Out of Hours Theatre

TOURETTESHERO

Backstage in Biscuit Land

*Actors Centre, London, 22 February 2015
and Battersea Arts Centre, London,
11–23 May 2015*

Jess Thom has Tourettes syndrome, affording her a unique perspective on life, and one she has released on the world with Jess Mabel Jones, a performer, puppeteer, and co-creator of the award-winning *Backstage In Biscuit Land*.

This two-woman show weaves comedy, puppetry, singing, and incredible tics to explore spontaneity, creativity, disability, and things you never thought would make you laugh.

Jess first brought her show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and then to the Southbank Centre, London. She was inspired to do the show after experiencing discrimination while watching theatre performances and wanted to share her experience of living with Tourettes. It was risky. Due to her tics Jess says biscuit about 16 000 times a day (hence the name of the show) and can experience unpredictable surges in her tics that render her incapable of performing. This does mean though that no two shows are ever the same.

What Jess achieves is remarkable. She is not wagging a finger, berating us for not understanding, or laughing when she says something outrageously funny, which happens a lot. Quite the opposite: she invites us to laugh and enjoy hearing her story, which she tells with humour and honesty, putting the audience at ease. She takes us through her life thus far, from childhood and school reports to her day-to-day activities:

eating, sleeping, working, and how she embraces her Tourettes.

Her story of being asked to watch a show from a sound box in a theatre and how it made her feel, even after the audience had been informed of her condition, shows us how limiting Tourettes can be and also how intolerant people can be of those with disabilities, preventing her from doing things we take for granted and were taking for granted at that very minute. The severity of her physical tics makes it difficult for her to walk and she uses a wheelchair.

Yet Jess is not in any way self-pitying. Instead we are sharing her enjoyment of life, seeing her as someone with a zany sense of humour and a hugely positive attitude. While telling her story, Jess asks us to do a few exercises to understand what it feels like to be her. Try not blinking for as long as you can or singing about carnal knowledge of animals in a crowded room.

Granted Jess has severe Tourettes. Only 10% of people with Tourettes have coprolalia, the technical term for obscene tics. Jess is one of them, but for her such tics make up a tiny proportion of what she says involuntarily. Her symptoms aren't typical of the majority, but what we learn is not solely about Tourettes: such insights could be applied to anyone living with a disabling condition.

Jess Thom (right) with Jess Mabel Jones. Photographer: Jonathan Birch.

The show was hilarious. We were not laughing at Jess; we were laughing with her. I left knowing more about Tourettes than I could ever learn from a textbook. I saw the person, not just the condition, and I hope I learned to be more tolerant and accepting in future.

Bridget Kiely,

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An FAQ page about Tourettes can be found here: <http://www.touretteshero.com/faq/>

You can follow Jess on Twitter @[touretteshero](https://twitter.com/touretteshero) and keep up with her at <http://www.touretteshero.com/about>

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