

**Review: Father (Vader), The Barbican**

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Photo: Peeping Tom

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5.0stars

*Father (Vader)* is a delightful twist of comedy, melancholic drama and unnerving horror. It is set in an old folks’ home where nothing is quite as it seems. In the minds of its residents, the orderlies are warped into mental patients and eerie copies of one another. At its centre rests a father, played by [Leo De Beul](https://www.barbican.org.uk/digital-programmes/peeping-tom-father-vader), gradually distancing himself from reality as one by one the surrounding figures are absorbed into an unnatural dimension where time is meaningless, and identity is interchangeable.

It is a convincing second part of a three-piece performance based on the intimacies, dreams and mad occurrences of families. In partnership with The Barbican and [London International Mime Festival](https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-the-pianist-london-international-mime-festival-southbank-centre/), the Belgian company [Peeping Tom](https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-peeping-tom-mother-moeder-barbican/) follow last year’s success of [*Mother (Moeder)*](https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-peeping-tom-mother-moeder-barbican/). Music and dance are playfully interwoven between stammered and mimed words which echo weirdly off the side. The experience is surreal as the sounds aim, and succeeds, to confuse and distract the audience. It remains unclear where one should look as the cast moves determinately across the stage and their voices bounce around, not quite coming from the lips.

The performers are mostly triple threats. Catlike dancers throwing themselves carelessly around with precision accuracy, becoming broken but bendable dolls. Impassioned singers using their voices to become something altogether Other while maintaining a vague character mould. However, the focus fixates on the father. He is an empty shell that encourages empathy, mindless but obviously creative. Showing a candle to the past, or simply highlighting his hallucinations, that much is unclear.

The father is charming in his flirtatious musicality, becoming an OAP rockstar at the piano as his fans (fellow residents) watch on with dreamlike adoration. That is, until he is dragged away by his somewhat loving son, until he too is absorbed into the fold of insanity and becomes a resident himself. He is undressed on stage and unceremoniously draped in a sheet after death. It seems that no one can run from the reality of the father.

A passionate speech, peppered with futile aggravation and swearing, is trivialised to the point of humour. Another son is introduced. He is angry at his own father for his lack of contact during his life, forever with another family, or job, or just away. However, a layer of reality is once again peeled away as the son, or more accurately performer, is awarded for his efforts and relentlessly questioned, in numerous languages. It is all an act. It softens the edges of a hard-gripping reality through an uncomfortably normalised confusion.

The play teeters on the edge, not quite willing to go the full way and really face the discomfort of the elderly, the unsure. However, perhaps this is their reality; forever on the brink of death, always in touch with their mortality. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to create a performance where everything ties up neatly whilst detailing a state of ambiguity. Though it can be said with certainty, this performance does not dwell within realism.

*Father (Vader) is playing at The Barbican until 2 February 2019. For more information and tickets, see* [*The Barbican website*](https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2019/event/peeping-tom-father-vader)*.*

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