
KNEEHIGH'S
UBU!
A SINGALONG SATIRE
NOTES FOR STUDENTS
Kneehigh

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Welcome.

Kneehigh doesn't believe in a set formula for theatre making but we hope this education pack gives insight into both the show and the possible ways in which the company work. The process for creating work is different for every project, there is no definitive approach.

This resource is suitable for GCSE and A Level Drama/ Theatre studies students and gives an overview of all the elements which went into the making of the production. This includes a peek at the script, some images for the early design and a selection of interviews with key members of the cast and creative team.



Introduction to Kneehigh and Kneehigh's Ubu.

Kneehigh is a local, national and international company. We are global citizens and tell universal stories that bring audiences together. For forty years Kneehigh have toured the world, forging vital relationships with artists and audiences across the globe. We have played our shows across Europe, as well as Syria, Lebanon, Africa, China, Australia and the US.

Kneehigh's Ubu! is an antidote to the divided world. It stands in defiance against divisiveness and brings audiences together through the joyful act of singing, joining in and the power of togetherness.

Kneehigh's Ubu! is a new version of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi. This infamous and ground-breaking play, written in 1896, was the first Absurdist Drama and is widely considered to have inspired Dadaism and the Surrealist movement. Kneehigh have taken this story and presented it in a convention-shattering way of their own. Building on the traditions of the Marx Brothers, Vaudeville and Monty Python this show is part play, part rock gig, part stand-up comedy and part singalong massaoke. It is joyful, entertaining and anarchic. The production is adaptable and belongs in any space, ideally non-theatre spaces. Each night we perform, we create a community with our audiences. We sing together, laugh at the buffoon, weep for the world and, like Jarry's opening in Paris in 1896, we hope to whip up a little riotousness.

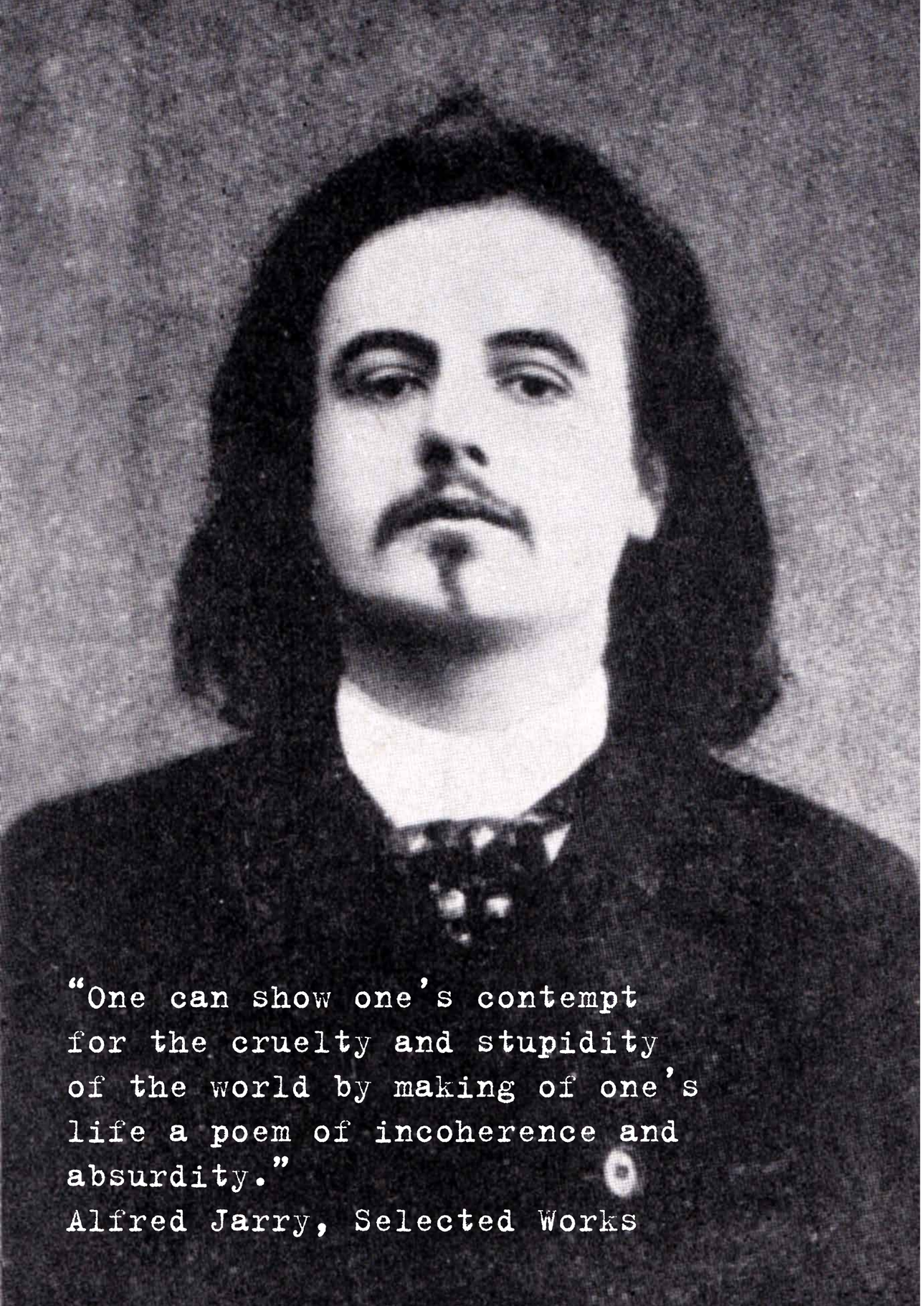
Kneehigh are internationally renowned for making wild, radical and anarchic work that appeals to audiences seeking something different.



Creative Team

Writer & Co-Director	Carl Grose
Co-Director	Mike Shepherd
Music Director	Charles Hazlewood
Designer	Michael Vale
Lighting Designer	Mike Gunning
Prop Makers	Sarah Wright & Alice King
Costume Supervisor	Megan Rarity
Jeremy Wardle, the host	Niall Ashdown
President Nick Dallas	Dom Coyote
Bobbi, his daughter	Kyla Goodey
Captain Shittabrique	Robi Luckay
Mr Ubu	Katy Owen
Mrs Ubu, his wife	Mike Shepherd
And special guest…	
Nandi Bhebhe	as The Brave Dissenter!
A Bear	?

Introducing the House Band...The Sweaty Bureaucrats:
Alex Lupo
Dom Coyote
Justin Lee Radford
Renell Shaw
Nandi Bhebhe



Alfred Jarry Timeline.

Kneehigh’s Ubu is inspired by Alfred Jarry’s play, *Ubu Roi*.

1873 – Alfred Jarry was born in Laval, Mayenne, France in 1873.

1888 - Alfred Jarry became a student at the Lycée in Rennes at the age of fifteen. Jarry encountered a brief farcical sketch, Les Polonais, written by his friend Henri Morin, and Henri’s brother Charles. This farce was part of a campaign by the students to ridicule their physics teacher, Félix-Frederic Hébert. The sketch Les Polonais depicted their teacher as the King of an imaginary Poland, and was one of many plays created around Père Hébé, the character that, in Jarry’s hands, eventually evolved into King Ubu. While his schoolmates lost interest in the Ubu legends when they left school, Jarry continued adding to and reworking the material for the rest of his short life.

1893 - Jarry contracted influenza. His mother and sister tended him, but once he recovered his mother fell ill of the disease and died; two years later his father perished from influenza as well, leaving him enough of an inheritance to live on. This inheritance also provided enough money to indulge his growing interest in alcohol, particularly absinthe, and various mind-altering drugs.

1894 - Jarry was drafted into the army. However, the sight of the small man in a uniform much too large for his less than 5-foot frame was so disruptively funny that he was excused from parades and marching drills. Eventually the army discharged him for medical reasons.

December 10, 1896 - Ubu Roi was first performed in Paris at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre, causing a riotous response in the audience. At the end of the performance a riot broke out, an incident which has since become “a stock element of Jarry biographia”. After this, Ubu Roi was outlawed from the stage, and Jarry moved it to a puppet theatre.

1898 – Jarry, accompanied by Franc-Nohain and Claude Terrasse, co-founded the Théatre des Pantins, which was the site of marionette performances of Ubu Roi.

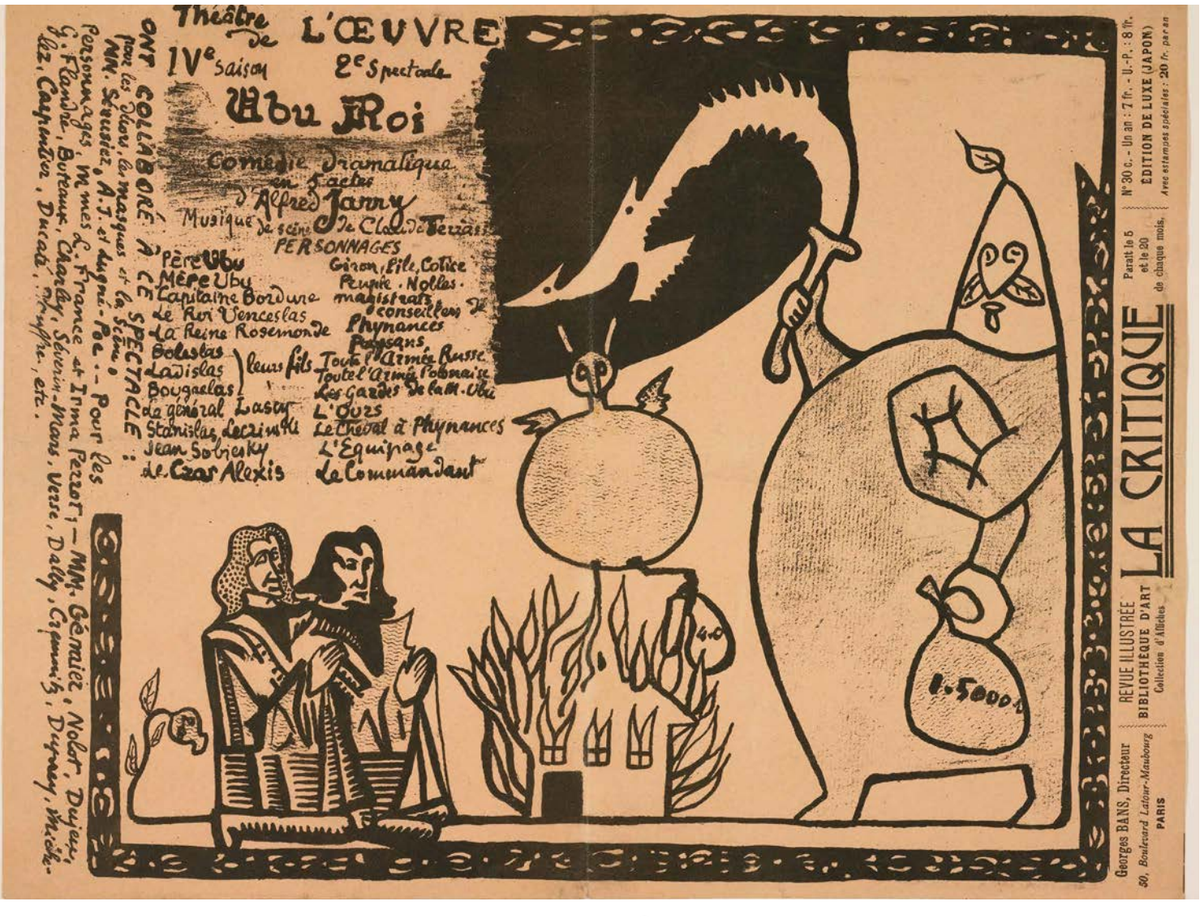
1 November 1907 - Jarry died in Paris of tuberculosis, aggravated by drug and alcohol use.

Facts about Alfred Jarry's play, Ubu Roi.

In addition to Ubu Roi, Jarry wrote Ubu Cocu (Ubu Cuckolded) and Ubu Enchaîné (Ubu in Chains), neither of which were performed during Jarry's 34-year life

The title of King Ubu is sometimes translated as King Turd; however, the word "Ubu" is actually merely a nonsense word that evolved from the French pronunciation of the name "Herbert", which was the name of one of Jarry's teachers who was the satirical target and inspirer of the first versions of the play.

Jarry invented the term 'Pataphysics' which he explains is "the science of the realm beyond metaphysics". Pataphysics is a pseudo-science created to critique members of the academy. It studies the laws that "govern exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one". It is the "science of imaginary solutions".





The action in Ubu Roi contains motifs found in the plays of Shakespeare: a king's murder and a scheming wife from Macbeth, the ghost from Hamlet, Fortinbras' revolt from Hamlet, the reneging of Buckingham's reward from Richard III, and the pursuing bear from The Winter's Tale. It also includes other cultural references, for example, to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (Œdipe Roi in French) in the play's title. Ubu Roi is considered a descendant of the comic grotesque French Renaissance author François Rabelais and his Gargantua and Pantagruel novels

Ubu's first line is "Merdre!", the French word for shit with an extra r added.

All the actors wore masks, the backdrop was plain, and the props were clearly made of cardboard, which we have echoed in our prooduction.

Alfred Jarry was associated with the Symbolist movement. His play Ubu Roi is often cited as a forerunner of Dada and the Surrealist and Futurist movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

His texts are considered examples of absurdist literature and postmodern philosophy.

A note from Mike Shepherd, Artistic Director of Kneehigh and Performer.

Kneehigh's Ubu is about responding to the challenge of keeping theatre alive. We do theatre because it's live but how do we keep it alive?

I've always liked sport.

I like being physical, playing in a team, getting sweaty, being in a heightened state of alertness, being brilliant, helping others to be brilliant, but over and above everything, BEING PART OF A TEAM with a shared aspiration beyond individual achievement: to play well, to score, to win or, in theatre, to tell a story, to engage an audience and transport them to somewhere they didn't expect to be.

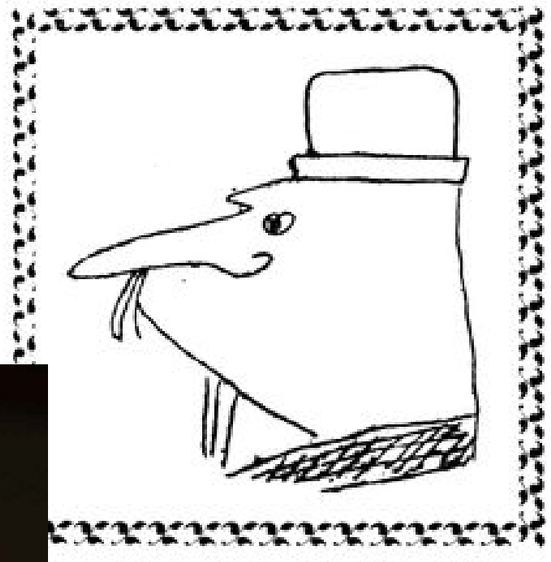


Why is sport so popular and so riveting for so many? It's because it's live and, more than that, it's alive.

Theatre should be like stepping onto a tightrope every night, not plodding down a well-trodden path.

Even when you're on your 300th performance there should still be a sense of spontaneity, a fizz of adrenaline and a feeling that the actors themselves don't quite know what's going to happen.

We also wanted to counter our more regular form of touring proscenium stages. This is partly because we wanted to reinvigorate our way of presenting theatre, partly through a hunger to keep taking risks with ways of working and exploring form and partly through necessity. Let's not forget that the English touring circuit is in considerable difficulties following 10 years of cuts and an increasing anxiety throughout the country which has generally made it necessary to find different ways of putting on shows. We wanted to create an immediate, accessible and collective experience where the audience could join in if they wanted to-sing their hearts out or dance with a stranger if they felt like it.



This a picture of Alfred Jarry's revolting teacher upon whom he based the character of Ubu

I identified with Jarry. I had a difficult schooling filled with repugnant teachers who all seemed to have greasy collars and acute dandruff

I have painful memories of school from as early as 5 years old when I was stood in a rubbish bin and told that I was rubbish. Of course, not all my schooldays were rubbish but they did leave me feeling like an outsider with a desire to do things differently - much like Jarry.

I also railed against institutions, establishment and the perceived order of things - much like Jarry.

I loved this spiral - synonymous with Ubu - an umbilical cord but also a symbol of order into chaos and back to order which kind of describes how I make theatre, travelling between order and chaos and back again with freedom and joyful anarchy.



Jarry's story of Ubu, a revolting deranged dictator where Jarry flushed all that he abhorred down the toilet - those in power, injustices, regulations, corruptions and cruelties.

I am drawn to Jarry's risk- taking and ridiculous view of the world always tinged

with humour. For example, his theories of Pataphysics. Jarry invented Pataphysics and describes it as '"science of imaginary solutions". Look at these paintings by Pataphysics disciple, Alphonse Allais:



MARCHE FUNÈBRE

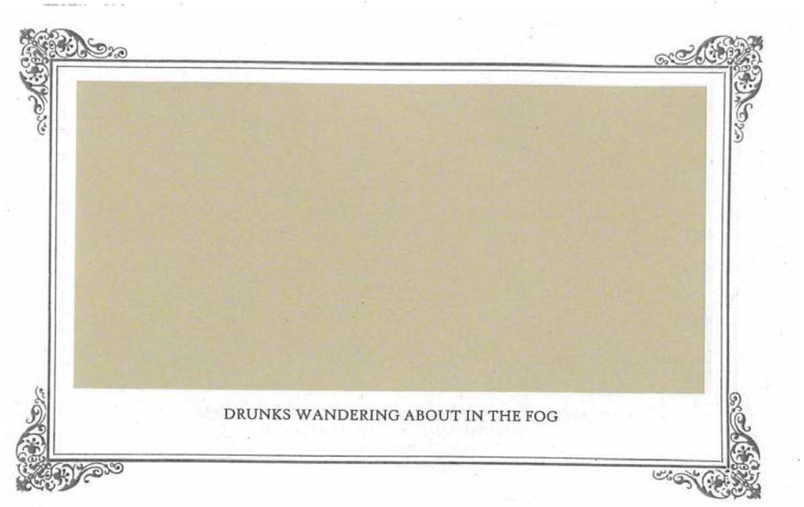
COMPOSÉE POUR LES

FUNÉRAILLES D'UN GRAND HOMME SOURD

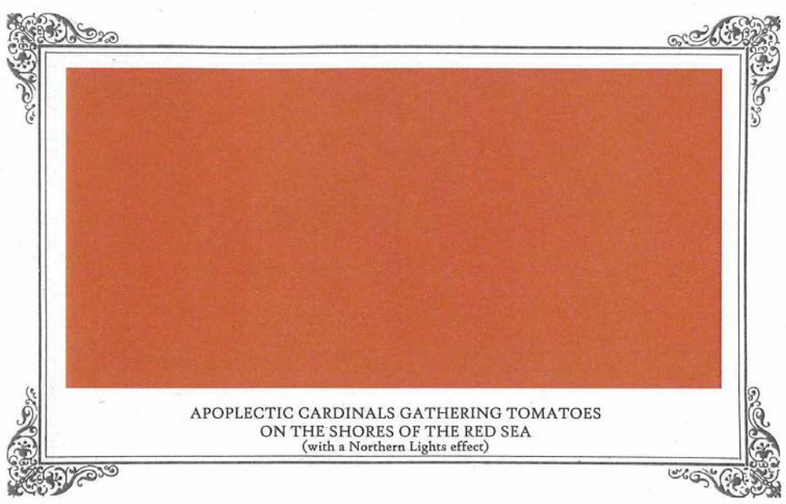
Lento rigolando.

T. S. V. P.

— 17 —



DRUNKS WANDERING ABOUT IN THE FOG



APOPLECTIC CARDINALS GATHERING TOMATOES
ON THE SHORES OF THE RED SEA
(with a Northern Lights effect)

— 11 —



I also loved that in Ubu, there's a bear for no good reason.

Kneehigh's Ubu is there to be enjoyed - make what you will of it - it's hard to define.

Part theatre, part gig, part stand-up, part game show and almost a riot.

Like Jarry's original it breaks all the rules. **They need breaking!**



Mike Shepherd, Co-Artistic Director, September 2019



A note from Charles Hazlewood, Music Director.

I have long dreamed of a show where the audience would truly fulfil their side of the contract; rather than simply sit in rapt gratitude/boredom/bafflement as it plays out in front of them, they could take their fulsome part in actually generating the action, and driving it forwards, through SONG!!! What's not to like, at regular points throughout the action, in a rampant audience crooning out a love ballad (Close to You), a war inciter (War, What is it good for?), an exercise in self-aggrandisement (I am an Anti-Christ) or a vomit of vanity (I Did It My Way)?

A show with songs chosen specifically for maximum lung release, as well as for their function in driving the drama....and with an exquisite band giving the crowd all the uplift they need. This is our new show: it should be as satisfying as Massaoke, and eminently more useful.

We love to sing at the football. It helps the drama of the game! It certainly helps the team win, if our fans have the bigger vocal fire-power. We love music festivals (even in a country with a lot of rain), and a big part of that is the mass singing along, this act of collective solidarity and love which generates a unity of joyous sound. It's great cardiovascular exercise. But more than that, it's about being part of the ultimate team, the ultimate democracy, where no one is more - or less - important than anyone else. It's healthy, generous, ebullient and communal; I genuinely believe that if all parliaments had to sing together in harmony before commencing the day's business, we'd have more flow, more consonance in our world.

I can but dream.

Charles Hazlewood, Music Director

Breakdown of Kneehigh's Ubu.

Act 1: The Rise of Ubu

Scene 1: Welcome to Lovelyville

Scene 2: Ubu's First Move

Scene 3: Bobbi's Bad Dream

Act 2: The Reign of Ubu

Scene 4: The Cruel Sports Day

Scene 5: Prize Giving and Fleecing

Scene 6: Yoo Hoo in the Boo Hoo Zoo

Scene 7: Bung 'em Down the Bog

Act 3: The Ruination of Ubu

Scene 8: Training Montage

Scene 9: All is Lost

Scene 10: Order is Restored

Character Summaries.

Jeremy Wardle, the host
Emcee and political commentator of Lovelyville.

President Nick Dallas
President of Lovelyville and Father of Bobbi Dallas.

Bobbi Dallas
Daughter of the president. Activist and Expressive Dancer.

Captain Shittabrique
Head of Security in Lovelyville. Former general for the old dragoon army. Hasn't felt a woman's touch in years.

Mr Ubu
Desperate. Despicable. Deeply daft. And hungry for power.

Mrs Ubu
Wife of Ubu. The brains behind the operation and a master manipulator.

The Brave Dissenter!
The incredible dancing dissenter who stands up to Ubu.

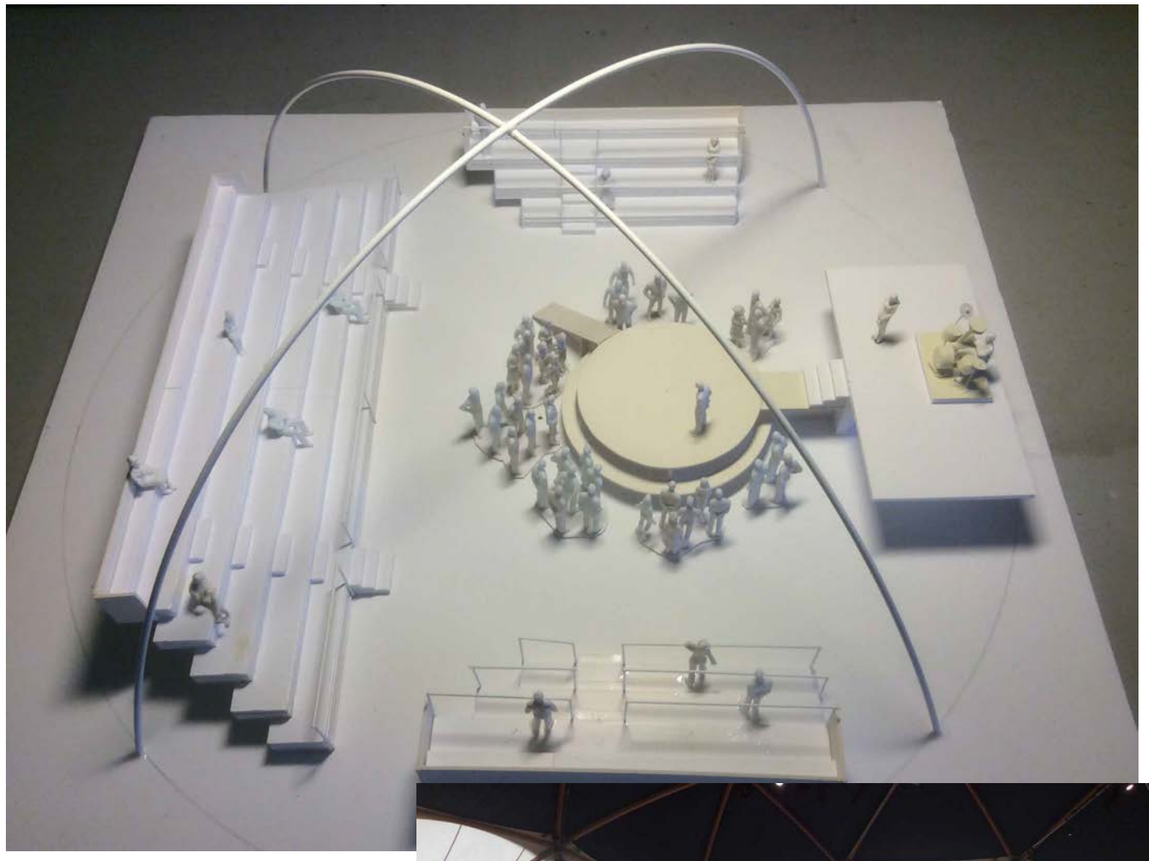
The Bear
A mysterious, random but kindly animal who helps Bobbi Dallas... but who is the Bear really...?"

The Sweaty Bureaucrats
Lovelyville's Live band.

The Design.

Kneehigh's Ubu was first performed at The Kneehigh Asylum in 2018. The Kneehigh Asylum is a pop-up theatre venue in a large dome tent.

Below is a photo of the model box, created by Designer Michael Vale.



And this is what it looked like in the Asylum tent:



In June 2018, there was a 2-day research and development (R&D) to explore design for Ubu. In the image below, performer Mike Shepherd is wearing an early design for Mrs Ubu, including the fabulous breasts and pointy hat. If you look at some of Jarry's early sketches you can see how he inspired the design.

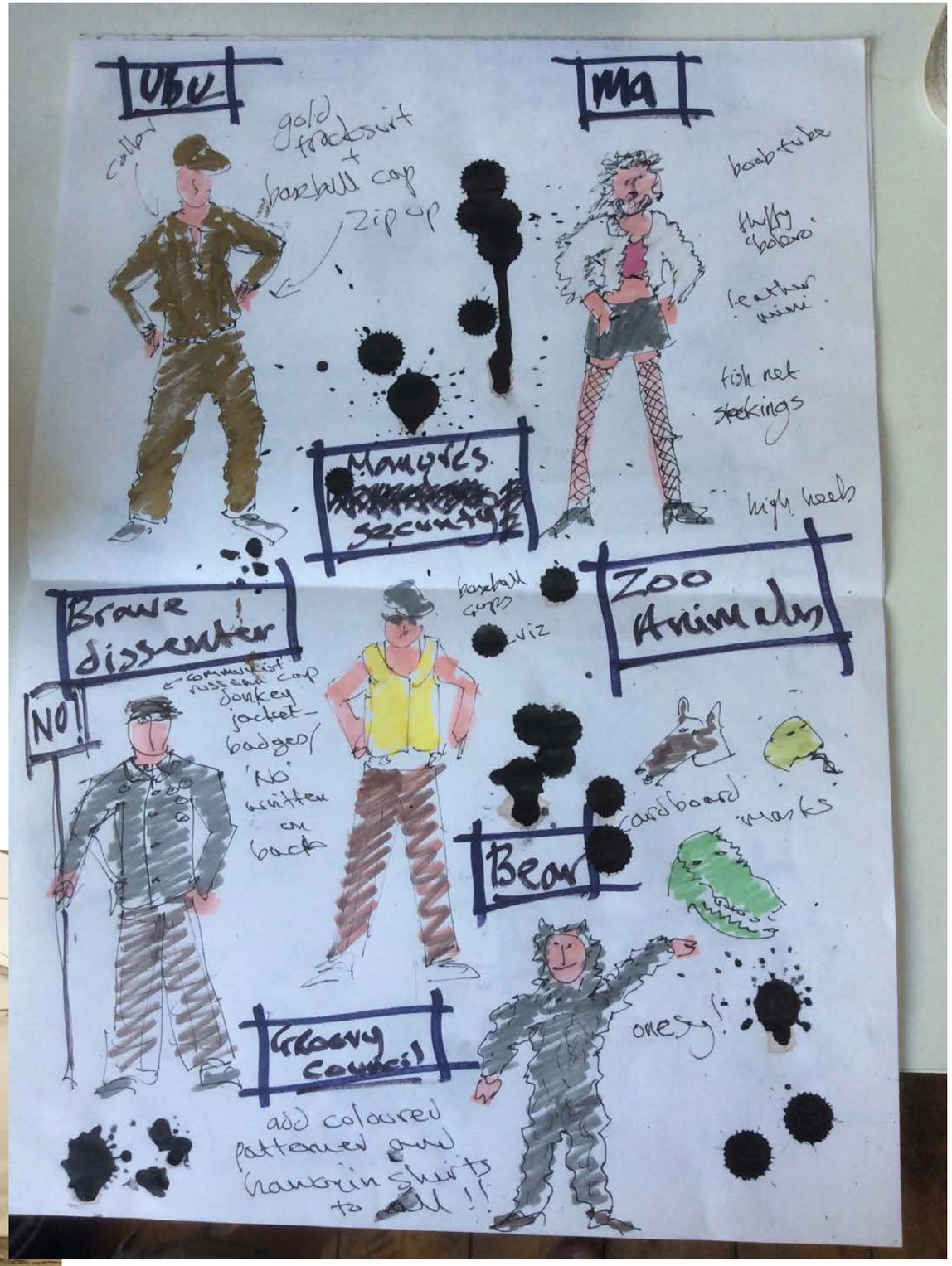


Kneehigh's Ubu was devised and created by the company over a two-week rehearsal period at the Kneehigh Barns in Cornwall.

On the next two pages, you can see some of the experiments with costume for Bobbi Dallas (played by Kyla Goodey) and Mr and Mrs Ubu (played by Katy Owen and Mike Shepherd), along with some early costume designs from Michael Vale's sketchbook.






Ube
gold tracksuit + baseball cap
collar
zip up
Ma
boob tube
fluffy bolero
leather mini
fish net stockings
high heels
Mangers
Security
Brawl dissenter
communist russian cap
donkey jacket - badges
'No' written on back
baseball caps
viz
Zoo Animals
NO!
cardboard masks
Bear
Groovy Council
add coloured patterned gowns
ones!
to all!!



Interview with Carl Grose.

Why did you want to make Ubu?

Well, I'd read Alfred Jarry's play, Ubu Roi, back in college and loved it. It was clearly a very unique play. Very anarchic, nonsensical and disgusting. It broke rules. It went wherever it pleased. I loved the cartoon violence in it and always remembered one amazing stage direction in it which described King Ubu just walking straight through a door – it felt like the precursor to The Young Ones!

I didn't really think about how it satirised political leaders and the abuse of power at the time. But every now and then the idea would bubble up, as ideas often do in life or the rehearsal room, and I always thought Mike (Shepherd) would make an ideal King Ubu. It was after making The Tin Drum, (which, like Dead Dog before it, was an ambitious and politically relevant piece) that the pertinence of Ubu took hold. It suddenly seemed to be about now.

The idea started to roll, and I wondered why the hell Kneehigh hadn't ever done Ubu before – it was a match made in heaven! The anarchy, the politics, the satire. Come on! I told Mike he was born to play Ubu. He said he was actually born to play Mrs Ubu – which made perfect sense and away we went! Sort of.

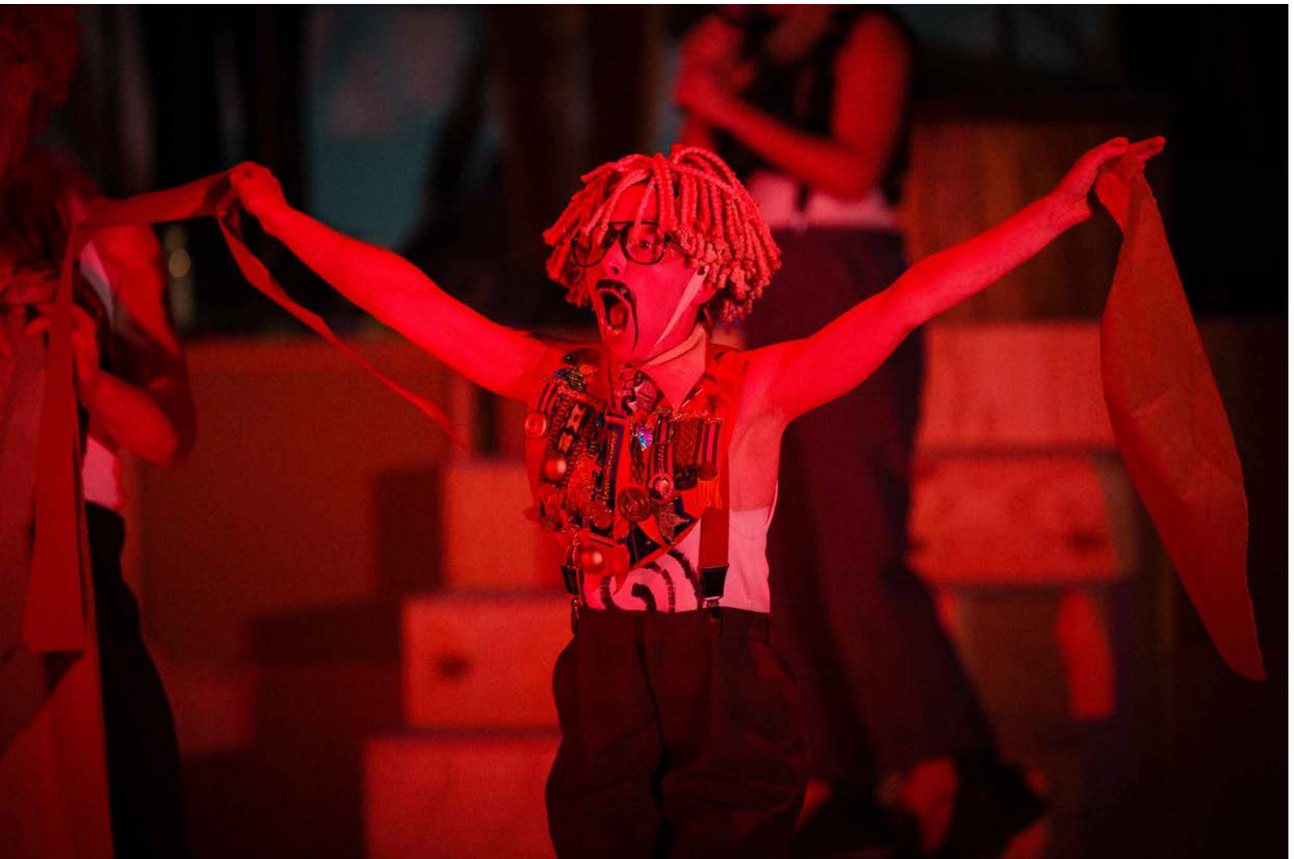
Tell us about the process of making the play?

So I should explain that while I pitched Ubu to my fellow collaborators, both Mike and Charles (the composer of Dead Dog and The Tin Drum) both had other very different ideas about what they were interested in doing. Charles expressed an interest in creating a piece where the audience sang the show. Imagine everyone singing Dark Side of the Moon together, for example. Amazing! And then Mike had a desire to make something a little more improvised, a bit more spontaneous, which is fair enough after the very exacting script and score process of Dead Dog and The Tin Drum. I suggested that we slam the three ideas together. Which seemed to spark for me. It made it more than just doing Ubu.

We suddenly had a new form which felt mad and fresh and exciting. We started to make a kind of surreal part-improvised jukebox musical. I wrote a loose structure. Rewrote and modernised the scenes from the play. Tried to invented a new world for it.

Because Jarry's world is a kind of strange amalgamation of various Shakespeare plays. We went down this route for a bit, but it felt the more modern the better. The scenes were starting points as we really wanted impro to be a big part of the process. We cast some incredible improvisers. Katy Owen and Niall Ashdown are just so skilled at impro, and in very different ways. Niall has a brilliant tap into modern thinking, politics, he can make up R.E.M. songs on the spot, it's insane. Katy is a wildly outrageous deviser. Ubu is foul-mouthed but he ain't got nothin' on Katy! She was perfectly cast as Ubu. Along with the brilliance of the Kneehigh stalwarts, Mike, Giles, Kyla and Robi – every performer had a skill in spontaneity and they needed to be brave and bold with their choices.

For various reasons we only had two weeks to make the show – which is seriously no time at all. We needed to find the time for scenes to be discovered and played with, but I was also very aware that we couldn't keep improvising and playing as we would have done in a longer rehearsal process. So I'd write up each scene from that day, adding whatever good impro was found, and we'd rehearse that the next day... And so forth. There was never time to finesse or polish anything. But that was absolutely perfect – luckily! And then there was the band, the songs... it was a brilliant and feverish process!



How have you adapted Jarry's original for today's audience?

Well, one of the things I'm most pleased about with our show is that I think we've done the original play really well. Jarry was our spiritual guide. His ground-breaking and highly controversial notions of theatre in his life time are absolutely how we think about making theatre with Kneehigh. He hated "realistic" painted backdrops – tropes of the naturalistic style at the time. When he wrote that Ubu enters riding a horse, he says either come in on a REAL horse or, even better, a cardboard one. Cardboard became our lead aesthetic for this show. Throwaway. Hand-made. Cheap. Punky. So on a level I feel we've collaborated well with him and hopefully done his work justice.

But as I said earlier, we also had to find a modern spin for it. The political satire of his play is so brilliantly on-point right now. Ubu is this grotesque fool, a monster hungry for power, ruled by greed and self-interest. It's Trump! It's Boris! It's Putin! It's all of them. But the proto-surrealism and the infamous language in his play has dated. Of course it has. It was written in 1896 for god's sake. Which is why I think the genius of Charles' karaoke – or massaoke – singalong concept is genius. Using these songs – Brittany, Elvis, Bruno Mars, Tina Turner – we've got 'em all! These songs collide with the scenes and do provide a kind of Dennis Potter-ish pop surrealism which is surprising and fun and strange.

And Mike's desire to find moments of impro and genuine "aliveness" and interaction with our audience (we have them standing up, singing along, joining in games) makes for a really exciting and unpredictable night. We've taken the world's first Absurdist Drama and disguised it as a cracking good night out – and I reckon Alfred Jarry would've approved.

How do you think the play reflects the world today?

One of the main things Jarry was doing with his play was poking fun at authority. The play started its infant life as a sketch he wrote as a student about his tyrannical school teacher. This was the seed for the character. And so ultimately this is what the play does, on a grand scale. Satirises (or just plain takes the piss out of) figures of authority. The abuse of power. Injustice. Maybe that's more our version. We've probably tidied it up and made more sense of it – but hopefully not too much! There's a brilliant scene in the second half of the play where Ubu throws everyone "down the hatch". We turned it into a toilet, but it's the same idea. His monomaniacal disregard for everyone but himself is so recognisable in our leaders today. It's Punch and Judy writ large.

I hope there's something therapeutic about seeing this show. Singing together in protest. Laughing at the buffoon. Weeping for the world. The play is also mad. Absurd. Characters burst into Brittany Spears songs. They have strange dreams. There's a bear! Speaking of which, we brought the show back this summer and the actor who played the Bear wasn't available. So we had to figure out a way of someone else doing it. Mrs Ubu got the job. So we revealed it like a big twist! Mrs Ubu was the Bear all along?! As Ubu says: "That doesn't make any sense!" To which I had Mrs Ubu reply: "Nothing makes any sense anymore, Mr Ubu! The world's gone mad!" It might be a bit trite, but it's something I believe.

Why did you decide to do the show as a singalong satire?

I may have answered this already. But to sum it up – it felt right. It felt surprising. It felt different. It felt exciting and entertaining. The piece is pop surrealism. One moment, it's bizarre singing Hello by Lionel Ritchie, but the next it accrues an emotional weight and you feel moved. That's what the songs do so brilliantly. And by the end of the night, we've all been through something together. And in a time when there's division everywhere, and there's lies and bullshit and lawbreaking coming down from the top, and democracy hangs by a thread, being together suddenly feels not just joyful, but radical too.





Interview with Katy Owen.

Who is Ubu?

In our story, he is a vulgar, greedy, sadistic, grotesque, cowardly and very, very stupid army deserter who has been living in the ‘sewers of life’ with his manipulative and ambitious wife. They have run out of money and have come to the utopian town of ‘Lovelyville’ under the guise of becoming ‘lovely, honest citizens’.....

How did you develop the character of Ubu?

I read the original story by Alfred Jarry to get a feel for him. I always take some key words that I think will be useful, interesting and contrasting (for the comedy) and use those as a basis. I really liked that he could be violent in one moment but totally cowardly in the next. I liked his complete stupidity coupled with his ability to sing an offensive, vulgar song to make you laugh. Then we began improvising. I am from Cardiff and thought that accent suited him best, it lends itself to the musicality of his nonsense. As we began to improvise and the character felt clearer to me a strange physicality sort of followed, which continues to surprise me and develop as we go along. We are definitely not in the world of naturalism; we are in the world of buffoon and grotesque so you can be extreme with your choices. Which is brilliant but by basing him in my hometown and on characters I’ve really encountered, hopefully he’s also plausible and real.

Your character involves a lot of improvisation, how do you prepare for this?

I try not to get too tense before a show. To improvise well I think you have to be in a sharp but silly state of mind. A big part of you has to be willing to take wise risks and not to give too much of a monkeys if something goes a little ‘off piste’. You also have to have a lot of trust for the people on stage with you, they can always bring you back if you go bananas and vice versa.

Do you have any tips for improvising on stage?

I think it’s really important to know where the focus needs to be. Identify the moments where you can really launch and be anarchic or risky and identify the moments where the focus needs to shift back onto another performer or part of the story. I love playing with a live audience, I love involving them in the show but again identify those who are willing and don’t pick on someone who will hate it or feel humiliated. Also, don’t take yourself too seriously, if you try something and it fails - get over it quickly and move on.

How do you interact with the audience in the show?

The audience are the show really. They play the citizens of Lovelyville and (without giving too much away) they sing, dance, fight and shout their way through a most joyful and vital protest.

Independent Review of Kneehigh's Ubu at The Asylum 2018.

Singing truth to power: How Kneehigh's new show uses mass karaoke to topple a dictator.

Ubu Karaoke features group singalongs, anarchic games, toilet humour – and a bar that stays open throughout.

The audience pelts ping pong balls at each other, bellows along with karaoke hits from "Your Song" to "My Way", impersonates a zoo and suggests public figures to be flushed down the toilet: there are huge cheers for Jeremy Clarkson and Nigel Farage.

Welcome to the Asylum.

Nestled in the corner of another Cornish tourist attraction – the beautiful Lost Gardens of Heligan - this domed tent is the summer playground for Kneehigh. The much-loved Cornish theatre company is known for its lively, very live shows which, over its 38 years, have rarely allowed audiences to just sit quietly in the dark.

And this is Ubu Karaoke – its semi-improvised take on Alfred Jarry's 1896 classic Ubu Roi, about the rise of the megalomaniac Ubu, a foul-mouthed, grotesquely greedy tinpot despot who tells blatant, shameless lies.

Any real-life modern resemblances are entirely intentional.

When it was first staged, Jarry's gleeful, puerile, linguistically exuberant take on a cruel dictatorship horrified audiences, who rioted.

This new version is also a riot – but one we're all in on. Because Kneehigh has paired this comedic study in power and populism with another form of crowd interaction: mass karaoke.

"The songs drive the action; it's not about watching the performers, but about the audience being the main focus," explains Kneehigh's musical director Charles Hazlewood when I meet the company a few weeks previously, as it is beginning rehearsals.

"It should feel a bit like being at a festival – bellowing your lungs out to whatever is playing."

And the songs are ones audience members young and old will be familiar with, whether that's Britney Spears' "Toxic", Queen's "We Will Rock You" or the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK".

The show's hot, punky, swinging live band – named The Sweaty Bureaucrats – are





onstage throughout. The audience sings along, but karaoke refuseniks fear not: no-one is singled out for an individual go on the mic.

“It’s about being part of a crowd. We’re not here to embarrass an audience; we’re here to make them feel they’re having an experience together,” says assistant director Keziah Serreau.

The other thing that surely helps the party atmosphere is that the audience is free to move around the whole time. Although there are bleachers to sit or stand on, there’s also a pit around the central circular stage, where you can get up close and personal with the performers.

And – crucially – it means you can always get to the bar, which stays open throughout the entire show.

This is theatre as a good night out; it’s a gig, a knees-up. It’s also a hoot: this troupe are masterful comic improvisers.

This is, for Kneehigh, a deliberate exercise in going back to its roots. Recent shows such Dead Dog in a Suitcase and The Tin Drum have been more polished: fully scripted, with complicated sound and tech elements.

Artistic director Mike Shepherd, who founded the company back in 1980, tells me he was keen to get back to its old-school devised and improvised work. Kneehigh shouldn’t be doing stuff you could see in any old sit-down, face-front theatre.

They only had two weeks to rehearse Ubu Karaoke – which was fine, as to over-rehearse improv would be deadly, after all.

“It’s a rough, very spontaneous event. The exciting thing about improv is getting yourself into the s*** – that’s where the magic happens,” says director Carl Grose. “We should never get it too good.”

I watch one warm evening in early August, adding to the south coast of Cornwall’s heaving hordes of tourists. After an afternoon spent strolling around the walled gardens and lush, sub-tropical jungled valleys of the Lost Gardens of Heligan, I follow its snaking pathways to a field where the Asylum sits, the dome squatting in front of a stunning view out to sea. The whole thing, frankly, seems charmed.

The rest of the audience clearly feels the charm (and possibly the Cornish cider) too: a mix of tourists and Kneehigh die-hards, they’re all up for it, whether ‘it’ be hugging a man in a bear costume or competing in Ubu’s bizarre Olympic Games, strangers getting intimate with each other, and balloons.

“It should feel quite anarchic,” says Hazlewood. “And very live. It does feel good not

to be doing another incredibly complicated technical show, but to be doing something dirty and earthy.

“What Kneehigh has is an amazing bunch of performers and musicians, and what they absolutely have is bravery, so almost the best scenario is when you just say: ‘off you go.’”

But to be brave as a performer, you need to feel safe. And you can certainly sense the trust and closeness of this troupe. I frequently hear people refer to Kneehigh as “a family”.

That is surely, in part, due to where it makes work: Kneehigh is based near the tiny village of Gorran Haven, a rural spot far removed from everyday distractions.

After the show I join the troupe at the Kneehigh barns, the clifftop headquarters that provide rehearsal spaces and prop storage, but also a place where the company can come together. There are great pots of food and crates of drinks; outside a bonfire flickers, and someone points out the Milky Way to me overhead. You don’t get that at an opening night party in the West End.

It’s a make-your-own-fun kind of place, but also a make-your-own-kind-of-work place. Living and working as a collective in this very beautiful environment clearly nourishes the company’s identity.

“A lot of it is about the spirit of a group of people working together,” actor Niall Ashdown says, on the importance of building trust in a company, so that you can foster it in an audience.

“It’s about going on a journey where we empower each other to fail. If we’re going to get the audience to try things, they need to be in that spirit too – where it doesn’t really matter what happens, we’ll make it all right.”

Kneehigh founder Shepherd is in the show – initially, Grose wanted him to play Ubu, but he only had eyes for Ma Ubu, and performs her swathed in a red feather boa and some shockingly badly applied red lippy.

The tiny Katy Owen – who also bewitched London audiences as Puck in former Kneehigh artistic director Emma Rice’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream at the Globe – is our moustachioed Ubu, with a mop for a wig and an absurd mix of pomposity and cowardice.

They make quite the double act: little and large, carnivalesque grotesques, spouting nonsense and flushing anyone who opposes them down a giant lav.

“She’s a firebrand,” says Grose of Owen, explaining that gender wasn’t really a consideration when casting it. “We just needed the craziest person on the block!”

For all that it’s a lark, there’s also a kernel of chilling truth to Ubu Karaoke. It’s easy to mock Trump, when he makes reality itself so absurd. But the show aims to remind us that, while we may laugh incredulously at the current political situation, we should never get used to it.

“It’s saying to the audience we must never let this reality become normality. We must never settle into this thing – because it’s insane,” says Grose.

Mob rule can be an ugly thing, but collective action can be a beautiful one. The audience engages in both, at times, in Ubu Karaoke – but it ends on a final moment of j’accuse, the crowd in one strong voice promising Ubu and Ma Ubu that they will reap what they sow.

It sends a shiver through the tent on a warm night. It is a reminder to speak truth to power; a reminder that our voices, together, really can be louder.



Kneehigh

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