

WhatsOnStage.com

15th Oct 2011

Rating: 4 Stars

It's delectably Boys' Own Paper in style, from the moment the audience comes into the theatre to be glad-handed by the two very hard-working cast members. The stage is cluttered with cabin trunks and a whole heap of paraphernalia which miraculously in the course of the performance translates itself into the aircraft which somehow managed to make the first transatlantic flight. But this show, written by Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon, does more than tell the story of John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown's achievement. It takes us into those now-distant times punctuated by the First World War when international competition was fierce but not necessarily (or literally) cut-throat. And it also reminds us that those who write scripts sometimes blur the distinction between fact and fiction in the interests of providing a bankable story. Richard Earl as Brown is the bouncy one of the two aviators; Ian Shaw has to be content with being something of a sidekick. Both work very hard, ad-libbing where appropriate, and carry the audience with them into the strange world in which Helen Fownes-Davies' designs play such a crucial role. Tom Lishman's soundscape is spot-on, with jaunty newsreel music alternating with strange echoes from an aerial terra incognita. The director is Daniel Buckroyd. - by Anne Morley-Priestman

The Public Reviews

13th Oct 2011

Rating: 5 Stars

Those Magnificent Men – Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds Fame is fleeting. Ask most people who was first to fly across the Atlantic and they'll probably say Charles Lindberg. He was in fact only the 104th person to fly the Atlantic. Eight years earlier, two Englishmen made the maiden nonstop flight from Newfoundland to Ireland. Their names may now be remembered only by 'weirdoes, bores and Airfix kit freaks' but, at the time, these aviation pioneers were international superstars. History also has the tendency to be rewritten, both by those involved in monumental events to boost their appeal, and more common by later generations looking for added glamour and sparkle. Both this historical tale and the resulting airbrushing of historical fact form the base for Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon's warm and witty comedy. In June 1919 John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown find themselves thrown together in a partnership that sees them cross the Atlantic together with their flimsy canvassed covered Vickers Vimy converted twin engine bomber. As the pair race against other competing teams to claim the £10,000 prize for the first non-stop crossing the English gentlemanly spirit seems at odds with more polished efforts of their competitors. All seems a fairly straightforward retelling of this forgotten tale, but the problem is our actors can't quite agree on the story. Alcock believes passionately in historical accuracy while Brown is keen to spice things up to entice a Hollywood action bio pic. There's precedence in Alcock and Brown's own accounts of the flight, both of which contain small, subtle difference. The tale itself, though, really needs no enhancements; the men's tale from World War One prison camps, to their historic triumphant 16½-hour flight in a flimsy open cockpit plane is the stuff of pure action adventure but with the twist that this actually happened. Although Mitchell and Nixon's script is packed full of comedy it also manages to be deeply poignant and touching, looking at a partnership that only lasted a year but shaped not only aviation history but also had a deep impact on a personal level. It is also a production that remains timeless, dealing with the 1919 flight as well as taking pot shot at the current trend of Hollywood to gloss over historical inaccuracies. This is a lovingly crafted production, full of beautiful touches, from the news-sheet 'lavish souvenir brochure' through to the RP accents – every detail evokes the sense of a golden age in endeavour. Ian Shaw and Richard Earl deliver faultless performances as the aviators, perfectly balancing the historical facts with spot on comedy. Daniel Buckroyd's direction moves the piece along at great pace while still allowing time to emotionally connect with the duo. There is ingenious staging from Helen Fownes-Davies and her packing case strewn set that transforms into a recreation of the Vickers Vimy plane in front of our very eyes. Tragically these aviation pioneers soon faded into historical obscurity and six months

after the record breaking flight one was dead and the other would never fly again. Lindberg may have had his Spirit of St Louis but in Those Magnificent Men it is the Spirit of Alcock and Brown that soars. A first class flight.

North Norfolk News

12th Oct 2011

Transatlantic flight is a routine trip for business people and tourists these days. But the first two men to do it non-stop nearly 100 years ago were plucky British aviators whose adventure was a ripping yarn of boy's story book proportion. Ex RAF chaps in a converted bomber made of wood and canvas, trying back in 1919 to beat Johnny Foreigner in the race to cross the ocean in less than 72 hours and win a £10,000 prize. Captain John Alcock at the controls in an open cockpit, Lt Arthur Whitten Brown navigating by the stars and climbing on to the wings to remove ice from the faltering engines. This touring show which landed briefly on Wednesday night tells the tale, with a tongue firmly in the cheek next to the stiff upper lip of Ian Shaw as the dashing upright Alcock, while Richard Earl switches between his knockabout foil Brown and his actor self seeking to "sex up" the story a bit to make it just as Hollywood as the journey of American Charles Lindberg who was the 104th person to make the crossing. The action is non-stop, the script witty with moments of slapstick and pathos, the delivery slick and the creation of a Vimy biplane from tables, boxes and bin lids as marvellous - at least to the 'boys of a certain age' in the audience - as the Meccano models also used as props. Jolly good show chaps.

British Theatre Guide (National Tour)

29th Sep 2011

Those Magnificent Men traces the pioneering aviators Alcock and Brown's quest to cross the Atlantic non-stop in an aeroplane. Ian Shaw as Captain John Alcock and Richard Earl as Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown are indeed magnificent as they relate their trailblazing tale. They make a good comedy duo, with an excellent rapport with the audience, as they deliver some wonderful one-liners in this clever witty script with Earl trying to 'sex up' the story to make into a Hollywood blockbuster film, whilst Shaw is trying to stick to the facts. The original idea to cross the Atlantic was first hatched when they were prisoners of war in Constantinople and when Lord Northcliffe from the Daily Mail announces a competition with a prize of £10,000 for the first plane to successfully complete the harrowing journey, the two men are hooked. They're based in Newfoundland but have yet to find an airbase to fly from. Their Vickers Vimy biplane is constructed from a large packing case with tables and canvas sheets for wings and the construction of it is great fun to watch and received a spontaneous round of applause. The flight is ironically scheduled for Friday 13th and as the two intrepid aviators don their Biggles-like flying caps you begin to appreciate the enormity of the task that must have faced the real Alcock and Brown. They experience bad weather and dense fog, lose radio communication and encounter engine failure due to ice forming in the intake valves. Brown has to navigate by "dead reckoning." This is a journey made on a wing and a prayer with "jolly jibes" and is performed with a mixture of pathos and madcap humour and the joy of sighting land was palpable. The final landing in Clifden in Ireland is recreated using a scale model of the Vimy and is very effective. Imaginatively directed by Daniel Buckroyd with a striking set by Helen Fownes-Davies this was a zany accomplished performance from two gifted storytellers and was simply tickety-boo.

Remotegoat.co.uk

28th Sep 2011

Rating: 4 Stars

A triumphant high flying adventure" 'Those Magnificent Men' is is a comic look at the first non-

stop, trans-atlantic flight across the atlantic by Capt. John Alcock and Lieut. Arthur Whitten Brown, flying 1,960 nautical miles from St. John's in Newfoundland to Clifden in Ireland in 16 hours in a modified Vickers Vimy bomber. As with all expeditions it is the adventure of the journey that overshadows the achievement itself, and this is successfully captured with British style, humour and panache so typical of the period. The comic writing is cleverly conceived; it balances the action of the Alcock and Brown story with occasional slips into reality of two actors on a stage who spar continuously with their own opinions of how the story should be told. It is soon evident that the characters are chalk and cheese and this gives the show its 'impetus and ultimately its' success; Alcock played, by Ian Shaw, comes across as the stereotypically stiff upper-lipped 'proper chap' whilst his partner Brown, played by Richard Earl, is a clowning adventurous type who is keen to embellish the story to make it more exciting for the audience - thereby fulfil his dream of taking it to Hollywood and get it onto the 'big screen'. Although reigned in on several occasions by his partner it doesn't suppress his high-spirited approach to life and their impending adventure. In a shabby-chic kind of way the set conjures the period atmosphere brilliantly; a large canvas map of the northern hemisphere hangs to the back of the stage highlighting the enormity of the journey that lies ahead of them. The stage itself is strewn with battered cases and trunks, flimsy tables and a couple of tea chests. Towards the end of the first act these combine with bits of canvas and dustbin lids to form the Vickers Vimy bi-plane; visually reinforcing the apparent fragility of the machine and the 'gung-ho' approach of the intrepid aviators. The actors have a natural chemistry that shines through from the off, and some great comic moments and characterisations ensue as they share tales of how they met, their own personal histories and the obsession of the period with setting new records in the skies. Some comedic highlights include the story of Hawker and Grieve's transatlantic attempt in May 1919, which is ditched at sea near a Danish fishing vessel, and a great moment of pretend slow motion whilst the pair dress for their adventure. Endless parodies of the 'flying-ace' period (Armstrong and Miller immediately come to mind) make this a dangerous, oft-cliched territory to visit but this particular adaptation works really well and the whole performance has a certain characteristically British charm and good humour that captures the mood of its' era perfectly. The comedic talent of the writers (Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon) was equally matched by the two actors who take naturally to the roles, bringing a cheeky innocent humour with them. It is evident the pair work hard to demonstrate a great spirit and energy throughout the show but, although opportunities came-a-plenty, sadly there was not much given back by this particular audience. Thankfully this didn't dampen their pioneering and adventurous spirit, nor prevent them mingling off stage during the interval. Although the seemingly humble ending came far too soon, it served to highlight the quick pace of the entire show and the charming feel of the production. It is another cliché to suggest this is a 'unique brand of humour', but it had a refreshing honesty that left us all with an upbeat feel-good mood as we shared in the pioneering achievement of our heroes

The Daily Telegraph

16th August 2011

Rating: 4 stars

If we have forgotten the incredible tale of derring-do that was the first non-stop transatlantic flight - and the fact that it was two Brits (Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown) what swung it for King and Country in 1919 - then that's partly because the modern entertainment industry has lost touch with the adage that truth is often stranger than fiction. In this jocular retelling of the adventure two actors (Ian Shaw and Richard Earl) play the stiff upper-lip heroes to spiffing perfection using a clutch of basic props to bring to creaky life the early days of aviation - while examining the mechanics of story-telling itself.

Dominic Cavendish

The Edinburgh Guide

11th August 2011

Rating: 5 Stars

The Fringe has landed a fair number of shows about the pioneers of flight – “Mission of Flowers”, “The Vanishing Horizon” and “The Wright Brothers” all spring to mind. Back in 2006 the posh [International Festival](#) hosted the modernist Brecht / Weill “The Lindbergh Flight”.

None of this will come as comfort to the writers of “Those Magnificent Men”, as they consider that Alcock and Brown, the duo who made the first ever non-stop transatlantic flight, have been somewhat forgotten. It’s a fair point. You can buy everything from radios, alarm clocks and ashtrays to pens named after Lindbergh’s Spirit of St Louis. Perhaps the pair should have come up with a catchy name for their ‘plane.

Anyway, now we have their stirring tale of derring-do as they take to the stage if not the air to recreate the record-breaking crossing. If only the actors could decide on the telling. As they merge from narrators to characters, they disagree – “Alcock” wishing to keep to the straight historical facts and the melodramatic “Brown” looking to improve and romanticise the plot with a view to a Hollywood movie. Perhaps the introduction of a baddie or a landing in Trafalgar Square? This forms a running theme examining just how far poetic license can be pushed in a bio-pic before it becomes wilful distortion.

The plot follows the World War I veterans to Newfoundland and their preparations amongst those competing to be the first to cross the Atlantic and pick up the £10,000 prize offered by the Daily Mail. The Vickers Vimy biplane is formed, literally, from packing cases and they take to the skies to begin their epic sixteen and a half hour flight through fog, hail, snow and not a little peril, armed with nothing more than a sandwich and a flask of cocoa.

Despite “Brown’s” concern that things need pepping up a bit, amidst the gentle comedy there are thrills aplenty along with moments of pathos. The whole production feels lovingly crafted from the portrayal of the dashing yet modest heroes, with stiff upper lips and lashings-of-ginger-beer accents, to the excellent set, sound and lighting designs and news-sheet programme.

Never mind Spirit of St Louis, it’s very much in the spirit of the Fringe.

Kenneth Scott.

One 4 Review

07th Aug 2011

Rating: 5 Stars

The combined efforts to recreate an epic journey in words, action, sound, lighting and set construction have resulted in a heart-warming production of great quality and humour. Ian Shaw and Richard Earl take on the roles of Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitton Brown respectively, as well as other characters in the story and themselves as narrators. On entering the auditorium we are met by the two actors who distribute programmes in the style of a newspaper of the times. It is also best to arrive early to take in the atmosphere created by the set which will figure in the story. Indeed, there is a third important character in the form of the Vickers-Vimy-Rolls aeroplane which Shaw and Earl put together as the story develops. It does look a bit of a Heath-Robinson construction but it is convincing in putting across the dramatic nature of their historic flight in what the pilots of the times called a crate. The humour in the account stems largely from Shaw and Earl being at odds as narrators with the former wanting to retain strict historical accuracy whilst the latter would introduce a few embellishments for dramatic effect. However, the story in itself is sufficiently dramatic from the time when Alcock and Brown form a partnership, to the battle with the weather elements on the record breaking flight right through to the aftermath of their success. Great credit must go to all involved, Writers Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon, Director

Daniel Buckroyd and all the technical crew. Although there is much humour in the play, it is done with respect to two aviation heroes never losing sight of their courage and daring.

The Times

12th Mar 2010

Rating: 4 Stars

Charles Lindbergh gave the world the Lindy Hop dance craze and one of the most notorious kidnapping cases in history. But what about those other pioneers of aviation, Alcock and Brown? Their trusty Vickers Vimy aircraft can be found at the Science Museum, and a statue of the duo — the first pilots to cross the Atlantic non-stop — was erected at Heathrow. But their names have faded over the years. It seems strange that Alcock and Brown, who achieved their goal eight years before Lindbergh, are little more than footnotes of history today. The random nature of fame forms the basis of Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon's enchanting two-hander, a ripping yarn that bundles together historical detail, stiff-upper-lip anecdotes and postmodern jollity in a wonderfully entertaining confection. Mounted by the East Midlands-based company New Perspectives, the production is touring, but has the makings of a West End hit. The director, Daniel Buckroyd, gets sterling performances from C. P. Hallam and Richard Earl as the jobbing actors who are picking a path through the lives of the First World War veterans. Hallam, the straight man of the partnership — playing Alcock — has the gawky charm of that quintessential pinstripe Englishman, Jeremy Lloyd. His goal is simply to tell the story by sticking to the established facts. Earl, flustered and flushed, is more interested in concocting a big-screen narrative, stuffed with bogus twists and turns, that will catch the eye of some high-spending Hollywood producer. After all, if Lindbergh got the James Stewart treatment, maybe Tom Hanks can be tempted to try a pair of goggles. We follow the aviators to Newfoundland, where they join the other contenders for the transatlantic prize offered by the press magnate Lord Northcliffe. Assembling an ingenious, bare-bones mock-up of the Vimy — Helen Fownes-Davies's set is a tiny miracle — our heroes set forth into the fog, battling with engine fires and the occasional hallucination. At one point Earl's Brown, the navigator, is forced to climb on to the wings to chip at ice. If you want to quibble, you could complain that the flight itself, which ended in a bog in Co Galway, is skipped over too briefly. But Mitchell and Nixon bring the evening to a quietly poignant conclusion as the pilots ask themselves why their feat was overshadowed by Lindbergh's crossing. Were they victims of America's cultural juggernaut? Or was it merely that they were two professionals doing a job of work, while Lindbergh was a figure of pure romance? Or was it simply fate?

Nottingham Evening Post

10th Mar 2010

No-one could accuse New Perspectives of playing it safe or Daniel Buckroyd of lacking versatility. Those Magnificent Men, about the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic by Alcock and Brown in 1919, is yet another radical departure for both company and director. It succeeds admirably. Probably the central intention of both play and production is to generate laughs; it does precisely that - lots of laughs. C P Hallam (Alcock) and Richard Earl (Brown) are fine casting. There's a lot of the comic duo about them: Alcock, tall with plastered-down hair, is the straight man; Brown, short with curly dark hair is the clown. The former is often the realist, the latter the idealist. They're mutually competitive, of course: each interacts beautifully with the other. But additionally they both interact with excellent sound and special effects. It's neatly written, with affectionate satire and delicate touches of anachronism. But there's a lot to savour in this play besides the humour. Arguably, when you've forgotten the laughs you'll remember how touching it is. There's the basic decency of all involved in the achievement, the under-stated patriotism and lack of cynicism, the modesty. And you're genuinely caught up in the danger and sheer terror of being fifty feet over the water in mid-Atlantic. There's some very good mime. It's an ingenious set. Bits and pieces on-stage are utilised during the play to assemble the aeroplane used for the crossing, a modified Vickers

Vimy bomber; and there's a rattlingly good red model of the machine as well. After the main story's been told, Brown is agog to know what happened to each of them in later life and Alcock tells him; it's very moving. It's particularly about this point that the play examines the relationship between history and truth. This is rewarding entertainment.

British Theatre Guide

12th Feb 2010

Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon's *Those Magnificent Men* is a hilarious spiffing yarn of the bravery of two plucky British pioneers, Captain John Alcock, a dashing WW1 fighter pilot, and his intrepid companion Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown, navigational genius despite a gammy leg, as they attempt to compete in a race to fly non-stop across the Atlantic. At stake is a £10,000 prize offered by Lord Northcliffe from the Daily Mail and, more importantly, the honour and pride of the British spirit of adventure. C.P. Hallam is splendid as the British flying ace Alcock, perfectly capturing the gung ho spirit of this eccentric pilot. He fought in the First World War and became a P.O.W. where he dreamt of flying the Atlantic. Hallam was the perfect schoolboy hero of the Biggles era: tall, strong, reliable and with a sense of fair play. He is perfectly matched by Richard Earl's delightful Brown, the boffin who is going to navigate this perilous mission - although he has never navigated a plane before. Both actors sparkle as a comedy duo with wonderful tongue-in-cheek humour. They play a myriad of other characters and are like a contemporary Morecambe and Wise, witty, with blundering tomfoolery and very funny. They plan to do the 1880-mile journey from St. Johns in New Foundland in a converted Vickers Vimy biplane travelling at one hundred and three miles an hour - and hopefully reach London. On stage they create this plane using tables, canvas wings and a variety of props including dustbin lids for the engines, all highly inventive theatrical business that works a treat. They are faced with major problems as they can't find an airfield to fly from but eventually are given the Australians' field following their withdrawal from the race when their plane crashes. Luck seems to be on their side. Armed with emergency supplies of Fry's chocolate bars, sandwiches and beer, our two stalwart adventurers prepare to take off with much press coverage. Huddled together in the tiny timber and canvas cockpit the journey of a lifetime begins. They experience bad weather, including dense fog, and lose radio communication when the aerial breaks off. The noise of the engines is so great that the two aviators communicate through gestures and notes. Navigation becomes more and more difficult since they can see neither the stars nor the horizon. This is a journey made on a wing and prayer. They experience engine problems and have to drop altitude, snow filled the aircraft and ice formed in the intake valves of the engines. Brown precariously climbs onto the wings to try to sort out the problems creating moments of true theatrical magic. Despite all the odds the plane finally manages to reach Clifden in Ireland landing rather unceremoniously in a bog, garnering spontaneous applause from the audience. Our heroes received international fame and were presented with their cheque from Winston Churchill and two days later were knighted. Quite an achievement: "We did it because it had to be done and we could do it," they reported. Their statues to commemorate the journey can still be seen outside Heathrow Airport. Directed with pace and inventive humour by Daniel Buckroyd and beautifully designed by Helen Fownes-Davies with dramatic lighting from Mark Dymock this was a comic tour-de-force performance by two consummate storytellers who relished in relating this classic slice of British history to an appreciative audience. Bravo! Highly recommended.

Reviewsgate 12th Feb 2010

Enterprising, entertaining adventure story really takes off. The enterprising New Perspectives Theatre Company have persuaded East Midlands Airport to sponsor this cheerful bio-show of Alcock and Brown, presumably because they were the first to show the way that is now routinely

taken by travellers from Jamaica to Castle Donnington. Our intrepid pair made it from Newfoundland to Ireland, but clearly would not be astonished at what they started, as they treated their crossing more as a job of work than an adventure. They are presented as a classic light entertainment double act; Alcock is tall, thin and supercilious, and Brown is chunky and bouncy. The actor playing Brown wants to jazz the story up with a few invented disasters, and a juicy villain, but Alcock wants to tell it like it was. Writers Mitchell and Nixon end up sticking with the facts, and although they start by hedging their bets by an opening sequence that tries too hard, they settle down to what feels like an authentic tone of self depreciating matter-of-factness that makes the genuine heroism shine out. This is particularly true in the bravura sequence of the flight itself, when just the words of Alcock and Brown chronicle the astonishing risks and the bravery with which they were faced. Both men only describe the heroism of their partner, not themselves - very British. This sequence also demonstrates the strengths of Daniel Buckroyd's entertaining production. Clever design by Helen Fownes-Davies means a satisfactorily rickety biplane is constructed on stage; very good sound and effective lighting help performers who look just right as they create the isolation and danger of iced-up engines, fog, low cloud and navigational problems. The performances too are first-class. Popping in and out of their main character to people the stage with rivals, Irish Garda and others, Richard Earl and C. P. Hallam keep a firm hold on the two individuals who never became quite as famous as those who came later. A debate between them about the nature of fame feels like a bit of a lecture, but otherwise these are complex, funny, interesting people who it is a pleasure to meet.

The Stage

12th Feb 2010

With so many legendary historical characters hitting the stage and screen, how does the gentle story of the pioneers who made the first ever non-stop transatlantic flight in 1919 make an impact with audiences hungry for drama, romance and danger? It is this angle that writers Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon have hooked into by turning this bio-pic into a sympathetic yet comic memoir. Actors CP Hallam and Richard Earl tell the story of pilot Captain John Alcock and navigator Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown, narrating their exploits but also performing as the men themselves. As Earl writes the story and tries to 'sex' up what he sees as a lacklustre narrative, there is ample opportunity for the two actors to form a great comedy double act, verging on the slapstick but always maintaining the right ethos. The production is full of laughter, pathos and ingenuity, with strong direction from Daniel Buckroyd and creative design by Helen Fownes-Davies, who uses basic trunks for a variety of clever purposes and facilitates the quirky construction of an amusingly credible version of the Vickers-Vimy-Roils aeroplane. The production itself has a real feelgood factor and, even in today's world of technical wizardry, reminds us of the selfless and pioneering ambitions of Alcock and Brown to thrust man forward into a new world of travel.