

SHEEPSKIN

Phoenix Arts Centre, Exeter

January 2006

This is a show of remarkable bravery. To distil the slaughter and disorientation of the foot-and-mouth debacle into one vulnerable character, and then to hold character and performance just a cigarette paper apart, so the spark of pain leaps across the divide, is a searing experience for meat and nerves. John Dean takes the risks discreetly and generously; the result is somehow both creepy and sympathetic.

Yet, in spite of the scorched history, there is also transformation here. We see a young farmer, Jeremy, besotted with the new vicar, raging against and entertained by the absurdities of bureaucracy and unfairness, taken apart before our eyes. Rejected by the fearful vicar, dreaming of lucid sheep, emptied out until he is little more than a voice speaking his own name questioningly, somehow the performance rejuvenates him, through symbols, conjuring a mythical personality from him – a sword-wielding metal-headed sheep-god!

Bianca Mastrominico's text and direction are precise and florid in equal parts, building from documentary tics and anxieties a glued ritual of denial, expiation and unnecessary suffering: a prophecy in a world where God speaks in the mealy-mouthed tones of a scared politician. From the struggle of strange desires with cold and greedy forces, from documentary material and improvisations, Sheepskin transcends its origins and circumstances to become a deeply odd show, as odd as the real events, but deeper.

Phil Smith