which turns nasty as one boy is forced to be the "breadhorse" again and again.

This theatrical version has been made in collaboration with young people across Bristol through a community chorus, which are positioned in one corner of the studio.

Meanwhile, a screen above the actors projects the words they speak as well as illustrations, photographs and videos of horses before beautifully melting away to reveal dozens of hanging horseshoes.

With name calling and finger-pointing, the breadhorse game could be a metaphor for the prejudice that disabled people face on a daily basis.

But the way that they confront this prejudice and rise above the name calling, in both the fictional production and also by the fact that these actors are on the stage in front of us at all – leaping beyond their mental and physical disabilities – is inspirational.

An incantation becomes almost hypnotic, helped along by a group of musicians in another corner of the studio, which adds a further element of drama to proceedings.

Tristan Sturrock (most recently seen at the Old Vic as Peter Pan) gave a few pointers to the company and the confidence that he must have instilled in them is clear to see as this fine group of actors present a poignant and enlightening new piece of theatre.



*The Breadhorse is being performed today and tomorrow, with a Q&A after today's 8pm show. For more information, visit [www.bristololdvic.org.uk/thebreadhorse.html](http://www.bristololdvic.org.uk/thebreadhorse.html).*

## **Review of Breadhorse at the Bristol Old Vic**

Author:  
March 15th, 2013

**Lucian**

**Waugh**

Curtis Woodhouse recently amused the nation by that revealing light-welterweight boxers have a violent streak when provoked. A

James O'Brien of Sheffield actively and keenly mocked Woodhouse's decidedly mixed professional fortunes via Twitter. After a successful appeal for information on the social networking site, Woodhouse tracked O'Brien down to his home. Posting updates en route, Woodhouse secured an unconditional apology before getting to the front door. On Thursday morning the two shook hands on ITV's *Daybreak*, O'Brien reiterating his apology.

Reaction to Woodhouse has been supportive. A sample of some of the tweets he received does read as considerably vexing. Furthermore no actual violence occurred so those of an anti-vigilante persuasion need not feel too troubled. Clearly O'Brien's mistake was to pick on someone with considerable resources (the bounty Woodhouse offered for his attacker's address was £1,000) and physical prowess. In this instance, the victim was no victim. Behind the latest trending story however, the banality and distressing reality of bullying is much less comfortable.

Another reported news story this week also involves violence and technology. The arrest of a fourteen year old from Hull was made after mobile phone footage of an assault was posted on Facebook. The attack on a pupil suffering from learning difficulties involved repeated punching and headbutting. This sad and upsetting story has only made it into the news because it was filmed. In this instance the evidence can be used in what will be a criminal inquiry.

The abuse that the most vulnerable people in our society face discredits everyone. Yesterday afternoon I went to the Bristol Old Vic to see a local production by Bristol's enormously talented Firebird Theatre who offered a complicated yet uplifting reply to torment. The play *Breadhorse* adapts a short story by Alan Garner and takes as its subject bullying, isolation, and eventual empowerment. The longstanding company comprises sixteen disabled actors who have established a strong local presence.

I was transfixed and surprised by this play. It is elusive and questioning; quietly hypnotic in its constant return to seemingly simple words and ideas, gathering layers of meaning with each recurrence. The actors were accompanied by a remarkable score, performed live by musicians and singers. Sound, movement, costume, and design were tightly integrated and a testament to the power of suggestion. It asks a lot of its audience, and trusts us to

construct our own meanings. The artifice of the theatre is cleverly applied to a play about the power of playing.

Some of its questions don't have obvious answers. Those who are different unquestionably encounter intolerance and cruelty. Is it patronising if I assume personal experience underpins the authenticity of these performances? Of course it is, yet it makes the hopeful and feisty conclusion all the more convincing. I felt I'd witnessed something cathartic for the performers; perhaps I didn't. But I certainly thought a lot.

We respond to bullying in different ways. Some of those ways are creditable, some flawed, some shameful. Threatening to drive to a tormenter's house and exact retribution is quite understandable. But a thoughtful refusal to see oneself as disempowered, expressed with all the talent and bravery required of acting before an audience is quite a response. It is easy to dismiss what happens on any stage as self-indulgent. *Breadhorse* is a world away from theatrical stereotypes and deals with a challenging subject with honesty and immense subtlety. Everyone involved should be warmly congratulated on putting on such a thoughtful and professional production.

Runs from Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March – Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> March

## Details

# Bristol Old Vic Theatre *The Breadhorse* review

22 March 2013

## Description:

**Bristol Old Vic Theatre *The Breadhorse* review**

**Catherine Hand reviews *The Breadhorse* at Bristol Old Vic Theatre**

The Firebird Theatre company captivated their audience with their adaptation of Alan Garner's "The Breadhorse". The company is made up of 16 disabled men and woman with a range of disabilities and ages all showing great potential and professionalism from start to finish. The actors began their performance walking single file, silently across the stage creating an eerie atmosphere capturing their audience immediately.

Alan Garner's short story "The Breadhorse" is centred on the unruly and boisterous playground game which involves children carrying each other on their backs. The story tells us of how one young boy was forced repeatedly to be the "breadhorse".

The Breadhorse shows an accurate portrayal of the bullying that happens in the playground. It reiterates how bullying affects us and highlights the prejudice that many people face such as disability, race and sexuality.

The way the actors are shown challenging and rising above the name calling shows them empowered through their own personal journeys. The play shows an enchanting journey of self-discovery and acceptance. It also asks the audience the question of would you ever bully? It allows us to feel passionate towards the inspirational message of these actors rising beyond their physical and mental disabilities.

This theatrical adaptation has been made in partnership with young people across Bristol, including the community choir, positioned in the left hand corner of the stage. Throughout the play there is a screen that projects above the actors showing the words as they speak as well as beautiful imagery of photographs and video clips of horses. Behind the screen were silhouettes of hanging horseshoes which were clearly visible creating a serene and stunning backdrop.

The rhyme throughout the show was entrancing and somewhat therapeutic. It repeated and altered by increasing the tempo, changing the melody or simply from whispering to chanting, and this simple change could alter the atmosphere immediately. There is no literal translation for the rhyme- this allowed the actors to make their own interpretation which made their performances an individual journey. The group of musicians that accompanied the actors dramatized the rhyme into an incantation making it feel very powerful and almost overwhelming.

The play unfortunately seemed to be over too soon, the story was very basic however carried an extremely vital message. What really fascinated the audience was the energy of the actors and how passionate they had portrayed their feelings towards bullying and the search for acceptance. It really was heart-warming to see all actors enjoying themselves and expressing a message that was so crucial to them.

## **Feedback from Ferment sheets**

Fantastic show, absolutely loved the performance

Fantastic show

Loved the music and live choir too. Loved the surtitles. Great performances but I really could not understand the story. It needed more explanation. Well done, great ensemble production

Loved the live music, band. Great to see the words displayed.  
Thank you.

We wanted to see something other than 'mainstream' performances.

Wonderful production. Good diction, heard every word, loved the music, loved the production.

Firebird's standard is always very high. I never miss their shows!

Was recommended to me. Really enjoyed it and the actors obviously did too.

Captivating performance, loved the mix of music and the spoken word.

Brilliant, really great!

Hypnotic performance – very immersive

I enjoyed the Q & A session at the end. It brought a lot more meaning to the whole production

LOVED the image for the show. It really sold it for me.

Also, it was an excellent performance and so different to anything else I've seen.

I loved the collaboration aspect of the show. Joyous!

Fantastic! Very powerful and moving.

I really enjoyed it, very professional.

I loved the artwork, the drawing and vibrant colour.

I loved the strength of feeling, the clarity with which the actors expressed their words, very moving.

I loved the Q & A session – the participation from all parties, the obvious sharing and collaboration. Heart-warming. Loved it!

It was a truly delightful production. I have long loved the work of Alan Garner and feel this was a powerful interpretation of his work.

Really good.

It was very good. Very clear.

Very enjoyable. Will definitely be back for future productions.

Enjoyed it!

I thought it was powerful and mesmerizing – well done.  
the guys are doing a fanatstic job..it's a really focussed and beautiful piece

I just wanted to thank you again for the lovely performance of Breadhorse, which my daughter and I came to see yesterday. I found it very moving – not because it was sad – but more because of the way that I felt drawn through the different performance spaces, literally moved. I loved that we were being spoken to in so many languages: music, song, chant, physical movement, drawn images, photographs, written text, voice, and the glimmering horseshoes suspended overhead. I felt I was being invited in so many different ways. The same words in different people's mouths were wonderful – spoken so differently and changing meaning subtly each time. The ensemble work is seamless, and yet there is also the space for individual performers to shine with the directness of their approach. Lovely!

I enjoyed it very much - everyone played their part so well and I loved the illustrations. An excellent creative piece of work. I stayed for the Q&A and was impressed by how engaged everyone was and how much they had clearly enjoyed and benefited from the experience.

Hi Firebird

Thanks so much for a brilliant show - Matthew and I loved it, and have enjoyed telling everyone in Brighton all about it. Really enjoyed everything about the show - but in particular the story telling, integrity of the performers, the way they engaged with the audience to tell their story, their ownership of the whole piece, and the choir - just excellent - a true piece of theatrical quality. I loved it.

Matthew and I were inspired by the theme, and talked about a film that combines animation of the lovely drawings, with the footage of the horse's legs that was projected during the show. I do hope that at some stage Firebird and Artists First get to work together to make a short film - time and funding allowing - I think you'd make a brilliant film. Carousel, Brighton

It was a pleasure to work with all of you once again and Breadhorse is a brilliant show!

All the best, Tim

The Breadhorse Feedback from audiences

It would be great if the images were made into a film. I love the whole piece.

Brilliant

Inspiring performance, this production is poetic and full of surprises. The music was fantastic – choice was a super extra. The cast was fully involved and had an extraordinary energy. Thank you all.

I thought it was really cohesive production. I love the projections and the music. I think it is great that BOV is investing in this sort of theatre. I really was given an insight into the story and senses of bullying.

Excellent. Well done.

Wonderfully heart warming and proof that making theatre is just as much about the collaborative process as it is about the final outcome. Q&A was brilliant, as it gave a chance for us to get a true insight into this genuine collaboration and into the fantastically performative but non-egotistical characters involved!

Fantastic piece of work - so enjoyable to see actors really getting something from the performance. You could tell from the audience perspective that it was just as much about the process and experience as the final production.

Loved the collaboration with so many different people. The musical elements really added something magical to the performance. Well done Firebird. Look forward to seeing which direction you travel in next.

This company goes from strength to strength. I hope it isn't too long before their next performance.

Very thoughtful and thought provoking. Many layers, a great deal to think about. Beautiful visuals.  
Very professional production.

It was a very good show, well organized and professionally carried out. Thoroughly enjoyable.