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THE MORNING LINE

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Broadway conjures magic with 'The Illusionists'

By Mark Kennedy

NEW YORK (AP) - Magic will be take center stage on Broadway this winter in a new, high-paced show but don't expect just one illusionist with a trick up his sleeve. Try seven.

"The Illusionists" starring seven international stars of magic - ranging from a card conjurer to a wizard with a crossbow - will play the Marriott Marquis Theatre from Nov. 26-Jan. 4, the first time in almost 20 years that a magic show plays Broadway.

"We're going to bring magic back to how it's supposed to be - a good, solid, inspiring sort of form of entertainment," said Dan Sperry, whose macabre show often features spinning blades and whose motto is "Magic No Longer Sucks."

The rest of the lineup includes Italy's star escape artist Andrew Basso, Belgium's weapon specialist Aaron Crow, campy magician Jeff Hobson, illusionist and "America's Got Talent" veteran Kevin James and Yu Ho-Jin, a Korean who just won the title of "Magician of the Year."

"The idea was to take the seven greatest living illusionists in their respective fields and put them together. It's almost like The Avengers of magic," said Simon Painter, the show's originator and lead producer.

The show first sold out at the Sydney Opera House in 2012 and went on to play Singapore, Mexico, New Zealand, Brazil, Venezuela and Britain. A new version focusing on futuristic acts - "Illusionists 2.0" - debuted last year in Australia and a hybrid of the two shows now comes to Broadway, called "Witness the Impossible." Tickets go on sale Tuesday.

Painter's goal is to do with magic what Cirque du Soleil did with circus - get rid of the dated lions and sequins and make it adult, sophisticated fun. His show has a throbbing rock beat and intelligent pacing.

"What we've done is make it a theatrical experience rather than it being a flashy, Las Vegas, showmanship experience. The theatricality was an important change that we made," he said.

The show will do a few tune-up stops around Thanksgiving in Akron, Ohio, and Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. Then, after its six-week Broadway engagement, it hits the road in America, visiting Washington, D.C., Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Salt Lake City and Tampa, Florida, among other cities.

The last big magic show on Broadway was a David Copperfield special that played a few weeks in late 1996 and Sperry, who was inspired to do magic after seeing Copperfield at age 4, is aware of the pressure.

"We've got big shoes to fill," said Sperry, whose Broadway act is still being finalized but will likely include a shotgun. "It's like go big or go home. We really have to try and bring it."



To be sure, there's always been magic on Broadway, whether it's the tricks in "Pippin" to the costume changes in "Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella." But the illusionists say magic deserves to be the main event.

"We're presenting it the way it deserves to be presented - not as a throwaway effect or an add-on to a song. But as a stand-alone act in and of itself," said Adam Trent, nicknamed "The Futurist," who will focus on technology-based illusions.

His act in particular takes advantage of the latest high-tech magic - high-definition screens, Wi-Fi video and 3-D live projections. "A lot of times, magic is the same thing dressed up in a different way," Trent said. "What I'm trying to do is really create a concept completely from scratch."

It's a long way from the stale, hocus-pocus image of birthday party magicians from the past. Copperfield's baton was picked up by David Blaine and now it's held by Sperry, who often resembles Marilyn Manson as he swallows razor blades or cuts off an audience member's arm.

"For years, magic kind of became the dorky, punchline thing in movies and TV shows. It was like, 'Hey, if you want to make the character a real dork, add the element that he's a magician,'" Sperry said. "I think it's coming around again where people are thinking magic's really cool again."

The New York Times

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Seamy World of the Tabloid, Bared Richard Bean's 'Great Britain' Opens at the National

By Ben Brantley

LONDON — Which one is she? Where is the woman we have gathered here to see pilloried? Where is, you know, Rebekah Brooks?

A rather ingenious moment of audience-baiting confusion occurs amid the hail of dum-dum bullets called “Great Britain,” Richard Bean’s relentless satire about the phone-hacking scandal that brought down a newspaper, and that opened on Monday night at the National Theater amid gleeful expectations.

Up to that point, we have assumed that the onstage stand-in for Ms. Brooks, the sphinxlike news executive at the center of the corruption investigation into Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World, is the play’s title character, Paige Britain, played by a bodaciously blond Billie Piper.

Lily Cole as Helen in ArtsBeat: London Theater Journal: A Weekend of Hedonism and Hope JUNE 30, 2014
But suddenly, in a scene set on the yacht of a Murdoch-like mogul, a new suspect slithers into view, a lissome figure with curly auburn hair and a Mona Lisa smile. The audience laughs at this apparition: a rival, it turns out, to our unscrupulous heroine and named Virginia White (note the scansion), played by Jo Dockery. For she is the spitting — or should we say salivating? — image of our Ms. Brooks.

In truth, you’d have to use some genetic equivalent of the photoshopping techniques that are so happily practiced in the tabloid newsroom portrayed here, and combine Paige and Virginia to approximate the complex human being who is Ms. Brooks. Complexity, though, is not the aim of Mr. Bean and his director, Nicholas Hytner, who previously collaborated to sidesplitting success on the international hit “One Man, Two Guvnors.”

Nor, according to the creators of this production, has there been any attempt to paint a literal portrait of the events that culminated in the 138-day trial of Ms. Brooks and others that ended last month. The inclusion of “Great Britain” on the National’s summer schedule was announced only last week, legal counsel having advised the theater that this spectacle should probably not coincide with the trial itself.

But, of course, any resemblance to persons living or dead in “Great Britain” is far from coincidental. And its bolt-from-the-dirty-blue premiere in the churning wake of the trial, which found Ms. Brooks acquitted of all charges against her, had a prurient immediacy that tabloid editors like Paige could only envy. Come to think of it, “Great Britain” borrows quite a bit from the tabloid culture it skewers here. Though handsomely mounted by a first-rate design team and vigorously acted by an immense cast, the script itself seems to have been written in large-type, screaming headlines that reduce everyone and everything to their lowest common (and common is the word) denominator.

It may be Mr. Bean’s belief that this is only fair treatment for the cynical, humanity-eating professions being examined here. And by that I don’t mean just the newspaper business, but politics and law enforcement as well. But the effect is less reminiscent of Swiftian satire than of throwaway television comedies like “Mock the Week,” in which headlines are transformed into punch lines on the spot by a panel of stand-up improvisers.

Like such telly fare, "Great Britain" relies heavily on local references that will sail right over the heads of most folks who live outside of the British Isles. Audiences who do get these references will also get the jokes, of course, but they are also likely to have heard many of them before, more than once.

If you've been following the coverage of the phone-hacking trial and the events that preceded it, you won't need me to tell you the plot here. Mr. Bean covers all the sensational bases that have been the subject of soul-searching and schadenfreude among members of the media and those who love to loathe them.

The script even appropriates, more or less wholesale, some of the more memorable and shudder-making lines to emerge from reporting on the scandal, as in a paraphrase of the former News of the World editor Greg Miskiw's statement of his professional credo: "That is what we do. We go out and destroy other people's lives."

Here, those sentiments are put in the mouth of Paige, played by Ms. Piper with a cocked hip and the diction of a soap opera vamp as a woman who leads, literally and otherwise, with her pelvis. It is Paige's rise, from tabloid staffer to an executive who rules and beds the most powerful men in the country, that gives the play its structure.

After serendipitously stumbling upon the code for hacking into other people's voice mails, Paige and her paper, The Free Press, become a king-making, celebrity-shredding and seemingly unstoppable juggernaut. Her colleagues, lovers, targets and rivals (who are sometimes all of the above) include the foul-mouthed former I.R.A. gunrunner and omnivorous press baron O'Leary (Dermot Crowley); a rising young star in the police force (Oliver Chris), who is handicapped by a conscience; and a Tory politician on the fast track to becoming prime minister (Rupert Vansittart), with the paid-for help of The Free Press.

And, oh yes, there's the editor Paige replaces (Robert Glenister), who goes on to a job as the press liaison for the Tory politician. You are welcome to infer parallels with the career of Andy Coulson, Ms. Brook's former colleague and lover, the sole defendant to be convicted in the trial, though some pleaded guilty beforehand. (Mr. Coulson was found guilty of phone hacking and will face a retrial on bribery charges.)

I could continue for hours with point-by-point similarities between real life and stage life, since the play itself goes on (and on) for nearly three hours. Mr. Bean's approach is to enlarge the already grotesque to the point of explosion, to multiply by at least a factor of two. Milly Dowler, the murdered schoolgirl whose voice mail was hacked into during her disappearance, in this version inevitably becomes twins.

Since the play is set largely in the fast-talking world of a tabloid newsroom, jokes arrive with dizzying speed and density. About one out of every 50 is pretty funny. The front-page headlines shown in video projections are often hilarious, though you could probably come up with similar riffs on your own in a party game. (My favorite: "Immigrant dole cheat's cat ate salmon.")

Aaron Neil is bludgeoningly funny as the thick-as-a-nightstick police commissioner known in the press as the Gay Terminator. And the second-act scene that parallels Mr. Murdoch's appearance before the Leveson inquiry, which investigated the allegations of hacking and bribery, begins with an inspired declaration by O'Leary that everyone who watched those hearings will enjoy quoting.

But back to what inquiring minds really want to know: Is Paige Britain indeed Rebekah Brooks? No, you fool. She is, as her name promises, Britain incarnate, the ultimate embodiment of a superficial, morally bankrupt nation in endless need of titillation. If this correlation is valid, then the much vaunted quality of British understatement must have shriveled up and died long, long ago.