The Woodlouse – John Butler

By Nicholas Johnstone

It’s tempting to view John Butler’s first theatre production through the prism of his own life story – after all, why else would this late-diagnosed autistic artist write a zombie musical after an ‘accidental’ 20-year gap in performing? But in John’s world, things are rarely straightforward.

For a start, his performance alter ego The Woodlouse, vies for fulfilment with John’s successful career as a sustainable building consultant. The two worlds are not entirely mutually exclusive, they overlap, although he confesses the consultancy funds the performance, which is more likely to eat into time he has allocated for the other. As he considers the prospect of presenting his funny, silly, sometimes dark, a bit gruesome, often ridiculous one-man (and one-puppet) musical, Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep?, at Lighthouse Poole this month, he has a stab at explaining how he tries to balance his time between John and The Woodlouse.

“I can feel like there’s two competing lives trying to happen simultaneously,” he admits. “I’m still unravelling it in my own mind, which doesn’t help, but I really need to sort that out so they can sit together more comfortably. I have to allow myself to stand back a bit. There’s no simple answer really.”

For as long as he can remember John has had a thing about performing. He grew up in Maiden Newton and played the trumpet as a child, appearing in local orchestras, wind ensembles and concert bands, before progressing to the guitar and joining a series of bands as an A-level Theatre Studies student at Beaminster School. A foundation course in Art and Design followed at Weymouth College before a ceramics degree at the University of Westminster that led to him working as a potter for a couple of years, living in Brixton some distance from his Stoke Newington workshop.

“That all took up so much time that there wasn’t much left for performing, and then I went off and lived in the middle of various nowheres for quite a while, mostly in a beautiful but dark valley in Wales where Camarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire meet. The thing with ceramics is that it’s quite hungry for time and I was wood firing, so the kilns were fuelled with wood in isolated locations not necessarily near to where I was living. That all took loads of time and as there were no opportunities to perform, I’d play music at home but only in very small doses.”

A return to Dorset in 2009, via the Somerset/Devon borders brought John and his then partner to Bridport where he followed his keen interest in Passivhaus principals and sustainable living. After realising wood fired kilns were anything but sustainable, he stopped making ceramics and built a straw bale extension on an old bungalow, reigniting his interest in green building to address climate change. He undertook an MSc in Sustainability and Adaptation in the Built Environment.

“Moving to Bridport was a very deliberate choice, there were things going on there, but then life happened, and circumstances changed. I became quite isolated and needed to get out more so during a phase of saying yes to everything, I accepted an invitation to an evening of storytelling for adults. That was the Flying Monkeys upstairs at the Beach & Barnicott and after going to it a few times I really got into it, so much so that I wrote a story.”

Following a venue change to The Woodman, John revived his Woodlouse persona to become co-organiser of the monthly event with Rosie Bulwark [check name\*\*] and regular storyteller Martin Maudsley.

“The Woodlouse actually dates back to my ceramics degree,” says John. “We had a pre-course homework assignment to draw from life an animal that we thought represented something about us. Then we had to make a hat based on the drawings and use that to introduce ourselves to the rest of the class.

“Living in Maiden Newton there are loads of animals out there, but you can’t just find a deer. The downstairs loo at my parents’ old house had loads of woodlice in it and I had a slight sense of affinity with them in that sometimes they were there on display, then at other times they curled up into a ball. That made some sense to me, and it felt true to me, so I drew woodlice and made a woodlouse hat out of old tin cans.

“The Woodlouse is a helpful remove to differentiate me from any other John Butler, but it has been there in the background ever since uni, that’s nearly 30 years ago now. It fits well with the performing in that sometimes it’s fine being out in the open and other times I need to be withdrawn. They’re quite tough as long as they don’t get stuck on their backs – that’s their one major weakness, they need to be the right way up. If they’re in control they’re fine.”

In 2017, John landed a lead role in the community theatre production, Flea! The Ukulele Opera, created by Sally Vaughan, written by composer Andrew Dickson, and performed at the Electric Palace in Bridport. It was a transformative experience for John and added fuel to his creative fire as The Woodlouse, taking further encouragement from his storytelling.

“I wrote a story that ended with an animated corpse and Rose said it needed a cheerful ukulele zombie song to finish it. I went away and wrote a half-cheerful, half-melodramatic song that sounded like it was part of a musical, which meant I then had to write the rest of it. Eventually that evolved into Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep?”

But not before John moved to Scotland in 2019 to be with his partner.

“It was just before the pandemic, not an ideal time to have moved to a new town, although we did know a couple of people. It meant I was able to do a lot of work on the musical and created most of the animations up there, before we came back to Bridport where I asked Niki McCretton and Jenny Harrold at the Lyric Theatre if they’d let me perform it there. I was so worried they’d say no, which would have been fine, but they didn’t, they said yes and have been incredibly supportive and encouraging about it. Without them I wouldn’t be in a position to take it to other venues.”

By the time of that first performance at the Lyric in November 2023, John was already some way into processing his autism diagnosis. For years he had thought he displayed autistic attributes, but it wasn’t until he undertook deeper, more serious research and completed a raft of online tests that he felt he was in a position to self-diagnose and seek further professional opinion.

“I realised it’s quite a common thing, this self-diagnosis. Essentially, if you go into it to the extent of doing the research and all the online tests, questioning whether you might be autistic, the chances are you probably are, or you wouldn’t have done all that.

“The formal diagnosis was absolutely huge. There was a lot of rethinking – almost my entire existence in the light of that new information. For months afterwards it felt like a big chunk of my processing power was being occupied by refiltering my existence, reassessing who I am, and why I am the way I am. It was profound and it’s still going on.”

What better catharsis than to write a one-man (and one puppet) zombie musical in which the undead groan in harmony and, egged on by zombie activists (‘Zombies are humans too!’) explore their ability to think and feel?

“Actually, no. I’ve not been particularly into zombies other than watching a few zombie films and the occasional zombie series. Like a lot of things I do, I start with the details then build out from there – the story that ended with an animated corpse that needed a cheerful zombie ukulele song that became a musical.

“I think I am creative in an autistic way, but I would struggle to describe what that is or why. I don’t think that has ever changed, I’m just more aware of it.

“When I work on sustainable building I’m working remotely, I’m at home with spreadsheets analysing figures, making calculations and answering queries from clients. I like it that way. But I’d love to take Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep to Edinburgh, so inevitably there’s a spreadsheet with potential venues, audience capacities and stage dimensions because I need the figures in the animations to appear the same size as me because they come out of the screen and there’s a life size cardboard cut-out puppet.”

And beyond that?

“Oh, I’d love to do an expanded version with a full zombie chorus – quite a few of the songs have layered harmonies, which is just me singing with myself on a computer, so I’d love those parts to be sung live on a full stage set.

“But also, I need to do the day job, spend good time with my partner, have some proper time off, a rest...”

:: Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep? can be seen at Lighthouse Poole on Friday 7 February. Tickets available now at <https://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk/event/do-zombies-dream-of-undead-sheep/> or on 012020 280000.