

# The Bookbinder

12th February, 2016 on [ADLFringe16](#), [theatre](#), [The Bakehouse Theatre](#), [Ralph McCubbin Howell](#), [Hannah Smith](#)

Once upon a time there was an apprentice bookbinder. A timid young man who made the grave error of doing what cannot be undone and who found himself, quite unexpectedly, in the pages of the wrong sort of book.

It is a cautionary tale to warn us, applicants for the recently vacant position of apprentice, that one must respect the trade. The teller is the master Bookbinder, a bearded man in a brown apron who speaks with the ineffable voice of the best kind of yarn spinners. What follows is a dreamlike story of encounters with strange old women, ships, bathtubs and eagle's nests, all richly imagined by Ralph McCubbin Howell and his room of curios.

"There's a difference between reading the book and experiencing it", the Bookbinder says, and while he may be warning us of the perils to soon try his protagonist, it is hard not to feel that we too are *experiencing* the book.

There is almost nothing on stage that does not play a hand in bringing our tale to life, from the golden gramophone horn that delights with Edith Piaf upon entering the theatre, to lamps of various shapes, sizes and flexibility, to a seemingly innocuous jar of water. Tricks of light and shadow, together with Tane Upjohn Beatson's compositions, weave an atmosphere of almost tangible storytelling, as the world and its characters come to life.

But most impressive is the book itself, a beautiful pop-up paper-art curio hand made by director Hannah Smith. Ralph McCubbin Howell is vivid in performance, moving from storyteller to character to object manipulator almost seamlessly. Occasionally a joke or observation falls a little flat, particularly when they bring us out of this carefully constructed world and into our own, but these are minor and, on the whole, easily forgivable.

Part Tim Burton, part Neil Gaiman, with a hint of Poe and Tolkein, *The Bookbinder* is the kind of show you wish you could attend in pyjamas. A whimsical and beautifully strange story that grips you by the childhood and doesn't let you go. As the Bookbinder reminds us, the best stories unfold in ways we never quite expect, and the ways this particular tale unfolds are sure to delight the young, the old, the bookish, and lovers of the peculiar alike.

*For show times and to book tickets, see the [fringe guide](#).*