

# Asking questions

Andrew Brown at NOTT Dance 2002.



My initial impressions were that this year's NOTT Dance festival would be more overtly 'dance' than a year ago. While curators Jane Greenfield and Ayla Suveren have an eye for the new and provocative, they also recognise the need for balance. The programme was full and varied, including *Kaash* the high energy work by Akram Khan; the quadruple bill *1st Class Air Male* featuring male choreographers Russell Maliphant, Ben Wright, Henri Oguike and Jose Navas each performing their own work; Protein Dance's *Publiffe*, a well-observed piece of 'social realism'; Martine Pisani's *Sans*, laying bare the rules of dance performance; and the dramatic mood swings of Déjà Donne's *In Bella Copia*. While some of the festival's audience were given an opportunity to develop a taste for experimental work, others could seek the sources of experimentation within the mainstream.

It is odd to consider Rosemary Butcher as mainstream, but her role in this particular festival was certainly that of the 'star billing'. Butcher occupies a unique position in contemporary British dance, influential and yet consistently radical. In her hands technology is fully integrated with performative elements and the result is clean and seamless. In *Fractured Landscapes, Fragmented Narratives*, still images of the two dancers were projected onto a screen, essentially sampling the dance. Transient movement was captured and the perfection of the image held, allowing us to contemplate it further.

Deborah Jones and Mark Lorimer aided and at times propelled each other, as though one had lost the power of movement. A particular feature was the inversion and reversal of conventional movement, for example when he scaled her body backwards, feet first. These elements were accompanied by a soundtrack in which a piano calmly picked out harmonic sequences. Subtly reverberating electronics emerged, adding a note of tension and disquiet.

Clinical blue lights clicked on at the start of *Still-Slow-Divided*, Butcher's latest work, which contrasted chilled intellectualism with a movement repertoire based upon the physical disciplines of parachuting and rock climbing. This was evident in the performers' apparent personal struggles with invisible forces and in a purposeful desperation reminiscent of human beings at the limits of their environment. Brief phrases suggestive of throwing-off, hanging-on, evading, floating, being-at-the-

mercy-of, were repeated several times. Any implied relationships were cool and fleeting; there was no mutual support.

Sound artist Cathy Lane created an impressive sonic accompaniment of electronic drones that developed into oppressive radiophonic drifts of sound and birdsong. There was a disquieting evocation of sterile nature as we were effectively transported to a suburban garden beneath the flight path to a major airport. The overall effect distilled a sense of exhaustion with the modern world.

## Rosemary Butcher occupies a unique position in contemporary British dance, influential and yet consistently radical

While Rosemary Butcher is unquestionably a radical in the world of dance, her work still conforms to certain norms of performance, sited safely within a black-box studio theatre environment. Her dancers demonstrate their virtuosity and we anticipate a high level of production, expecting to be entertained with work that is out of the ordinary, that we would not be able to do ourselves.

By contrast, in the blank space of the empty Bonington Gallery, Jonathan Burrows and Jan Ritsema's *Weak Dance Strong Questions* discarded all such norms. Beneath the bare gallery lights, the pair, dressed in everyday clothes, began as though warming up or performing a walkthrough. It could be said, and it was, that they made an unlikely dance partnership, two men at either end of middle age looking as though they had walked in off the street minutes before. Their duet was effectively two parallel solos, with little apparent interplay. Each was absorbed by his own movement, with the stated objective of being in a state of perpetual questioning for a period of fifty minutes. Questions such as 'where is my arm; where is my leg, what is under my shirt...' were answered by movement. Conceptually pure with a total absence of artifice, as honest sweat formed on Burrows' brow everyone in the room was taken on an exploration of will and movement.

Again it could be said, and it was, that such beginnings do not make for particularly accessible performance. However fifty minutes felt more like twenty and the end came all too soon.



Both men's facial expressions showed profound concentration, thought preceding bouts of activity as they recentered themselves. This repeated focusing became mesmeric; more so, at times, than their movements.

The differences between Burrows and Ritsema were apparent from the start, the former a renowned dancer once with The Royal Ballet, the latter a Dutch theatre director and a dancer more by virtue of his desire to dance than by any formal training. Burrows performed speculative movements, appearing to err on the side of caution and frequently aborting his movements. Ritsema was visibly more hopeful and expansive as he skipped and pranced and 'tiptoed through the tulips'. Once, when the mood took him, he traversed the gallery floor in a few histrionic strides. Performers and audience alike found amusement in the exploration of the body, in its evident limitations and the odd positions it can assume. Although there was laughter, this piece was most certainly not played for laughs. Underplayed, if anything, it felt open and honest; neither man appeared to have anything to hide or apologise for. The strength of the questions and the weakness of the dance raised by the title never materialised. What might concepts such as 'strength' and 'weakness' mean in this context?

As the piece progressed in its peculiar fashion, speculation of how they might conclude became irresistible. Would both simply stop and say 'that's it' or grin awkwardly and shuffle backwards towards the exit door, strategically open throughout? In fact the pair simply exchanged a

glance, stopped and turned on their heels, returning to take the audience's applause.

The need for answers to the questions they had posed was satisfied by a post show discussion which offered valuable insights into their relationship and the origins of the piece. Both men expressed the desire for a mature relationship with the audience able to accommodate individual responses such as boredom, the urge to sleep or to laugh. As Jan Ritsema said: 'In these days we have to think and rethink all the time, keep things open and change.' This approach goes for audience as much as the performers.

The Bonington Gallery was again used for its white-box qualities for Thomas Lehmen's *Mono Subjects*. On this occasion it was transformed into something of a crucible, with aluminium foil on the far wall reflecting the harsh lights back into the space. The heat was intense and throbbing feedback, wrought by Lehmen and his two associates from three bass guitars, moved the hot air and our internal organs, producing a shocking physical and emotional response. Despite this testing introduction, *Mono Subjects* was not intended as an attack upon us, but more upon the conventions that surround dance performance. Lehmen, Gaetan Boulourde and Maria-Clara Villa-Lobos were all sympathetic characters and seemed intent on treating us as equals. They thoughtfully attempted to describe and demystify everything in the room: objects, processes and themselves. From the outset the trio formed a relationship with the audience that did not rely upon the sustaining of myths about virtuosity.

The principal feeling I got from this piece – in its ‘matter-of-factness’, in its pointing out the blindingly obvious – was of the exhaustion of culture, of lassitude. The boredom of the rock band that knows all too well there are no new notes to play, everything has been done before, and there is little point in continuing. In the heat and the electrical hum of lights and amplifiers, dance performance was held up as a waste of time and energy. In its place was proposed a form of activity based upon knowingness, acceptance and grim humour. I was reminded of Samuel Beckett’s words in conversation with George Duthuit, on the creative urge:

*Beckett: ‘I speak of an art weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.’*

*Duthuit: ‘And preferring what?’*

*Beckett: ‘The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.’<sup>1</sup>*

Although it sounds anything but, the result was entertaining and perversely enigmatic. Interesting to speculate where Lehmen might go next, towards the mute minimalism of Beckett’s *Quad* or shrugging off all baggage, step out in another direction entirely.

Despite the performers’ irrepressible urge to reveal all, *Mono Subjects* was a non-didactic experience – the teachers had nothing new to say and the pupils knew much of it anyway. By way of conclusion, light sticks were liberally strewn across the darkened stage, a suitably trashy ending to the piece. Pretty enough but everyone present knew they were simply the result of a chemical reaction produced by bending the plastic tube.

Felix Ruckert returned to NOTT Dance with *Love University*, a month-long residency comprising open workshops, in which his company worked with regional artists and the public. Ruckert is to be applauded for devising a model of para-theatrical work that is comparatively accessible. Experiences of this kind tend to be both exclusive and expensive, tapping into the demand for organised group encounters among *au fait* professionals. The majority of Ruckert’s sessions were open to all and allowed those who attended to undergo a fascinating and therapeutic experience for free.

Ruckert has developed a choreography that engenders a physical and emotional contact between ‘performer’ and ‘audience member’ far beyond the norm. In such a context conventional frames of reference become obsolete. What takes place is real and has a profound effect upon the state of being of all participants.

There are few situations when we come close to experiencing intimacy with people we do not know.



Love University. Felix Ruckert. Photo: Louise Baker.

The effects of Ruckert's work are probably heightened by the novelty of the experience. Going to the hairdresser, having a massage, being examined by a doctor are more or less formal situations in which touch is allowed but professionalism is absolutely to the fore. Perhaps models exist in other cultures, such as the Japanese geisha, that go beyond such transactions and allow for a truly intimate sensual interplay between individuals. Whereas much art is self-referential and maintains a studious detachment, there is no escaping the significance of a real human touch.

At the *Love University* participants were inexorably drawn into a genderless realm of the senses, secure in the embrace of fellow human beings, totally accepting and worthy of our trust. Impish too, though, as when we were tickled vigorously or encouraged to run fast with our eyes closed.

Over all too soon, it was time to observe and witness what had been done to us being done to others and to speculate which of the 'performers' had been doing what and when. What struck me was the amount of physical effort they were expending upon us; their trembling muscles, beating hearts and sweating bodies were part of the intimacy.

## The combination of youth and experience, regional and international, mainstream, avant garde and simply off the wall, contribute to the unique character of the festival

Last year's performance of *Ring* by Felix Ruckert's company left me trusting, open and slightly vulnerable. I wanted the feelings to last and to be able to do something with my energy. The opportunity came about on this occasion when, after a break, things moved into another phase. A volunteer was asked questions of a more or less personal nature, while being 'improvised with' by the members of the company. These improvisations included being picked up, carried around the room, dressed in other people's clothing, put into poses, including tableaux vivants with other participants. The company members avoided any sense of maliciousness by keeping things playful and 'light'.

The questions, which were improvised and honestly-asked, seemed to demand honest responses. The mood was informal and although most people in

the room began as strangers, the atmosphere felt supportive and as though we were among 'friends'. There was a strange sensation of having the body disconnected from the mind, being asked searching questions while being manipulated physically.

I strongly felt that I wanted to engage with the process and volunteered. I was glad that I did, feeling energised by the experience. At the conclusion it felt as though we had collectively achieved a sense of resolution.

An exciting new development at NOTT Dance 2002 was the launch by Dance 4 and the NOW Festival of the bi-monthly Showroom platform events for emerging practitioners. These opened with an evening of dance and live art at the newly-built Lakeside Arts Centre in Nottingham. *The Skin of the Projection* by Kerry Wise used the performer's body as the moving screen onto which her own image was projected. A simple concept made particularly captivating by the performer's extraordinary calmness. Following this, a work in progress by Kerry Francksen was screened in which dancer and camera inhabited the same space, the distance between them opening up and falling away in dramatic fashion.

NOTT Dance has always demonstrated its commitment to up and coming artists by creating space in its programme alongside more established names. The combination of youth and experience, regional and international, mainstream, avant garde and simply off the wall, contribute to the unique character of the festival. In Rosemary Butcher's words, NOTT Dance

*'focuses upon the most current work in Britain and Europe and doesn't limit itself to the current mainstream dance idiom. It is both experimental and questioning. It continues the debate as to what modern dance is and the role of dance within twenty-first-century performance.'*

At the end of another successful festival, NOTT Dance seems more relevant than ever. ●

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- 1 Beckett, Samuel. *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: John Calder, 1965. (First published in *Transition*, 1949.)
- 2 Interview with Rosemary Butcher by Andrew Brown, April 2002.