

The Nine Lessons of Caliban



Bristol Old Vic Studio (Wed 29 Feb-Sat 3 Mar)

THEATRE The moment Firebird come on stage you know you're in for something different. What? They're normal. Step into the tight-knit world of studio theatre and you are often presented with hour-length shows performed by well-groomed (generally white) folk under 35. Nothing wrong with that – but it's a massive breath of fresh air to see a large company of performers of all ages present themselves quite simply as themselves – something most actors will admit to finding terrifying.

'The Nine Lessons of Caliban' does something remarkable – it makes Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' interesting. Instead of a series of unintelligible monologues about a man with a magic stick, the production's focus is on Caliban – the man/monster/freak Prospero so cruelly punishes for getting it on with his daughter Miranda. The identification of this disabled theatre company with Caliban is both charged and poignant. When as a mass they shout at the audience the names Caliban has been taunted with – "Monster, Freckled Whelp, Stupid" – it's not a ticking off, it's angry, impassioned and real.

We follow Caliban's life story. Born to his mother Sycorax and living happily and alone on their island, he is able to rely (as most of us are) on the unqualified love of his mother. When she dies, and others arrive on his island, he finds the world to be an uglier place. And has to learn how to survive it.

Each "lesson" takes the form of an announced vignette – how to grieve, how to fend for oneself, how to love, how to form relationships with others etc – in an often hostile and fickle world. It's a curiously satisfying way of doing things, with each lesson taking a different form – the highlight of which is the tender, downright sexy episode where Caliban and Miranda's relationship becomes physical. It's quite appalling when

Caliban's world falls apart through the innocent pursuit of love.

As Prospero and his now reconciled foes (Google the synopsis if you don't know the tale) prepare to leave the island to live happily ever after, Caliban faces a terrible dilemma – "To go, or to stay?" Is a life of ignominy and prejudice in company preferable to a peaceful one of solitude? Written down, it might seem simple, but as Firebird look out at you in the show's final moments, it's a very hard question to answer, and one they don't offer the comfort of giving us.

After a vast round of well-earned applause, rather than scurry away to the dressing rooms, Firebird come forward into the audience and meet the fans. All of which makes the established convention of running off and back on for a bow seem completely absurd. Nothing absurd here – just regular people making an excellent piece of theatre.
(Tom Wainwright)

★★★★★

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Review of [The Nine Lessons of Caliban](#)



"Thoughtful blend of performance poetry"

by [Patrick Cash](#) for remotegoat on 29/02/12



Inspired by *The Tempest* and performed by a majority cast of disabled actors, Firebird Theatre's *The Nine Lessons of Caliban* was a bold, involving and thought-provoking devised piece in the Bristol Old Vic's Studio Pit last night. Weaving together a bittersweet blend of performance and poetry, the show took the themes of the omnipresent Shakespeare play hovering over it, elevated its mocked Caliban to their anti-hero, and used these components to illuminate the company's own experience of the modern world. Names, language, the spoken word, and their very raw potency were a manifest trope of the production, featuring original poetry from both the in-house Firebird Poets and resident Bristol poet Claire Williamson.

For most of the theatrical experience the cast were split into either side of the stage, coming to the fore as their lines demanded. A small circle of shells eloquently drew the image for the audience of a mythical island in which these performers were

surrounded. As the actors wholeheartedly delivered their new and vibrant verse, the lines were also displayed on a projected screen behind the stage which made for a thoroughly immersive experience. An excellent lighting scheme and beautiful music score helped to set the pace and feel of differing scenes, as tranquil words upon a sunny beach descended into anger laced within a dark and destructive storm.

That the cast were disabled should not technically merit especial mention. Each member could act and deliver their lines as well as the next man, and that is what was important, as the cast imbued their performances with a lack of artifice and raw purity that was deeply effective. If the key to good, true theatre is creating an environment in which both audience and actors believe in what is being portrayed fully then *The Nine Lessons of Caliban* achieved that with the utmost skill.

Perhaps where the cast's disabilities did come into play was when speaking of the lasting potency attached to names, and how they can stick in one's mind. If each audience member thought of their own experience at the hands of this subject in the past, then the reminiscing was doubled by the consideration of what names this talented cast might have gone through in their lives to date, and came through to stand upon a stage and tell us. Firebird Theatre say in their manifesto that their 'job is to tell stories that will stay in people's heads long after they leave the theatre and go home'. With *The Nine Lessons of Caliban* they can safely say they have achieved this goal.

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Bristol Old Vic Ferment Blog

Caliban: "a most delicate monster"

As Firebird prepare to inspire audiences once again with their latest project, *The Nine Lessons of Caliban*, coming to the Bristol Old Vic studio this week, we take a look at who they are, what they believe in and how they're putting it in to practice this time around.



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Firebird Theatre is a company of sixteen disabled actors who have been making plays and performances together for over twenty years. In that time they have developed a style that characteristically combines music, devised work, text, and ensemble acting.

Our relationship with Firebird goes back more than 10 years. They're a regular set of familiar faces around the building, but last year they became our associate theatre company. You might remember this particular piece, which was shown as a work in progress as part of Bristol Ferment in January 2011.



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"Theatre is important to us. People used to think disabled people with learning difficulties couldn't do anything, but when we get on that stage we can show people what we can do." Firebird

Collaboration is also at the heart of what they do, and *The Nine Lessons of Caliban* was developed alongside Bristol poet and creative writer Claire Williamson who worked with the company to produce poetry inspired by their interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

"When we looked at people in the story of The Tempest, we put on their shoes to help us understand them. We channelled our experiences into them, so that we could feel like them and understand them. We expressed our feelings through them." Firebird



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During this process, their focus became Caliban, one of Shakespeare's most complex and ambiguous characters; deformed, wild, malevolent, and - as Firebird present him - misunderstood.

He is the only inhabitant of the island not to take a human form, a "deformity" that extends beyond his physical appearance: "as disproportioned in his manner as in his shape". He is left alone on the island after the death of his mother, befriended by Prospero upon his arrival, trained by him, taught language and kept in his company to perform menial chores. Later, when Caliban attempts to rape Prospero's daughter Miranda, he is confined and enslaved by Prospero, who threatens to punish him. Realising he has been forced into servitude on the very island he believes to be his by birth, Caliban plots to murder Prospero.



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Unusual, you might think, that Firebird would align themselves with a character who has broadly been interpreted as *The Tempest's* brutish, slow villain. But a closer look at the play reveals the link to be a creative one. Whilst Caliban is coarse, vulgar and mishapened, he differs from Shakespeare's other rogues in that his speech contains an unusual number of passages in verse – a form normally reserved for noble and dignified heroes.

For example, this passage, in which he describes how he Prospero treats him:

“All the infections that the sun sucks up
From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall and make him
By inch-meal a disease! His spirits hear me
And yet I needs must curse. But they'll nor pinch,
Fright me with urchin--shows, pitch me i' the mire,
Nor lead me, like a firebrand, in the dark
Out of my way, unless he bid 'em; but
For every trifle are they set upon me;
Sometime like apes that mow and chatter at me
And after bite me, then like hedgehogs which
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount

Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I

All wound with adders who with cloven tongues

Do hiss me into madness."

In another he speaks of the island homeland he feels he has been robbed of, and produces some of the most beautiful and stirring imagery in the whole play:

"Be not afraid, the isle is full of noises,

Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments

Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices,

That if I then had waked after long sleep,

Would make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,

The clouds methought would open, and shew riches

Ready to drop upon me: when I wak'd,

I cried to dream again."

Firebird have seized on his ability to articulate his sense of identity and sensitivity to his treatment as something incredibly humanising. It's this delicate, poetic side that they have combined with their own experiences to produce an imaginative and sensitive response to Caliban's thoughts and feelings that also reflects upon the challenges of disability:

"Caliban reminded us of some of our experiences as disabled people. If you don't fit in, people treat you differently; they don't think you are good enough and they don't treat you with respect, they take away your strength and your rights. When you are told that you are stupid, ugly, mental, slow, sub-normal, you start thinking that that is how you are and you start acting that way. We think it was the same for Caliban.



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When Prospero and Miranda arrive on the island, Caliban welcomes them but soon Prospero acts as if the island is his and Caliban is treated like a monster. We know this is because of Miranda; Prospero punishes Caliban for liking Miranda but we also wonder if Prospero just didn't think Caliban was good enough for his daughter. Caliban and Miranda were friends and when they grew up then it was natural for them to be more than friends. But Miranda had to do what her father wanted and he didn't want her with someone like Caliban.

We think that 'Nine Lessons' shows Caliban as someone who is human just like everyone else. He has to grow up quickly because he loses his mother when he is very young, he has to learn to survive. He learns hard lessons but he is treated very badly by Prospero and Miranda." Firebird

Here's some feedback from the show's very earliest performances:

"An amazing re-telling of parts of The Tempest put across in a way that will make you think."

"Had the piece been devised by those without learning difficulties, many layers would have been lost, and Caliban's voice would not have shouted so loud."

"I can't remember the last time a piece of poetry haunted me so much."



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Audience comments and feedback

We wanted to write to thank you for the wonderful performance on Friday evening. It was a technically superb piece of theatre which we found very moving. We would be very grateful if you could keep us informed of the company's activities.

Thanks again
very best wishes
Mike Spooner and Anitra Vickery

Hi

I am writing this to say a huge thank you for the production, "The Nine Lessons of Caliban."

I have been an avid theatregoer for many years now and have seen countless productions, many of them very moving and featuring some of this country's finest actors. But last night's performance was something extraordinary - one of the single most genuine expressions I have ever witnessed in any theatre anywhere. The poem of Caliban and Miranda in particular was mesmerising - so pure and so beautiful, in the quality of the writing but especially in the intensely moving acting.

This was not just a production; it was a cry from the heart. It was raw and it was real, and I cannot thank you enough.

Yours

Michael Saffery

Fiona and I went along to the matinee today and really enjoyed the performance: Very poised, poetic in shape and sound, clever and beautifully put together. I especially loved the shadow poem. Please send our congratulations to your lovely (and surprisingly large!) cast.

I also enjoyed reading the piece in Theatre Bristol Today.

Best wishes

Becky Chapman

Producer

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It was lovely to meet you and the Company yesterday and I so enjoyed watching the performance. Thank you so much allowing me to spend some time with you all afterwards. It was a really useful (and enjoyable!) experience.

Obviously I was able to get a lot of feedback from the actors but was also keen to gain a bit of a perspective of your experience and the professional challenges/achievements involved with putting on such a performance. I've put a few questions down below. Would you mind popping a few brief ideas down....and I really do mean brief as I am aware that you're going through a very busy time. And it's absolutely fine to wait until this run is over. I'm in no immediate hurry.

Once, again thank you for your time yesterday and I hope that our paths will cross again. I'll certainly be looking out for further Firebird performances.

Best wishes,
Naomi

- 1. What were some of the challenges with this production and how did you overcome them?**
- 2. What lessons have you learnt/things have you noticed in hindsight in producing this piece?**
- 3. What do you think a) the audience b) the cast got from the performance and how do you evaluate this?**

Naomi Crowne
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Hi Jane and all,

I'm picking up amazing feedback from 9 Lessons. Huge congratulations!

Katie Keeler
Executive Producer

Theatre Bristol

Hi

I wonder if it's possible to get a script of the
Nine Lessons of Caliban?

I thought it was really powerful and would like to read it
again.

Many thanks [Jeremy Iles](#)

I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your
production The Nine Lessons of Caliban that I came to
on Saturday night – wonderful, moving and thought-
provoking theatre – all clichés I know but true in this
case! I thought everyone spoke out those powerful words so
beautifully and I particularly loved Stephen's choreography. The
concept of exploring this vilified Shakespearean character was
inspired and really made me think. Thank you everyone!
very best wishes

Ruth

p.s. my husband enjoyed it hugely too!

Ruth Sidgwick
Arts Programme Manager

Lynda Oldham: The play was absolutely amazing and very
powerful. What a lot of work had gone into it. Not only the actual
production but enabling the actors to understand the whole
concept. We shall certainly be coming to any future productions
and should be grateful if you would remind us in case we miss it.

From Comments book:

My favourite lessons were 1, Love and Pain and Rejection, and the
movement. I thought you portrayed the story very movingly.

Thank you so much. Beautifully told, very powerful. I thought the scene with the shadow dancing was especially good.

A beautiful piece of no nonsense storytelling wonderfully told through several mediums. Wonderful Well done and congratulations.

A wonderful insight into such a complex character – conveyed with passion and clarity. Outstanding performances. Thank you.

Wonderful use of visuals. The imagery was powerful, the poetry very moving. It made me look at Caliban differently. It was a wonderful, simple story with applications far beyond the island. Utterly lovely. It will stay with me for some time, I suspect.

An inspiration for anyone who saw it. A friendly cast full of talent. Will be looking out for more productions xx Ty xx

Loved it! Great stuff again Firebird. Maggie (no1 Fan) x

9 Lessons of Caliban – beautiful, sad, moving. I cried. x

Great show! Looking forward to the next one. Lessons for all of us...Jan Burke

Well done everyone! You should be very proud of yourself. I really enjoyed watching you all in a moving performance. Love Dan Asworth x

Outstanding performance by all of the cast. The words and movements were beautiful. Well done to you all. Thank you.

Once again a really moving, wonderful show. Such a talented group of actors. Well done, Jenny x (ex BOV FOH!)

I thought the performance was beautiful, the acting and the movements were very well done. Speaking to the cast afterwards was really great, I have never spoken to actors after a performance and it was really great to do this. Well done!! Thank you!

Congratulations on another excellent, polished production. Very moving work. Tony Horitz

Congratulations. Best of luck with all your (tours?). I've enjoyed your piece of Nine Lessons of Caliban. Also loved working with you. Love from Shane x

Very moving- as humans we all learn the 9 lessons of Caliban. Thank you for recognising what all children should be told in school. x

I **loved** this performance: I reckon I know *THE TEMPEST* - and this cast so much new light on the play - and the actors told the re-worked story so clearly, so movingly - one longed for Miranda and Caliban to really make it together.

I wish I'd had a notebook to jot down what **exactly** the Nine Lessons were?
Is there a script?
Or could someone let me know what they are, please.

Well done, and thank you.

Neville Boundy
(formerly chaplain to the Bristol Old Vic Company 1975 - 2011)

I wanted to contact you to say thank you so much for the production, The Nine Lessons of Caliban.

I have been a performer and director for over twenty years and seen countless productions, many of them intensely powerful and moving and performed by some of this country's finest and most deeply revered actors. But last night I was touched in a way I have very, very rarely experienced in a theatre.

This was the most genuine work I have seen for a long time – simple but intensely powerful, and I have to say that the poem of Caliban and Miranda in particular was absolutely beautiful, both in the writing and in the performance. This was not just a performance; it was a cry from the heart. It was real and it was deeply moving.

Thank you so much.

Mike Saffery