

# FLESH

Cie STILL *Life*

Press review 2023

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# TOTALTHEATRE



## The Word Made Flesh: LIMF 2023

*‘Death is always present – it reminds us that we are alive.’*

*This is the mantra of Belgian theatre company **Still Life**, who present their Avignon Festival hit show **Flesh** at the **London International Mime Festival 2023***

Blackout. Ambient electronic music plays. As the lights slowly go up on the stage, we see what might be a lounge bar. Tables and chairs, velvet seating running along the back wall. Cheery Italian pop music is playing, but the people in the room don't seem very happy. Two are sitting on chairs set round a central table; a pregnant woman eating crisps, and a leather-jacketed man turned away from her, shoulders hunched. Another man in a dark-coloured suit is pacing up and down nervously, smoking. Mounted on a stand is a large photo of a woman, with a spray of white flowers below.

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We realise that this is a funeral gathering, a wake. The pregnant woman goes over to a cassette machine and changes the music to something more sombre – perhaps an adagio by Albinoni, that sort of thing. Another woman enters the room, carrying a box. What's in it?

There are clearly complex, longterm dynamics playing out in this group of people – niggles, grudges, jealousies, rivalries. The piece builds very slowly. A terse, psychological acting out of family relationships descends little by little into an out-and-out farce featuring physical fighting, flying ashes, and alternating manic laughter, hysterical crying and primal screaming. All of this is played out as a wordless drama, with a Mike Leigh meets early Complicite kind of vibe.



*Still Life: Flesh part 4. Photo Christophe Raynaud de Lage*

The piece is one of four vignettes that together make up the show *Flesh*, which is coming to the Barbican for the London International Mime Festival 2023, after playing to great acclaim at the Avignon Festival 2022. The show is what the Lecoq trained company Hoipolloi always talked of as situation-driven theatre: each of the four pieces takes one key scenario and works through it with a meticulous care for detail. The central idea is the driver. What if we place four warring siblings in a room with their mother's ashes? What rituals do we need to go through in these pandemic-determined days to be allowed in to see a dying relative in an ICU? Each of the four pieces, in one way or another, deal with death or transformation of the human body.

*Flesh* is created and presented by the Belgian company Still Life, founded and co-directed by Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola.

‘We do everything together,’ say Aurelio and Sophie when I meet with them online. ‘One mind with two bodies.’

Both of them had conventional text-based theatre backgrounds, but having finished their conservatoire training, met as young practitioners attending a three-week-long workshop at the Avignon Festival, 20 years ago.

Deciding they wanted to work together, they formed Still Life as a company with ‘the body at the core’. They have created a repertoire of works that are predominantly wordless, but most definitely theatre rather than dance or mime.

The first show they made together was about death – which turns out to be a recurring theme in their work.

‘We were just young adults, but aware that death seemed to have disappeared from our society,’ says Aurelio. ‘We wanted to make something about death that was funny and playful.’ What emerged was *Où les hommes mourraient encore*, set in a fictional land where death has disappeared, exploring what happens when a trio of friends encounter its return.

Sophie takes up the story, mentioning the company’s second show, *Keep Going* – a show which set the trend for titling their work in English.

‘We wanted to make people look differently at the world – to create a theatre without words that was meaningful,’ she says.

An interesting reflection, as one of the barbs traditionally thrown at physical/visual theatre is that it is hotter on form than on content.



Throughout the years, the company have maintained an ongoing relationship with Avignon Festival. In 2015 they, along with a number of other young Belgian theatre-makers, were commissioned to create a short-form outdoor piece – *Frozen* was the result. This was later developed into a longer version. Still Life returned to the festival numerous times, and were commissioned to create a new full-length piece called *No One* for the 2020 festival. It premiered in February 2020 at the Théâtre les Tanneurs in Brussels (where the company are based, and supported as artists in residence), and went to a few other Belgian venues, but then had to be abandoned when the Avignon Festival 2020 got pulled because of the pandemic.

‘It was terrible,’ says Aurelio. ‘We were crying!’ And it turned out that in 2021, the moment had passed for *No One*, so it never made it to Avignon. But they got over it, moved on, and decided to create a new work made up of short-form pieces, which resulted in *Flesh*. And this was indeed presented at Avignon Festival 2022, bringing the connection full-circle from that first workshop 20 years ago to a fully-fledged, full-length production.

Over the past two decades, the core company has expanded to include administrative director Marion Couturier, and technical director Nicolas Olivier.

Other regular contributors to the work – constants for all Still life shows made in the past ten years, says Sophie – are Thomas van Zuylen, co-writer and dramaturg; choreographer/movement director Sophie Leso; and set designer Aurélie Deloche. They are joined on this production by lighting designer Guillaume Toussaint-Fromentin, adding another crucial element to the scenography. Aurelio and Sophie both say that working with the same core team over many years really enhances their work.



*Still Life: Flesh part 3. Photo Hubert Amiel*

I'm very interested to learn how important the writing process is for the company. We often think of word-free theatre as something that develops from a devising session in an empty space – but that's not the case for *Still Life*.

'Everything starts with a dialogue between the two of us,' says Aurelio. 'Then we write.' Aurelio and Sophie will have an idea or a question, which might perhaps be inspired by a novel, or by an image from an art exhibition. Both are fans of the work of sculptor Ron Mueck (he of the 'Dead Dad' sculpture notoriety).

'We like the way Ron Mueck's work seems realistic, but is actually fake – we try to pull those two things together in what we create onstage,' says Aurelio.

Talking about taking their cue from the world of visual arts, Sophie says: 'Vision is vital! We want people to really look at what they are being given; to really see...'

Once an idea has been talked through, and initial writings done, then they bring in dramaturg and co-writer Thomas Van Eyen. Thomas comes from a film background, and uses scripting techniques developed from cinema. In what Aurelio calls a 'ping pong' process between the three of them, they develop a very detailed script in which staging, visual imagery, physical action, music, sound effects, and lighting are all detailed.

'We write in everything before we step into the rehearsal room,' says Aurelio.



*Still Life: Flesh part 2. Photo Christophe Raynaud de Lage*

We then move on to talking about the process of creating *Flesh*. I ask Aurelio and Sophie whether the four separate tableaux (or short-form pieces, as they prefer to call them) were always intended to be shown together; and how they were developed.

‘We started off writing many more than four, just trying out different ideas around the theme of the body – its presence and absence,’ says Aurelio. ‘It was during the pandemic, so the fact that people could not touch each other was informing the work.’

They then sent on the first-draft pieces to Thomas who interrogated the writings, and together the three of them picked out the four pieces they wanted to develop; the ones that best foregrounded the theme of the body’s presence or absence; endurance or transformation. They later worked out the best order for the pieces – the one that would take the audience on the strongest journey. The first piece investigates the dying body; the second is about modifying the body through plastic surgery; the third investigates the dissociation between body and mind, as played out through a VR experience; and the fourth piece explores re-connecting where there has been disconnection. The work is performed by a four-person team of actors – including Sophie and Aurelio themselves.

One of the crucial elements of *Flesh*, as for much visual theatre, is the sound design. This is by Eric Ronsse, who is working for the company for the first time. The show features an interesting mix of pre-existing tracks, composed electronic music, and ambient sound.

Talking of sound, Sophie emphasises the role that silence plays in the work, and we talk about the fact that theatre-makers need to be brave about such things, and to trust that audiences can handle silence, stillness and space.

Something that comes up a lot when people review Still Life's work is the word 'visceral'. It is very hands-on, physical work. In *Flesh*, we are not encountering surreal, ambivalent landscapes – the company create tangible environments, peopled by very real and present physical bodies, and then add a twist to the tale.

'We always start our stories with something the audience knows,' says Aurelio. 'For example, in the first piece, the audience all have a collective memory of what a hospital room looks like, so they recognise the scene, and its associated emotions, immediately.'

So the audience are not made to do loads of work trying to identify where the scene is set. It is the situation in which the human occupants of this scenario find themselves in that is the key factor – and how they then respond to it.

'Some things are both terrible and funny,' adds Sophie, 'and this interests us.'

It is this juxtaposing of seeming opposites – the terrible and the funny, the real and the imitation, the present and the absent – that is at the heart of the company's work.



*Still Life: Flesh. Photo Thomas Hobbs*

Featured image (top): **Still Life: Flesh** (part 2). Photo Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

**Flesh** by **Still Life** premiered at Théâtre les Tanneurs in Brussels in February 2022, and was performed at the 76th edition of Avignon Festival in July 2022.

It comes to the **Barbican 25–28 January 2023** as part of the **London International Mime Festival**. Book tickets [here](#).

For more about the company, see <http://still-life.be>

**London International Mime Festival (LIMF)** is an established, annual festival of contemporary visual theatre. Essentially wordless and multi-disciplinary, its programme embraces circus-theatre, puppetry/animation, object theatre, mime, live art and physical theatre.

LIMF takes place in venues across London from **Monday 16 January till Sunday 5 February 2023**. For full details of all theatre shows, film screening and workshops in this year's programme, and to book, see <https://mimelondon.com/>

This entry was posted in Writings and tagged London International Mime Festival on January 5, 2023 by Dorothy Max Prior.



## About Dorothy Max Prior

Dorothy Max Prior is the editor of Total Theatre Magazine, and is also a performer, writer, dramaturg and choreographer/director working in theatre, dance, installation and outdoor arts. Much of her work is sited in public spaces or in venues other than regular theatres. She also writes essays and stories, some of which are published and some of which languish in bottom drawers – and she teaches drama, dance and creative non-fiction writing. [www.dorothymaxprior.com](http://www.dorothymaxprior.com)

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## Review: STILL LIFE: FLESH, Barbican

Heartfelt tragedy and unspeakable beauty

by Alexander Cohen Jan. 26, 2023



From four images flow a smorgasbord of emotions. They spill out off the stage and fill the **Barbican Theatre** with their tender embrace. In just under an hour and a half *Flesh*, the UK debut of Belgian theatre company Still Life, communicates tragic truths about the human condition all without uttering a word.



Four performers, Muriel Legrand, Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola, and Jonas Wertz, present four scenes: The final moments of a man in a hospital bed, a socialite overeagerly unwrapping bandages after plastic surgery, a woman lost in the fantasy of a VR experience of the Titanic, and a dysfunctional family gathering after a funeral.

They might seem random, but the creative team gently scratch at the images to discover a vulnerable emotional nexus behind each sequence. Underpinning everything is a distinctly human urge to love and be loved in return. It manifests in different guises, mourning the loss of family, the desire to become beautiful, escaping the reality into a fiction.

Love and its infinite ethereal possibility may hum gently underneath the music of our lives, but we still have to manage that alongside our situatedness in the world, our entanglement as physical things who dream metaphysical dreams. Human flesh is a recurring motif, how we use and abuse it, how it eventually betrays us.

The constant yearning to transcend our bodies ends in failure. We are doomed to fail. Love just leads to loss. Fantasy is a maze that leads back to cold hard reality. The second scene ends in Cronenberg-esque horror when the still malleable plastic is distorted and ruined by a lover. Terror ripples around the room as the socialite becomes a freakish monster shuddering with fear. All we can do is laugh at our hubris. We are doomed to be human, all too human. Let's try to have some fun while we are at it.

The third sequence is, despite how hilarious it is to watch a woman oblivious to onlookers recreate *Titanic* (car sex scene and all), a silent tragedy. Her desperation is palpable, each long satisfied breath she takes, each ship's horn and ocean wave crash that rumbles from her headset completes the illusion. But it is nothing more than that. It comes cascading down to earth when she removes her VR headset and is almost aggressively confronted with a dull grey room, with a disgruntled employee goading her to hand over the headset.

It's all thanks to the four performers who evoke subtly a rich depth to each character they inhabit. There are no ostentatious decisions, nothing particularly theatrical. Just intelligent direction reflecting quantum level idiosyncrasies that go unnoticed in the everyday humdrum of life. Only the tiniest flickers of their characters' inner lives are visible. Each icy look, loving gaze, and eyebrow twitch screams with a torrent of language and all without uttering a word. It's intensely moving but you can't quite tell why. It's beyond language.

# Still Life: Flesh review



“Absurd, poignant and disquieting”

REVIEWS JAN 27, 2023 BARBICAN THEATRE, LONDON



Scene from *Still Life: Flesh* at Barbican Theatre, London. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Darkly comic series of vignettes presented by an inventive Belgian physical theatre company

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The London International Mime Festival invariably throws up some gems. This show by Belgian physical theatre company Still Life, which went down well at the Avignon Festival last year, is a prime example.

Created and directed by Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola, it consists of four vignettes, all in some way concerned with mortality, love and loss.

The first scene starts slowly. We watch as a man dons PPE, a drawn-out process involving generous application of hand sanitiser. It feels at once comic and all too depressingly familiar. Once gowned up, he is able to visit a dying relative; the rest of the scene teeters between dark comedy and something more moving.

The second sequence is more overtly unsettling, containing echoes of Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*. A wealthy couple celebrate the removal of one partner's surgical bandages with champagne, only to find the results are not what they hoped – that they are not who they were.

The third scene essentially consists of one joke, but it's a good one. A woman arrives



**Natasha Tripney**  
INTERNATIONAL EDITOR

Natasha is international editor for *The Stage*, co-founded *Exeunt* magazine and regularly writes for the Guardian and the BBC.

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everything that the character Rose experiences onscreen.

The scene relies heavily on the way in which the film is deeply rooted in collective cultural memory. As the woman virtually engages in a spot of Irish jigging in steerage, or some steamy backseat action with hero Jack, we watch her writhe and judder around a clinical grey space, watched over by a nonplussed employee. This juxtaposition is initially amusing, but things take a tragic turn as the ship goes down and she gets to experience terror and grief with the same level of intensity, leaving her quaking and dazed when the VR experience abruptly ends.

The fourth sequence takes place at a wake in which four siblings, one heavily pregnant, toast their late matriarch before doling out her ashes. The tensions and rivalries between them quickly become apparent, and the scene soon escalates into a familial free-for-all in which bodily fluids and human remains end up pooling together.

Each scene is like a miniature play, with funereal curtains sweeping across the stage in between. The detailed set design by Aurélie Deloche creates four distinct worlds, and the company takes its time shaping each scenario and building the mood. The performances throughout are precise in their physicality and convey so much without dialogue.

While the episodic format probably couldn't sustain itself much longer than the current running time, the piece walks an assured line between the absurd, the poignant and the disquieting. This company is one to watch.

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### Production Details

Production name	Still Life: Flesh
Venue	Barbican Theatre
Location	London
Starts	25/01/2023
Ends	28/01/2023

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Press night	26/01/2023
Running time	1hr 20mins
Creator	Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola
Set designer	Aur�lie Deloche
Costume designer	Camille Collin
Lighting designer	Guillaume Toussaint Fromentin
Sound designer	Eric Ronsse
Cast includes	Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola, Muriel Legrand, Jonas Wertz
Stage manager	Rudi Bovy, Charlotte Persoons
Producer	Still Life

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## Review: Flesh, Barbican

Author: Mary Pollard in Off West End, Physical theatre, Reviews 28 January 2023 0 472 Views

### London Mime Festival 2023

#### Summary

Rating

Excellent

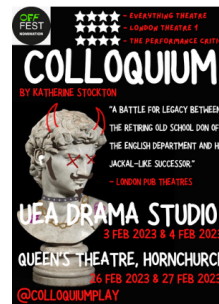
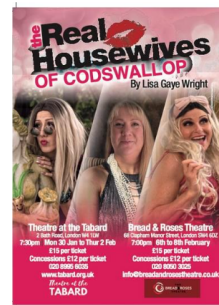
**Cleverly captivating and refreshingly funny, this production makes the ordinariness of being human sublime, communicating its stories using only bodies and totally without words.**

**Still Life** are an extraordinary Belgian theatre company, bringing *Flesh* to London for the first time as part of the **London Mime Festival**. Clearly, there is a gap in understanding between the largely English-speaking audience and the French-speaking creators. So the question naturally arises of how to communicate, to tell a story, when we don't share common words. *Flesh* skilfully and inventively demonstrates a multitude of ways that this can happen.

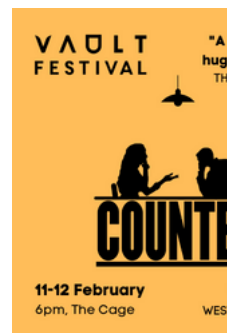
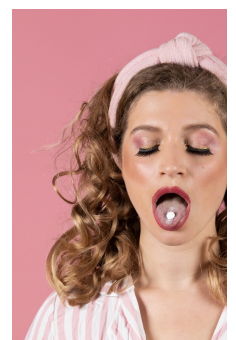
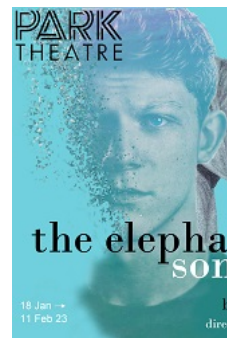
The show's title suggests how it looks beneath the skin of being human, examining it from different perspectives. It comprises four exquisitely observed vignettes that capture very different stories, telling them with delicious richness and without the need for any spoken language.

As the show begins, electronic music fills the air, resonating throughout the theatre and our bodies: already the audience understand corporeally that something is happening. The enormous **Barbican** stage is totally black, with a central cube of curtains. This fabulously epic space then frames and gives spectacular consequence to the ordinary, recognisable stories depicted, which might otherwise be mundane or overlooked. The sets are sharp, straightforward, and change rapidly to move us between snapshots

In the first scene a man visits his dying father in hospital. Heavy breaths and the beep of the monitor signify life, although the body we see is dormant, and is in truth a puppet: not flesh at all. Nothing about the actors' performances is exaggerated or oversized yet the narrative is impressively delivered with enormous power. Instructions are offered, and a multitude of emotions such as confusion, embarrassment and deep grief are silently signalled. Laughter ensues immediately, as we recognise the familiar, repeated ritual of hand sanitising, donning PPE, and bagging of property to ensure human safety. Ultimately these



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behaviours are seen to be meaningless, the father's body a limp, empty object as our laughter turns to deep, moving sorrow.

Next, a silent comic horror story considers the consequences of plastic surgery and reveals the fragility of human vanity. **Sophie Linsmaux** and **Aurelio Mergola** are superb as the cheesy lovers whose body language speaks of romance and vanity until Mergola's artificial face melts and morphs into disgusting shapelessness. Normality, depicted in the everyday living room, underscores the complete absurdity. Again, it's beautifully performed with perfect comic timing, creating a vividly ominous sense of the unnatural and cleverly questioning illusory concepts of the beautiful body.

**Muriel Legrand's** hugely entertaining display of carnal enjoyment, as she immerses herself totally in a VR game of the film *Titanic* is a tour de force performance. The audience sees nothing of what she views, but understands it exactly through her passionate, meticulous movement. Legrand's bodily animation is delightfully counterpoised by the geeky shop attendant (**Jonas Wertz**) who sits flatly by, unmoved, as she plunges in to her new reality, relishing it utterly, before crashing back to real life in tragic disappointment as the game ends.

Finally, at an awkward funeral, four siblings meet to remember their deceased mother and share her ashes, with devastatingly funny results. The detail of this unspoken performance is magnificently observed: so much is said about respect, power, status and ritual without a word used. A half kiss, smoke in the face, inappropriate greed and selfishness all feed in to a complex story of family feuding. And yet despite its negative possibilities, human life is seen to endure in a spectacular ending with an amazing special effect.

*Flesh* is a fascinating and wonderfully entertaining work, both beautifully understated yet epically impressive, and crafted with meticulous precision. This production makes the ordinariness of being human both sublime and interesting and it will certainly have you laughing your socks off!

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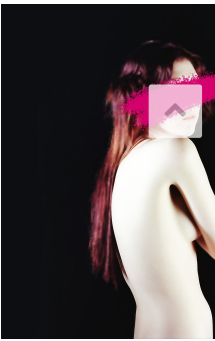
Conception and Direction: Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola

Scenario: Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola & Thomas van Zuylen

Spatial Installation: Sophie Leso

Set Design: Aurélie Deloche assisted by Rudi Bovy & Sophie Hazebrouck

Flesh plays as part of London Mime Festival 2023 until 28 January. Further information and bookings can be found [here](#).



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## ABOUT MARY POLLARD



By her own admission Mary goes to the theatre far too much, and will watch just about anything. Her favourite musical is *Matilda*, which she has seen 14 times, but she's also an Anthony Neilson and Shakespeare fan - go figure. She has a long history with Richmond Theatre, but is currently helping at Shakespeare's Globe as a steward and in the archive. She's also having fun being ET's specialist in children's theatre and puppetry, and being an Assessor for the Offies! Mary now insists on being called The Master having used the Covid pandemic to achieve an award winning MA in London's Theatre and Performance.

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