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# The Flying Machine, Unicorn, London

By Sarah Hemming

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In St Ruth's Eye Hospital, standards are not quite up to government regulations. In the children's ward, patients amuse themselves by building townscapes out of fluff and dust and keeping a register of strange smells, while Nurse Cakebread abandons her charges in favour of packing for her Greek holiday. No one comes to visit, and Peekka and Munib are resigned to this miserable little existence for the foreseeable future (or not-foreseeable future, as both have their eyes heavily bandaged). But then a new patient arrives, with attitude and a suitcase full of plans. Bonyek Strangleman intends to build a flying machine and break out, eluding Nurse Cakebread and the hospital's daunting security system.



Phil Porter's odd, likeable new play creates a bizarre comic world with its own strange logic. It is also that rare thing: a brand new play for children. Much children's drama is adapted from existing traditional stories or popular contemporary fiction, so the Unicorn is to be congratulated for flying without a safety net and commissioning this new work (for seven-year-olds and over). And Porter has a surreal creative streak that seems to speak to children. He has previously written for *My Parents Are Aliens* (for television), which has a similarly wacky edge, and adapted *Pinocchio* (for the Royal Opera House), which has a similar dark undertow about controlling children. Here he develops his own bizarre, slightly unsettling story, which tackles serious issues. Porter depicts children learning to trust their own creativity and to find ways of rising above adversity.

Like the flying machine itself, the play takes a little while to get off the ground. In the first half some of the comedy feels forced and it could do with cutting. Quite a few young audience members started to fidget. But it perks up once the adventure gets going, and comes to an exciting climax.

Rosamunde Hutt's production is nicely delivered, particularly by Maggie O'Brien as the smiling, sinister Nurse Cakebread (a relative of Nurse Ratched, surely), and Toyin Omari-Kinch (pictured above) as Bonyek. He brings enough energy to the production to get us all airborne.

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