



Changing places in the animal kingdom

**PHYSICAL THEATRE
 FOOD CHAIN**

Riverside Theatres, January 22

Reviewed by Jill Sykes

A BEAR observes the audience as we sit down; it sits so still on a camping stool that we might not notice it in a moonlit forest scene populated with smaller wild creatures that have been through the hands of a taxidermist. But it is offering us a clue: this intelligent and physically explosive work is about to explore the animal in all of us.

Directors Gavin Webber and Grayson Millwood have said they liked the idea of "animals experimenting on humans, viewing them like a David Attenborough documentary in reverse". This turns out to be only a fraction of the action that unrolls, dramatically and wittily.

Almost everything is conveyed by movement alone – mostly robust encounters between various combinations of bears and humans but also a lyrical interlude of shadowplay and a pivotal

engagement with a giant dead tree that dominates the stage.

Spoken word, however, is essential for the Attenborough-style conversation and it emerges cleverly (and probably essentially, owing to the bear costumes) from an independent source that adds to the amusement.

Themes twist and turn in their exploration of the line that divides, sometimes tenuously, humans and animals. Appetites for food and sex, communication and alienation, trigger surprises that won't be revealed here. Suffice to say that performers disappear and reappear in different guises – at what point does the human turn into an animal or vice versa? Is this a dream or a long hidden inclination?

The dead tree is designed as the ultimate climbing tool and becomes a central player in the show. Having participated from the start, it provides the climax as everyone in the cast clambers around and down it in a self-renewing "food chain".

Their choreographed scrambling

is breathtaking in its tough beauty and themes; it offers a conclusion of a kind and a visual highlight.

Webber and Millwood spearheaded the team that brought together the memorable physical theatre pieces *Lawn* and *Roadkill*. Their exceptional physical skill and daring, along with their bold imagination, has not lessened over the past five years, and it is exciting to see new performers working with them: Kate Harman, Gabrielle Nankivell, Tommy Noonan and Joshua Thomson.

One minor reservation is that the strength of the through-line that powered *Roadkill* is missing. *Food Chain's* episodic construction is obvious and a couple of sequences may go on too long but all the elements are there for further refinement in this premiere season. And it is already outstanding.

Food Chain runs at the Seymour Centre from Wednesday to Sunday.



Where the wild things are ... Kate Harman learns who's who in the zoo and gets in touch with her animal instincts in the German/Australian production of *Food Chain*

Sydney Festival's Food Chain

By [Lynne Lancaster](#) ArtsHub | Tuesday, January 25, 2011

Once upon a time in a forest...

This mesmerizing new work by Animal Farm Collective (Gavin Webber and Grayson Millwood, who previously brought us the fabulous [Lawn](#) in 2006, working as Splintergroup) challenges our perceptions of the world and the environment we live in. An analysis of how humans affect the world, and of our body language – as seen from a bear's point of view – it could also be seen as an exploration of 'releasing the inner animal' and how booted, be-suited corporate humans still climb the 'food chain'.

Moritz Muller's exciting set includes several stuffed animals (e.g. a deer, a pig, a fox, a badger) plus the vitally important, wonderfully textured, solid tree that the marvelous dancers (a cast of six – Millwood, Webber, Kate Harman, Gabrielle Nankivell, Tommy Noonan, and Joshua Thomson) sit in/lie on/slide up and down. There's also a tent and scattered bits of camping equipment on the stage, against a delightful backdrop of trees.

From the opening moment when a mossy Ent-like figure (the spirit of the forest?) slowly slithered down the tree I was hooked.

In the topsy-turvy surrealist world of *Food Chain*, bears are the leaders and social predators who sit highest in the food chain. They conduct experiments to see how much of the inner animal is left in humanity. They mastermind psychological traps in order to explore human beings' animal instincts. What follows is social and sexual chaos.

Ferociously attacking a camping human couple, the bears kill the female, and then use her body, manipulating it like a puppet, in an attempt to lure the human male down from the tree where he has taken refuge. The bears end up using an axe to try and cut the tree down. Will it work?

There is ironic use of video and technology (the bears film themselves posing after the attacks, and film the audience, making sarcastic comments about humans all the while). Wonderful use of silhouette and shadow puppetry is incorporated in one scene, with the tent as a screen, as various stuffed animals are 'brought to life'.

Particularly memorable is a lyrical dance sequence for the girl and her dream bear lover (the male camper's mourning fantasies?) which is tender yet wildly erotic.

In another section, the stuffed animals are lined up and given a warning lecture on the dangers of bears by an over-enthusiastic park ranger. There is also a scene where the bears lay a trap for humans using a tape recorder playing a tape of a crying baby, wrapped in a shawl in a stroller.

Towards the end, in the 'real' world, the two mustachioed 'bear men', clad in cream coloured suits, are seemingly benign at first, but soon there is a fight for cigarettes and a lighter, and events go downhill. This section seems to be an analysis of individual vs. pack survival; how do we know who is friend or foe? A seemingly trivial incident can spark things off. One of the men keeps trying to remind the others that 'it's me!' while they run in fear. This leads to a sequence where the pack turns on the outsider (quite vampirishly, going for the throat).

Savage destruction and fast and furious movements are contrasted with lighter, gentle scenes. Choreographically, the work is at times sculptural, with a possible Butoh influence; and at other times explosive, energetic, and athletic. The finale, with the entire cast as a seething mass swarming up and down/hanging on/climbing the tree was fabulous.

We are what we eat.

Gavin Webber & Grayson Millwood (Animal Farm Collective) present *Food Chain*
January 26 – 30

Sydney Festival
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Tame with slow fade to inconsequence

DANCE

Food Chain

Directed by Gavin Webber and Grayson Millwood (Animal Farm Collective). Riverside Theatre, Parramatta. January 22.

DEBORAH JONES

I SAW *Food Chain* just after returning from Hobart for the opening of David Walsh's intensely thought-provoking private art gallery, the Museum of Old and New Art. Despite the immense difference in scale, there is a link of sorts between the two things.

Walsh declines to impose the usual parameters of order and narrative so central to art institutions. He has simply — and yes, incredibly expensively — put what pleases and inspires him out for contemplation by others. You can tell from the name of his gallery that he doesn't much care for categorisation. Old and new is as definite as it gets.

There are, however, two strong organising principles: Walsh's taste, and the extraordinary building in which it's displayed. The museum is enjoyably anarchic, under controlled circumstances.

Food Chain also sets itself outside conventional parameters, ignoring narrative, linear structure and ease of categorisation. Don't believe the Sydney Festival program's assertion that it's dance: this work is a collectively devised collage including, but not limited

to, shadow play, stand-up comedy, horror-movie tropes, nightmarish visions, robust physical interaction and a wildlife lecture. The organising principle, one might say, is to illuminate the degree to which we are all animals, with basic drives for sex, food and shelter.

Visually the show is extremely arresting (set and costumes by Moritz Muller), with its evocation of a lonely wood in which huge, cunning bears roam and humans are at a distinct disadvantage. A tall, sturdy tree provides little refuge for the hunted, but is a wonderful vertical stage for the final 10 minutes of the 70-minute piece, in which the performers slowly ascend and descend its trunk.

In between the strong start and finish there's a right old grab bag of sequences of varying degrees of interest, most played out too lengthily. The shadow play that begins sweetly and ends with a bit of inter-species sex is fun; the lecture on how to be safe with bears very much less so. (There is quite a lot of text in *Food Chain*, unfortunately not delivered all that well, as is so often the case with performers trained primarily as dancers.

This does the work no favours.)

Gavin Webber and Grayson Millwood, working as Splintergroup, have previously created compelling dance pieces — *Lawn* (2004), *Roadkill* (2007) — but here the insistence on “everyone involved” helping to shape the work dramaturgically has resulted in a mishmash. Even worse, for all the men in bear suits snuffling around for food in other animals' innards and those intimations of sex and death (another link with MONA), it's rather tame.

Theatrically it's obvious and threadbare in a few places, too. The house lights go up and down to signal that we're all part of the show; men swap their bear suits for business suits. Get it?

In one of the more unusual program credits around, Kat Lynch is named as being responsible for the taxidermy. Unfortunately the cute animals scattered around the stage aren't the only things that are stuffed. Ultimately the performance falls apart, not with the panache and thrill of David Walsh-style anarchy but with the slow fade of inconsequence. Webber and Millwood, listed as co-directors of *Food Chain*, acknowledge they were sometimes more equal than the others in Animal Farm Collective. It's a two-way bet that didn't come off.

Seymour Centre, Sydney,
Wednesday to Sunday. Tickets:
\$30. Bookings: 1300 668 812.

- Dance Informa Magazine - <http://www.danceinforma.com/magazine> -

Food Chain at Sydney Festival

Posted By [admin](#) On January 24, 2011 @ 12:36 pm In [Australian Reviews](#) | [No Comments](#)

Gavin Webber & Grayson Millwood
(Animal Farm Collective)

Sydney Festival 2011
Parramatta Riverside Theatres
January 22

By Linda Badger

Food Chain is a very interesting and humorous look at a role reversal of humans and animals. It is a very David Attenborough-like look at humans through the eyes of animals.

The work centres around two bears (two men dressed very obviously as bears), and their observation of human interaction. There are many different takes on this concept and all are very entertaining. It is a satirical look at the way we behave, and how we too could be categorised in the same way that we do animals. There are many layers of thought to digest within this piece and it says much to both the uneducated theatregoer and the career artist.

Food Chain was created through an invitation from Physical Theatre Collective www.pvc-tanz.de ^[1] of Germany to work with directors Webber and Millwood. The collaboration brought about a very unique and thought provoking show. Just like previous works from the same directors (Lawn, Roadkill), they bring together a well written, humorous script and seamlessly blend it with dance, lighting, costume and set. All these elements have an equal role to play within the work, with not one element dominating.



Although *Food Chain* has a very European flavour (with no nudity sensorship and some very sexual themes), it is also very relevant in its humour to an Australian audience, complete with beer drinking bears talking about the audience. They make the obvious more obvious and there is plenty of laughing at ourselves.

A mix between regular pace and slow motion, and turning the house lights on and off, confronts the audience, making them a little uncomfortable in their seats and encourages self reflection. This is very amusing. The work literally includes the audience and breaks the 4th wall, but beyond just that, it actually makes the audience completely aware of its own role in the show.

The performers' skills are quite versatile and they are strong physically and emotionally. At the end of the play they find themselves continuously, slowly falling out of a tree (the centrepiece for the set). This is mesmerising, and it is at this moment that I as an audience member find myself very satisfied and settled – a definitely memorable performance.

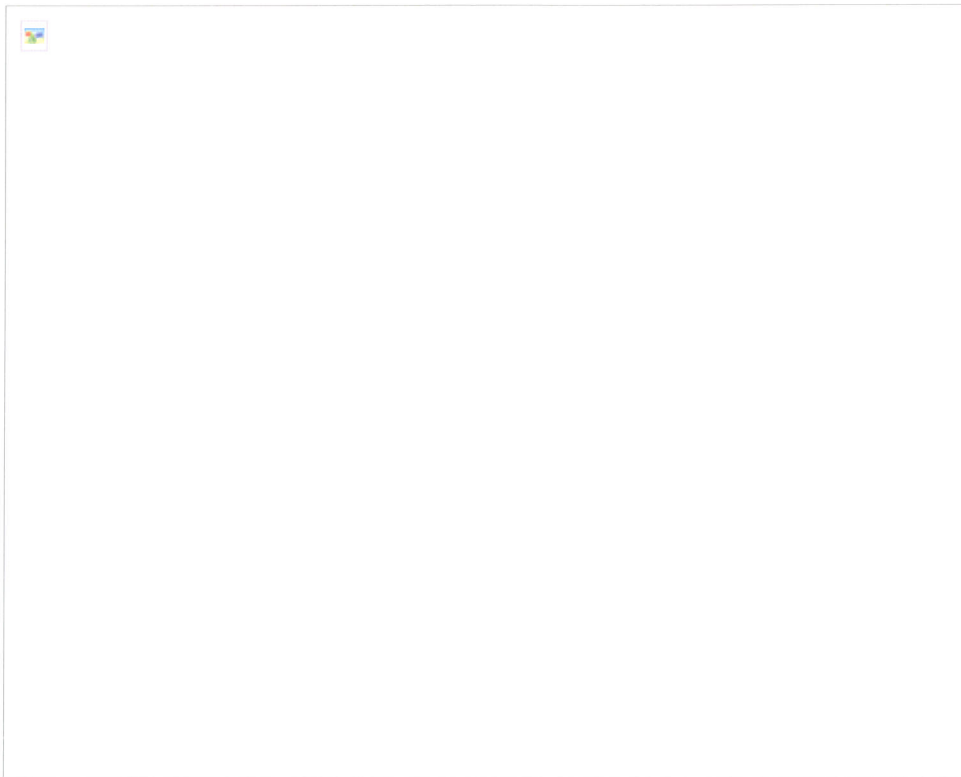
Food Chain is thoroughly entertaining. This work is not to be missed at this year's Sydney Festival.

In another section, the stuffed animals are lined up and given a warning lecture on the dangers of bears by an over-enthusiastic park ranger. There is also a scene where the bears lay a trap for humans using a tape recorder playing a tape of a crying baby, wrapped in a shawl in a stroller.

Towards the end, in the 'real' world, the two mustachioed 'bear men', clad in cream coloured suits, are seemingly benign at first, but soon there is a fight for cigarettes and a lighter, and events go downhill. This section seems to be an analysis of individual vs. pack survival; how do we know who is friend or foe? A seemingly trivial incident can spark things off. One of the men keeps trying to remind the others that 'it's me!' while they run in fear. This leads to a sequence where the pack turns on the outsider (quite vampirishly, going for the throat).

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For more details including ticketing information see the festival's Arts Hub [event listing](#).

