



Willi Dorner. Photo: Lisa Rastl

NOTTDANCE 2004

Andrew Brown reports from the annual festival produced by Dance4

My 15 month-old son, Louis, is nonplussed. He looks towards me for reassurance. Then an expression of faint amusement crosses his features. His latest party trick of opening his jaw wide and making a 'cracking' noise is being mimicked by a respected British dance artist, not that Louis knows or cares who he is. Louis' well-honed dribbling skills subsequently prove to be beyond them however.

A gathering of small children, their respective adults and four performers interacting in an inflatable space, this is *Oogly Boogly*. Unselfconscious children, pre-speech but full of non-verbal communication together with adults attempting to find their inner child, communicating happily together. Billed as 'an event for babies and their grown ups' it was

good, for once, to see something for this invariably overlooked age group. How much the young ones knew of what was going on we will never know, so maybe this was an event just for parents after all, seated around the outside observing their offspring playing a key role in an unusual art work. The event had to be and was handled with a great deal of sensitivity. When it got too much, and most children did require moments of reassurance, attention was directed towards another child. Even the most resolute 'I'll just sit here and watch' attitude was challenged as the performers cleverly gained the children's confidence and drew them out of their shells. A situation was created whereby some children, well into the game, would deliberately do something difficult or silly as though testing their protégés.



Fascinating duets and trios came out of the process and even in periods when the activity subsided, attention was turned towards quiet gestures with subtle interactions.

Jérôme Bel's *The show must go on* gave us the opportunity to study a large group of performers and unashamedly people-watch. We instinctively form opinions of people through the way they behave and move and this, as with so many other aspects of popular culture, is explicit in Bel's work. Despite the presence of the performers it was the popular song that took centre stage and we were 'treated' to nineteen 'contemporary classics', from Bernstein/Sondheim to Queen, in their entirety, the title of each providing the cue for the performers' actions. Thus upon the instruction 'Come together, right now, over me' taken from the chorus of the Beatles' song, the 18 performers walked onstage. Taking things literally is a feature of Bel's choreography, as is playing with our expectations. Half the fun is invariably in anticipating what will happen, working out from the initial few bars what the performers might do, like a postmodern version of 'name that tune'. Everyone, audience and performers alike, end up waiting for the cues in the piece, mirroring the way we respond to musical cues in our lives much like Pavlov's dogs. This music effectively belongs to us, we all know the songs, especially disturbing if you have tried to keep such things at arms length, only to find them having insidiously percolated into your subconscious.

Sally Banes wrote in *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1980) that 'In postmodern dance, the choreographer becomes a critic, educating spectators in ways to look at dances, challenging the expectations the audience brings to the performance, framing parts of the dance for closer inspection, commenting on the dance as it progresses'.

This pretty much sums up the basis for Donald Hutera's *Choreographus Interruptus*, although in this case the dance writer played the role of MC for the evening. I found myself among an audience that with surprisingly little encouragement experimented with viewing positions and took over the reins of the performance. The result was by turns agonizing and revealing, a bit like watching a rehearsal in fact. The three dancers' improvisation skills and patience were severely tested by requests to 'be more committed, less committed, tender, rough, to swap roles and back again'. Not only could we get the performers to do our bidding, we were also offered music and lighting options from an extensive menu. Spoilt for choice. 'Doing things by committee' is a concept widely held up to ridicule and it is easy from this experience to see why. The power, or perhaps simply the idea, had gone to certain people's heads and they were making suggestions on a whim, seemingly unable to control themselves. This was a social experiment that threatened to get out of control had it not been for Donald Hutera's well-timed interventions. He kept proceedings on some kind of track and what he achieved was typically

measured and affable, the man's personality radiating through his work. We were introduced to some of Donald's pet loves and hates as he indulged himself with New Hampshire Frost, a lighting shade of which he is apparently very fond, while revealing his dislike for star ratings on reviews.

The Lakeside Arts Centre provided a peaceful setting in the early evening sunshine for the Willi Dorner Company who occupied different parts of the site for a series of short solos, duets and trios, as well as video installations. In one solo a performer armed with a length of 2 by 1 arranged herself in different geometric configurations with the wood, resembling pole vaulter, kendo practitioner, weightlifter. Another solo piece in the Art Centre's green room was to be enjoyed one at a time with the eyes firmly closed; a 'dance for the ears'. Once seated fast flurries of movement could be sensed all around, as though several people were moving rapidly across the space. I imagined bird-like figures, necks extended, arms flapping like proto wings, this vision perhaps due to a sound that I heard repeatedly, a forced exhalation that was more animal than human. Far away and close up, the movement continued and then ceased. At the conclusion, when I could bring myself to open my eyes, a performer faced me, grinning.

Showroom is an ongoing bi-monthly opportunity for regional practitioners to express their ideas within a supportive environment. This latest manifestation, held in the Bonington Gallery continued the recent trend of 'staged happening' style events and, in the spirit of this noble tradition, the more multi-layered and apparently random the experience the better. One of Allan Kaprow's key *Seven Qualities of Happenings* (1965) states that audiences should be eliminated entirely, everyone at a Happening being a participant. In this vein people in the room were invited to assist with various activities and none were safe from declamations, bicycles being ridden wildly through the crowd and people tagging clothing with shop price taggers. The climax of the event featured the numerous performers rolling from one end of the space to the other, over and over again, forcing anyone unwise enough to be looking the wrong way to receive a hefty jolt to the legs.

Déjà Donné's *There Where We Were* opened with spoken lines of prose that dealt, abstractly, with

losing and finding oneself. This led into a tender piano/trumpet duet which was sustained throughout the piece. Simone Sandrini stood impassively for much of it, watching the two female performers, Masako Noguchi and Teodora Popova, conduct a stand-off that suggested mutual loathing within a relationship born of necessity. Their antagonism took the form of haka-like movements and an apparent ability to be able to strike the opponent from a distance, generally to the chest or the belly. There was much belligerent backing into and blocking of paths. Eventually Sandrini intervened and walked towards Noguchi, taking her hand as they acted out an intimate form of congress. Each seemed to utilise their own form of strength as they engaged in a battle of wills and physical resources, a perverse courtship redolent of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, complete with languid heat. Popova re-entered the fray and the menace was turned up yet another notch into a sequence that resembled a knife fight with fists, no punches pulled. Truly physical theatre and commitment from this excellent company. Digital delay trumpet built in volume and intensity and peaked as the company left the stage, with a closing passage of text that suggested a welcome stage of resolution.

The closing performance event was Xavier Le Roy's *Project*, 'an investigation into the relationship between the process, production and presentation of dance and theatre'. We were confronted by a large open space, with eight PA speakers arranged as four sets of goalposts. Fourteen performers, some of whom had been in Jérôme Bel's piece a fortnight earlier, were to be seen warming up, adopting sporting gestures and mannerisms. They kicked off and, incredibly, we were watching a game of four-a-side football being played in a black box theatre: people in skirts versus people without. The game ended as suddenly as it began and scores were read out into a microphone by someone who had been sat on the bench. Next was a game of handball between people with and without hats. Then pink shirts took on yellow shirts in a game called 'Corners', where all four team members have to stand in the four goals at the same moment to win. And now began the three-game game, akin to three-dimensional chess except with everything, board, pieces and players on the move. The football and the handball were kicked and thrown, people ran hither and thither, wearing different combinations of skirts, hats and shirts.



Temporary alliances were formed and broke up again, each person seemed to be playing simultaneously with and against everyone else. Frequent interruptions occurred, when increasingly meaningless scores were announced.

Ultimately all left the arena, one by one, only to re-enter in a variety of inappropriate costumes, which they proceeded to swap and become more and more hampered by as the proceedings take an increasingly surreal direction, with actions connected with sporting ritual being repeated and performed in unison. *Project* touched on a number of issues concerning society and the need for and nature of play. Like Jérôme Bel's work it questioned the way we perceive and identify with other people, form alliances and define shared attributes. More than anything it acted as a metaphor for the rules that we all follow, whether in relation to art, sport, relationships or life in general.

It has long since been irrelevant to ask what any of this has to do with dance.

NOTT Dance entertains us and makes us think. It has reached this point through ten years of serious investment by Dance 4 in its relationships with artists, choreographers, funders, audiences, venues, co-producers, and its own staff.

It is about taking risks which is why even hardened dance audiences should be up for a challenge, as they were on several occasions this time. A healthy festival is surely one where work can irritate or fall flat and yet the sky doesn't come crashing down. The diversity of NOTT Dance 2004 and the way that audiences keep coming back is testament to its success. As its Artistic Director Jane Greenfield says, 'I'm delighted with this year's festival. We've seen some extraordinary performances; venues across the city have worked with us in really creative ways and we now have half our audiences staying behind to take part in post-show talks. I'm interested in artists who have an energy and vitality about them. I think part of my role is to stir things up a bit, surprise people, and encourage people to think freely, illogically, and creatively.'

Reference

- Banes, Sally. (1980) *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin
 Kaprow, Allan (1965) *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*. New York, Abrams

Andrew Brown writes about art related matters for various publications, performs with and co-ordinates the music/film group Left Hand Right Hand, and lectures in the School of Art & Design at The Nottingham Trent University
 andrew.brown@ntu.ac.uk