



'Fly By Night' review

Theatre, Outdoor theatres ★★★★★



© Victor Frankowski

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Time Out says ★★★★★

A constellation of pigeons fly over Thamesmead in this stunning twilight spectacle

Does a show that consists of LED-lit flocks of pigeons flying through the sky over a dilapidated former golf course in Thamesmead technically count as theatre? Dunno, don't care, but I'm very happy I saw US artist Duke Riley's beyond-sublime 'Fly By Night' (co-produced by LIFT, GDIF and 14-18 NOW).

At a signal from Riley and his assistants, the approximately 1,500 pigeons surge out of their illuminated coop, and wheel about the skies in tight, agile formations. As night descends, the birds cease to be discernible, with only the clear LEDs they wear around their legs visible. They look like clouds of shooting stars, like swarming constellations, like some sort of strange and wondrous celestial portent. It is really, really fucking cool.

'Fly By Night' is also notionally a commemoration of the messenger pigeons that were key to the British war effort a century ago. This doesn't necessarily come across particularly obviously, but it's not an unwelcome idea – it's perhaps more accurate to call this a suggested train of thought rather than an actual message.

For me, the greater depth to the show was in how it functions as a commune with nature and the stark, hard landscape of Thamesmead. Not the hippest district in London by a long shot, on a perfectly clear solstice night it felt genuinely magical: a perfect, fading primrose-and-pale-cornflower sky chased with the crisp silhouettes of flying birds, the only noise the beat of wings and the odd, mournful whistle from Ellis and his team. In an unfamiliar, industrialised landscape that is, conversely, far closer to the countryside than most Londoners tend to get, it all just felt pretty transcendent, like the glowing birds were somehow a natural manifestation of the landscape, rather than outsiders here to perform a show.

You could argue over whether it 'means anything' that the pigeons come home. But you're almost certainly never going to see a spectacle quite like it again. There are two performances left, and I would seriously urge you to try and make one.

BY: ANDRZEJ LUKOWSKI

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Details

Event website:

<https://www.liftfestival.com/events/flybynight>

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1500 homing and racing pigeons, fitted with LED leg tags, are released over the Thames