

# NOTTINGHAM RULES

Andrew Brown reports from this year's nottdance festival

nottdance06 brought exciting newcomers to Nottingham and the UK, in particular Alain Buffard and the Brazilian triple bill of Michel Groisman, Marcela Levi and Luiz de Abreu. The festival also maintained its productive relationships with several artists including Thomas Lehmen and the ever-green Jonathan Burrows (performing with Matteo Fargion) and reaffirmed its commitment to the programming of both intimate one-on-one and ensemble works. The spectacle of performers en masse has long been a feature despite the additional logistical burden and expense. Not only were La Ribot's *40 espontaneos* and Frank Bock and Simon Vincenzi's *Here, as if they hadn't been, as if they are* not a continuation of this trend but also demonstrated another preoccupation of the festival – in rule-based work. But whereas Maria Ribot's rules made for benign lunacy, Bock & Vincenzi's resulted in an atrocity exhibition.

La Ribot opened the festival with a celebration of humanity. Fifteen or more volunteers aged over forty, without previous performing experience, were given the freedom of the Sandfield Theatre, having spent a mere five evening workshops with the artist. The outcome was a carnivalesque cycle of renewal against an ever-changing multi-coloured carpet of fabric, large posters and furniture. The mischievous and overdressed performers frequently infiltrated the audience, coming amongst us to claim objects. La Ribot herself, documenting the show from back of the auditorium, was evidently enjoying proceedings.

A notable effect of the piece's apparent informality, the performers' gleeful manner and the house lights being up throughout, was the liberating effect upon sections of the audience. Unwritten codes of behaviour were set aside as people laughed, talked, shouted out loud and even ate cake. The sonic refrain of the piece took the form of collective laughter, inevitably including someone's outrageous hiccupping laugh, which naturally tickled everyone's funny bone. But laughter wears thin over time and enters a phase in which it can

be observed dispassionately. Feelings during the piece underwent a disconcerting split, between appreciation of the visual aesthetic of set and performers, and mounting irritation and a vague feeling of nausea. William Miller (1998) suggests in *The Anatomy of Disgust* that laughter, when too long or frequent can 'prompt disapproval or disgust' and that laughter evoking animalesque sounds, such as 'hyena-like yelpings', is particularly culpable. It may seem odd for an artist to encourage us to dwell on such things, but La Ribot has never balked at confronting us with our own psychological complexes.

As the floor space became entirely covered, laughter subsided and the performers played dead and became sleeping exhibits, each holding a different number. After a brief lull they began again, swapping clothes, donning odd shoes or 'one shoe on, one shoe off', and righting furniture. The 15 were then joined by three more bounding on from the audience, presumably the 'espontaneos' alluded to in the piece's title.

Twenty minutes in and still laughing, I speculated whether one could really die laughing as they belly laughed themselves off chairs, sliding to the floor, 'dying' over and over again. As the lights gradually dimmed, the last were dropping yet more expertly, still proudly clutching their numbers.

Bock & Vincenzi employed similar means to affect their audience: repetitive motifs, the spectacle of human beings behaving to some extent involuntarily, disgust, and dissonant sound, though notably not much laughter. *Here, as if they hadn't been, as if they are not*, follows *Prelude* (2004) and *L'Altrove* (2005) and functions as an epilogue to the Invisible Dances that have provided the artists with a productive framework for practical research for the past seven years.

It was a warm evening in Nottingham and its oppressiveness was asking demanding questions of the audience even before the show had begun.

Most stayed in their seats for the full two hours but some were certainly regretting their choice of entertainment as tension mounted to breaking point, and we were held witness to repeated cycles of abject behaviour. For those whose attention was prone to drift in and out of focus, random stabs of sound and light were thoughtfully provided to prod the consciousness.

Despite contemporary trappings, the first of three acts referenced Greek mythology as a figure resembling 'Ulysses, come back from Troy' entered the space, arms outstretched in appeal. To borrow a phrase from George Hyde (1990), he appeared as 'a traumatized Everyman from the boundaries of life and death', clutching his ears as though the noise in his own head was impossible to bear. The noise in the theatre felt only marginally less so, with dense layers of chattering electronics building and shifting ominously. The act ended with a sudden loud bang as the single bulb that had been the main source of light fell to the ground and threw the stage into darkness. Gradually an otherworldly green light revealed a host of troubling characters.

As the piece progressed it became apparent that each one was subject to different rules and cues, either in the form of speech or sound played via headphones from minidisc players attached to their belts. Fellow performers would insert a disc into another's player and stand back as the subject underwent apparent agonies. In extremis, they seemed dangerously disturbed and out of control, oblivious to their surroundings, eventually coming round as though out of a fit, the sound having presumably ceased.

Two women and two men, dressed in black, played a sober-looking counterpoint to the rest of the freak show: a dishevelled carnival reveler staggering on high heels; a blind man in grey feeling his way around the entire space, moving as through portals of sleep, in his sock; a group of three characters in swimwear and white masks, with their pallid bodies protruding from their trunks resembling inhabitants of a municipal pool (this trio appeared transfixed by a TV monitor that was presumably providing the cues for their unique movement; an almost obscene shuddering open-legged balancing act, accompanied by a hissing sound like

water, or escaping gas); a mumbling blonde haired, 60s throwback, with an appalling blue tinge to his skin; a young woman wearing a hooded top, seemingly even more disturbed than the rest due to her administering the sounds to herself, who pulled up her hood and sunk into oblivion or exquisite pain, arms extended, hand fluttering, ending up on the floor, jerking and calling out; a statuesque female narrator whose disembodied voice described horrific scenarios in an alternate reality – the unseen characters she introduced making the space feel even more crowded, as the dead mingled with their living counterparts.

These were characters one wouldn't wish to meet being affected by sounds one wouldn't want to listen to, each one 'the objectification of the repressed part of the psyche' (Hyde, G. M., 1990). Tadeusz Kantor (1975) famously referenced Kleist and Gordon Craig in his manifesto on the *Theatre of Death*, and expressed his desire to overthrow the 'problem' of: 'the living actor, Man, nature's creature...an alien intrusion into the abstract texture of a work of art'. Kantor's solution was to augment each living actor with their mannequin double. Bock & Vincenzi's performers were alive but shackled by their minimal and private instructions. When rules are imposed upon a human performer to such an extent that they exist onstage merely as a ciphers, Kantor's (and his predecessor's) vision of a stage populated by 'puppets' has been partially realised.

Sound built up, rushing throughout the space, as if the roar of the body's interior. Sound and light then cut out, to be replaced by a single tone and a flickering video projection onto the pale shirt of a human figure. He performed what transpired to be a painfully protracted bow, bending over, arms hanging, to rise again, but seemingly shrunken, hands raised in surrender, appearing to be falling, into darkness.

Over several days of the festival Simone Kenyon & Tamara Ashley took up residency within the grounds of Nottingham's Wollaton Park for their exploration *Exchanging Stone for Coal*. By means of an evolving relationship with their environment (an Elizabethan mansion literally built from stone exchanged for coal mined from the estate) they encouraged witnesses to explore global and personal issues, such as the relationships between

property, power, privilege, the function of labour, and one's own place in all of this.

The artists were engaged in a process of continual exchange, transporting coal from one place to another and returning with wood and stone, 'putting something back', exploring material properties and diverse ways of carrying and supporting between themselves. This also concerned the futile drive to arrange things, to place things 'just so', until a person, animal or natural forces destroyed the arrangement, emphasising the provisional nature of human activity and implicitly suggesting the need for a re-alignment of priorities. Despite wearing identical blue smocks and brown stockings, the artists were not attempting authentic reconstruction, but grounded themselves and their interventions in the here and now. They provided a timely opportunity to reflect upon the multiple meanings of the industrial and military relics at the adjoining Bank Holiday Steam Rally, as well as upon the entire site and the notion of 'heritage'. There were a series of small acts taking place among other small acts: children kicking a ball, families taking a stroll, animals following their instincts.

The indications are that Dance 4's director Nicky Molloy is consolidating the excellent and pioneering work of her predecessor Jane Greenfield, whilst introducing her own agenda in the development of new aspects of the programme. A strong feature appears to be in the demystification of contemporary dance/live art practices. What one experiences in a festival like nottdance naturally leads to a desire to reflect, discuss and learn more. Post show discussions have commonly been used to this end but can have their limitations. Sometimes the agenda of the chair person leads to interesting questions being asked, but never quite the same as one would have asked oneself. Far worse is the takeover bid by a fellow audience member bent on self aggrandisement. Often the time allotted for discussion is simply too short, particularly at a time when people have to get home using public transport.

Alternatives explored at nottdance06 included discussions held over lunch the day after the show. The turnout for these was promising and they covered interesting ground. Another welcome development was a Saturday afternoon event



Photo: Neil Callaghan

called *Revealing Process – a Dialogue* in which artists (Graeme Miller, Sally Doughty, Rosemary Lee, Henrietta Hale and Eddie Nixon) articulately presented and discussed their individual notions of process. It is not difficult to appreciate why process is so rarely revealed. Excessive revelation might limit appreciation of the all-important abstract within a work. There is also an assumption that audiences pay to be entertained and to witness skill and professionalism, arguably best displayed after an exhaustive rehearsal process. But there was evidence of considerable skill and professionalism in this particular dialogue and it felt a friendly, supportive forum in which to be discussing such issues. Whether it could become a major new strand of visible activity needs further consideration, but being allowed to see the underlying themes, the false starts, the things that didn't work (and the reasons why) can be a revelation. And all of these can engender a greater appreciation of the depth of exploration and sheer perseverance manifest in the final work, and could result in the development of a more knowing, committed and active audience. And anyway, aren't accidents generally the most interesting bits?

Hyde, G.M. (1990). *A New Lease of Death: Tadeusz Kantor and Wielopole/Wielopole*. Introduction to *Wielopole Wielopole: An Exercise in Theatre*. New York & London: Marion Boyars

Kantor, T. (1975). *The Theatre of Death*. Krakow: Cricotage (translated by Piotr Graff)

Miller, W. (1998). *The Anatomy of Disgust* (p83-84). Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press.

**Andrew Brown writes and lectures on art related issues whilst pursuing his own sonic and social art works.**