

Transcript of an interview/discussion between Barry Edwards and Elizabeth Stewart.

Stewart: Looking at notes made after seeing Second Spectacle, I postulated that the piece was built up from a basic story but with crucial things removed. When I asked you about this afterwards, you said that this made the structure less specific and allowed a wider range of possible associations. There are several points to raise here, but first of all, what did you mean by a range of associations?

Edwards: The question of the story line is rather crucial, because one of the basic impulses behind this particular work was to bring the narrative and the visual modes of working together. This was especially true of the first piece, One Spectacle which is perhaps further away from the narrative than the later pieces. This was always a tension during the creating of the work, some wanting to develop the story line, which is one way of making meaning in the theatre, but there was the other possibility, which was to hold moments that you could look at in an almost sculptural way. For example, from the video of One Spectacle, moments such as the performer standing behind the coloured table cloth. To come back to the question of narrative and visual moment, you have a problem in that if people latch on to the meaning or a narrative, they tend not to *look* quite so closely. They miss things or start to look for things that aren't there; the narrative context if you like. It's as if you conceive the whole narrative first and then remove crucial clues.

Stewart: One of your aims or techniques which we have talked about before, is to 'ring bells'; in the minds of the audience. This suggests that perception of the nature of the work will depend,

to a large extent, upon individual experience and preconceptions. Audience sensibility, however, is kept in a constant state of flux by your use of contrasts and opposites. You said ‘...what the audience sees and hears can support or disrupt the narrative’ and ‘composition must always be done with great care’. While the direction of the work remains fluid, the audience cannot settle down, the ‘bells’ remain disparate and they cannot identify exactly what it is that they are supposed to be experiencing. Why is it so important that the audience remain outside your work?

Edwards: It is really another kind of duality isn't it? There's a meaning on the one hand, a narrative if you like, which the audience can follow through, they know what's happening, they can 'settle down' to the story. Yes, I did want to avoid that kind of straightforwardness. The other side to this is a kind of complete abstraction, a collage if you like. I was aiming to avoid that too and fit somewhere in the middle. So say, in practical terms, two performers enter on stage, and the moment they are on stage the audience is bombarded with clues about the situation that surrounds our two performers; in one way this clue giving is rather unsubtle because the clues have got to be immediate, a bit like a cartoon. Did you see Bunuel's Belle de Jour? (Stewart: Yes) Seeing that film a long time ago and then again so recently reminded me of the kind of influence Bunuel's surrealism had on me. The humour in his work really struck me; he works so much with cliché as in Belle's fantasy sequence. The fantasy is not disrupted by the context of reality. The brothel scenes, for example, are images of the 'essence' of brothel, rather than details studies of a particular place and time, then he plays around with it. In some respects I was attempting the same kind of cliché disruption, giving the audience an 'instant' image, with very easy clues and then putting that in a strange situation.

Stewart: What made the film particularly interesting for me was Bell's characterisation which was much underplayed.

Edwards: That's an interesting thing about English acting, which is excellent in respect of motivation, character and situation; but in the case of a Bunuel type approach, that could prove awkward because they're liable to give far too many details, fill it all in. You know, the doubts, the worries, the possibilities whereas with Belle you never knew quite what was happening. She focussed on very basic decision making, which some would say was bad acting!

Stewart: One tended to watch her, waiting to see some obvious aim, or change of direction. One was always curious..... is your approach when working with actors, similar?

Edwards: Yes, that's why we talked about Godard earlier. You only get a hint of what is going on and your attention is constantly being drawn to the artifice behind what you are seeing.

Stewart: Now, the music in your pieces; in Hugh Morrison's book on directing, he says that 'familiar music has connotations which will be different for each member of the audience, and the director must ensure that he does not use music that will raise associations which are irrelevant to the play'. Now, presumably you make a conscious effort to make very particular use of the varied connotations and associations, against which Morrison warns?

Edwards: I was trying to achieve a little more than a backing track type of music by having live music. For example the range of Eastern instruments that Clive Bell uses have a very strong physical presence on stage. I remember being very attracted by Hary

Parch, the Californian composer, and his notion of corporeal music, music that is a *presence* in the piece as much because of its playing as its sound.

Stewart: If you want to create this range of possibilities from which the audience identify yet more clues, why don't you use more familiar references rather than an original score?

Edwards: That was to reinforce a kind of Hollywood type ending; it sounded very Hollywood, but was in fact Mahler which for various other reasons was appropriate; details like that are important. Then in *Short Sighted* we used the opera music from *Barber of Seville* as an introduction.

Stewart: That worked very well because one recognised the *Barber of Seville* and one was always looking for it to return.

Edwards: In a way that was highly aesthetic wasn't it? There was a strong feeling that more of a *personal* setting if that is the right word was an ambition, but that is difficult because you're dealing all the time with artifice and art objects.

Stewart: I looked up Optik in the dictionary; it said 'relating to sight...optics. The science of nature, the law of vision, the figure of any object formed by rays of light'.

Edwards: Yes.

Stewart: You use the word 'image' a lot. That's another term for mental pictures, is it not?

Edwards: When the work started we looked at the work of a lot of other companies' and I think that there seemed to be two kinds of extreme categories. There was one kind of company for whom

image was everything so that the work seemed to slide from one image to another, with narrative, or even acting being largely irrelevant. There are several companies who work in this way; there is a whole school that goes in for rather tasteful imagery with a lot of slides and long moments of reflection. There was also another side to this kind of work where I found an acting that verged on the melodramatic, that pushed intensity in a rather conventional manner. Emotions were very important to this work; anguish, anger, violence quite often and aggression, particularly to develop intensity.

Stewart: The actor baring his soul.....

Edwards: Yes, it's an old Pip Simmons technique, to see an actor throttling another actor and getting as close to the real thing as they can! This is a kind of dramatic intensity. Of course, in the end it is all simulated but its one way round the age old question of how you convey life and tension as a performer on stage. If you are building up to a climactic moment, obviously violence is quite handy there; but what I wanted to try and achieve was to get this feeling of intensity, a real conviction in an actor, but not through that rather straightforward use of aggression or adrenalin, especially toward another.

Stewart: Aren't you setting yourself an impossible task to some extent? If you dispense with the theatrical climax, and you do seem to avoid any noticeable climax in the conventional sense, aren't you creating problems in a dramatic sense?

Edwards: Yes, well it is really a question of style.

Stewart: So it doesn't it worry you that there is no recognisable climax because you're not setting out to build your theatrical structure in that way?

Edwards: That's right. It seems to be a question of reducing in a way. I feel that it is in line with what I have studied about the traditional Japanese approach, particularly in Noh, but also in Kabuki. It means that you would rather have a very small action mean a lot, than a lot of actions that by sheer number add up to the same thing. It's a love of economy, but that whole question of climax in the piece is something that was always being raised, often by other companies, for whom climaxes were very important! One company in particular had the problem of always tending toward the 'big' moment whereas we found that we were always trying to avoid great moments of confrontation.

Stewart: But the general public is used to 'big' moments. There is so much overstatement on television today, so much violence, all action and plenty of drama. We are used to watching but not actually observing, if you see what I mean. It's as if you are trying to re-educate people to *look* again. Aren't you asking the audience to do too much, something beyond their scope, or at least, more than they are prepared to do?

Edwards: Yes, you are I suppose. But by the time you've got them sitting there looking at you, you've got them in your hands, so to speak. It's true that people do *expect* a lot of action, we didn't give them that; it seems to me that it is very dangerous to fill up a theatre with action. For example, putting the sound tape up to the top of the sound range or hitting the brilliant lighting effect. However good the technicality of all that kind of thing is, in the end it's just too easy a solution for me. It's filmic really; it seems to me that one should know that that is all possible but to *contain* it, not to use it at all.

Stewart: One of the criticisms voiced by some of the audience after Second Spectacle was that they felt as if they were on the outside of something rather like an in-joke that they didn't understand. Would that be a fair comment?

Edwards: That could be an understandable reaction, I suppose, particularly if you are in an audience where some people find something very funny and you don't. But I think it's probably a little bit of a defensive reaction.

Stewart: There is no doubt that it can be taken on various levels. I would imagine also, that had I seen it five years ago, today and then again in five years, my interpretation would be totally different. I know that this is the case to some extent with most things, but your work is particularly fluid. Are you conscious of this?

Edwards: It's almost inevitable isn't it? The choice of props and situations is governed by any particular moment you are working in. For example, in One Spectacle we choose a pole, a piece of string and a certain kind of table cloth, not for specific reasons arising out of the narrative necessarily, but these props were sometimes interpreted by the audience in the most dramatic way possible. One spectator was convinced the whole piece was about Laos and Vietnam; she had worked there and was moved to tears by it as a result, but that is a very dramatic example! The props etc. are always going to have lots of associations that we aren't aware of, but the manner of choosing and using those props, the deckchair, fishing rod, table cloth etc. when these things are finally mingled together in a theatre composition, and are not made subservient to a plot context, which essentially limits them a kind of vibrancy results. In a way that is what I was trying to do, to get the assembly of items to vibrate, rather like a musical instrument.

The metaphor for what is right seems more appropriately musical than anything else, it is the right *sound* (used metaphorically) that one is looking for.

Stewart: I suppose it is essentially a kind of *ambiguity* you are talking about. As some of the audience said, they felt that they were only guessing at the meaning but that this didn't bother them.

Edwards: I think that brings us back to the question of emotional involvement. It's clearly possible to play with audience emotion, by getting them to care about a character and then to give that character a good time or a bad time, but this is essentially a trick, a technique. If you want an audience to drop some of their involvement in individual character and have an interest in something wider, then yes it's less emotional in one way.

Stewart: I did find that Second Spectacle was easier to watch having seen One Spectacle and being familiar, by then, with the technique that was being used. I enjoyed each piece more as a result. Does that matter?

Edwards: It must help to be familiar with a certain style, although that shouldn't matter too much. In a way, that's one of the reasons why I chose something concrete like the Barber of Seville for Short Sighted. Here is something that is familiar in one way and you can do strange things with it. I was pleased with that choice. It has the hand of tradition on it; French 'A' level text, classic play etc. It is familiar through various operatic versions and yet very few people have actually *read* Beaumarchais' Barber of Seville. Figaro, of course, is a very familiar landmark to many people without them actually knowing why where they have actually come across him. This is a way of getting people to feel familiar with something and still holding

their curiosity. But there aren't that many Barber of Sevilles around to use in that way. Shakespeare wouldn't work for example, other French dramatists are a possibility, with their constant use of love relationships and their unconscious indebtedness to Moliere, like Marivaux. The plot of Barber, the networks of relationships, like Commedia and Moliere is capable of being grasped in one moment, it is a stock relationship. Shakespeare doesn't work like that at all, it is much more intricate.

Stewart: Aren't you creating yet more difficulties for yourself when you challenge audience expectations? In his book, The Best and Worst of Professions, Jean Louis Barrault says that '...the audience come to forget self, their personality, their daily life, to witness the concerns of others in a quest for purification....they come looking for a place to dream and want the readjustment of the balance of life'. The majority of mainstream artistic appreciation today could be said to be no more than a celebration of that tradition; an act of preservation; a reassuring ritual. There is a need for a sense of identification, not only with each other, as a shared experience, but with what's happening on stage. You leave always a question mark. The audience are not sure what it is they see, and are, therefore, uncertain as to the nature of that shared experience. The effect is almost one of alienation.

Edwards: Yes, that's right. People have said the work has a kind of coldness about it from that point of view. It's not really *warm*, no.

Stewart: You never communicate directly?

Edwards: No, but then that needn't be threatening in any way. It's more like the theatre equivalent of a riddle, like a Donne sonnet is a

riddle, a working out of a certain set of linguistic and other elements. At its best, this seemingly cold process can achieve a very particular kind of emotional power. There's also the question of the enjoyment of the theatre experience for its own sake. If people could take pleasure from such things as an aesthetic arrangement of ideas, which in Eliot's definition is the classical as opposed to the romantic approach, I think they would find an emotional pleasure. It certainly isn't there just because you take it as your subject matter (the romantic view).

Stewart: Society pressurises us to divide and define.

Edwards: Yes, the methodical categorisation of things; this is the antithesis of the creative arrangement. The methodical approach insists on a certain kind of logic, a linear logic; in the case of the theatre, a beginning, a middle and an end. In contrast to this, there is a way of appreciating shape and form even in a theatrical moment and finally in all the moments put together. This is different from seeing everything as a progression from one moment to the next. The final moment in Short Sighted isn't a conclusion, it is intended to bring together all the pieces into one moment of suspension and then to hold it for the audience to enjoy. Ideally this final image brings the whole piece together into one picture, an overall view, rather than the last bit in a logical sequence. In other words, the piece is a picture, not a statement.

Stewart: It must have taken a long time to create a work of this length, if my experience is anything to go by. When I work, I don't have *an* idea as such at the beginning, only a few fragments of ideas, visual moments or sound combinations etc. and it's an amazingly long process of development; putting in, taking out, experimenting with and cultivating an electric range of ideas until eventually it grows into 'a whole', but not 'a whole'

which can actually be described as being about anything. This process gradually saps my creativity and I find it very tiring. Your works, which are much longer, must be excessively draining.

Edwards: Yes, they certainly are. If you're creating the piece it would be so easy if it were all there to begin with! But of course it can't be, it's rather like starting off with a piece of material as in sculpture; plaster, wood, whatever. You start chipping away at it but you're not sure what it's going to be, but bit by bit the work begins to tell you, it begins to take a shape then you can start to go in a certain direction, but if you take a definite direction on too *soon* of course, then you limit yourself. So there are no easy answers. It is not quite as straightforward from a theatrical point of view; well perhaps it is but then what *is* the theatre's material that you start off with? Getting the right collection of items to start work on is the crucial thing. In Short Sighted we had a good starting point in the Barber of Seville.

Stewart: Your actors are really like animate props in some ways, aren't they?

Edwards: The four pieces Optik produced were all demanding on the actor. Acting Barber of Seville for example, and yet at the same time commenting on it and being able to act the *essence* of the moment or person you were playing, often without a build up, and frequently without any context to help you, in fact often in opposition to the rest of the stage context! It's the ability to give an essential and economic definition in performance, as in the woman standing in the street in Short Sighted.

Stewart: A question of how *little* is required to say what you want to say, rather than how much.

Edwards: You have to be able to carry conviction and intensity, and yet in these pieces you invariably have to show this conviction alone and not *to* another. It's quite a lonely thing really! It's an internal dialogue; each actor is presenting a dialogue between their character and the world around them. Highly essential of course! Each actor is essentially marooned, alone.

Stewart: It's a particular kind of stage presence too, isn't it?

Edwards: Yes, although I worked with the actors for two and half years on this manner of presentation. There are some actors who, when on stage, display a kind of inquisitiveness...it is a presence, yes, but one that questions itself, it doesn't believe in itself if you like. It throws itself into doubt.

Stewart: That must limit who you can work with.

Edwards: To some extent, yes, but that applies to any director really. You have a preference for a certain kind of acting or actor.

Stewart: You could be called a very self-conscious artist, looking at what you are doing while you do it, a kind of auto-referentiality. Is that a fair criticism do you think?

Edwards: Do you mean too self-centred?

Stewart: I suppose that to be so aware of what you are doing, that is, the content being the structure would make the work self-conscious.

Edwards: But I'm not entirely sure I see it as a criticism, rather like that kind of style in a way. Like an actor who always seems to be thinking about what they're doing. So that whatever it is, say they handle a prop, that prop becomes somehow unusual or unexpected, just by the way the actor has handled it; which is an art, a technique. It is very different from what is normally expected of an actor, what a traditional training would expect. If, for example, in a script the actor is called onto enter, pick up a flower and give it to someone, then if they make that look ridiculous then they are destroying the text. I'm giving an extreme example here. But that quality of strangeness, which *disrupts* the context rather than confirms it, is the quality I try to get from the actors I work with, and what I try to achieve overall in the pieces I have created with Optik. As in the last piece, *Ancient Sighs* an actress finds an object on the floor, she picks it up and with that action makes us feel as if that object had no right to be there at all! Of course this means that props do play a crucial role, which is not surprising. Talking of props, I often used domestic or familiar props such as make-up, bowls, washing lines, deckchairs, fishing rod, slot machine, table and chair, newspaper. The tendency was for the familiar, not the weird, with the exception of the last piece, which made a feature of the Egyptian shaduf. Prior to our last piece, which in a way was a departure, and not that successful as a result perhaps, all the props had a functional quality. In One Spectacle someone walks on stage with a cassette recorder hanging round his neck, blaring away. It has significance beyond its simple everyday function as a cassette recorder; it could be a medal or a shield for example. That's much more interesting, to make the tape machine carry some significance, rather than make an original artefact that has to look like a strange medal. Following on from this, there is a battle sequence where the weapons are a fishing rod and a flag. This is more exciting to my mind, going back to what I said earlier

about technology, than trying to create a stage Star Wars with laser beams or something. That is the mode of film, but theatre achieves more with economy and the correct choice of simple props. Theatre can create the epic from the mundane. It's a crucial function of the medium.

Stewart: Once a particular prop has been selected, and I make this rule in my own work also, it must be used all the way through. Props cannot be brought on for one special moment and then conveniently lost or forgotten. Their use, however, can be changed; as in your fishing rod becoming a weapon. When one's choice of props is limitless, then indiscriminate use of large numbers may actually achieve a lot less. If on the other hand, one limits oneself to a certain crucial selection of items, then one is forced to explore the possibilities within each. This selection then, requires that each prop be flexible, able to work all through your piece.

Edwards: That's absolutely correct, similarly hiding things away, hidden effects. I suppose the whole paraphernalia of *illusion* really is not satisfactory.

Stewart: Which comes first, the idea, a mixture of ideas and objects, or what?

Edwards: There is a duality in each piece I think, a kind of tension of opposites which generates the impulse, dialectic if you like. As in Short Sighted, there is a reality, although it is a fiction, an artefact, and that is Barber of Seville to a strange location, the unfamiliar. The network of relations within this dialectic is potentially very complex indeed. In Short Sighted the seemingly familiar, the Barber of Seville is given elements of strangeness, while the totally new location, the unusual setting that follows, contains much that is completely normal, like

washing etc. This new location that was created was a desert place, a strange location. Now it would destroy the duality, the normal and the strange I was talking about, if this strange setting also contained weird unusual objects, actions etc. You set up a weird location and the music plays a crucial role here in doing this. In Short Sighted I used a long piece of playing on the Turkish saz, a kind of lute, to set up the unusual quality. Since this was live there was a considerable strangeness about the event. An actor enters pushing an object covered in black silk cloth; the action is full of effort. What does the object turn out to be as he uses it unseen under the almost ritualistic black cloth? We gather from the sound that emerges that it is a slot machine, albeit a very old one. The shrine becomes a slot machine, but the significance also runs the other way. For this run-down character, for some undisclosed reason, the slot machine is a shrine. To have tried to create a shrine from scratch, an original, would have been impossible without destroying this essential two-way process.

Stewart: You said another interesting thing when we were discussing the question of illusion and reality. When challenged about the meaning of Second Spectacle, you said that the whole thing was really very shallow! ‘Merely an illusion of depth, like the 2D illusion of perspective’.

Edwards: That was a provocative thing to say! I was probably reacting to an over-reading of the narrative line in that piece, or to the desire for great events, the ‘great’ moment. Yes, it’s shallow in that sense, but I meant to imply that this was in itself quite a deep comment! For example the standard historical drama, tries to do just the opposite, give the illusion of the ‘great’ moment, through artifice. War films are a classic example of this aggrandising technique. The fiction is far greater than the reality. The trouble is of course that many people do not

separate the two! So in Second Spectacle there was an attempt to expose something of this tendency. Nothing ‘happens’ in Second Spectacle and yet it is permeated with potential great moments.

Stewart: Looking back on all your pieces, I feel that the idea of time and time passing is always a strong feature of your work. If one is living an experience, one isn’t able to see it objectively. Watching an Optik performance gave me the feeling that I was standing outside time itself, able to observe and old for an instant, the illusive quality of time passing. In other words, it wasn’t the *doing* that was at the centre of an Optik performance, but its reflection, the experience of an action almost with hindsight.

Edwards: Yes, there is always the hint of significance, but never the certainty. Rather than defining experience in hindsight it raises doubts.

Stewart: Thus, I suppose, retaining that illusive quality of time. I thought specifically of your work when reading Susanne Langer, where she speaks of a work of art expressing ‘...more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions which the artist *has*, but feelings and emotions which the artist *knows*; his *insight* into the nature of sentience, his picture of vital experience, physical and emotive and fantastic’. There’s a difference between ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ isn’t there?

Edwards: Yes, knowing something is already an artistic process, because you’re reflecting on something. This is pertinent to the whole process of acting; one approach to acting, based on illusion, tries to make ‘know’ and ‘be’ the same thing. This is in some ways the basis of the Stanislavski approach. Understand an emotion, feel it and then acting in this technique aims to make

the emotional intensity appear just at the right moment, giving the illusion of felling. It is still an expressive technique of course, but it has produced many arguments about whether actors really feel the emotion etc. including the famous Archer questionnaire, to say nothing about Strasbert, about whether actresses' performances were better if they really felt the emotion they were playing. Although, when all is said and done it is still an illusion of technique that wants the audience to believe in the experience of the particular emotional moment. This all sounds of as Optik is closer to Brecht than anyone else, and in this important sense, I suppose it is. You want the expression of the emotion to be accurate, but at the same time you want to see the actor's comment, which is in effect saying, I don't feel this, or this is a possible response to this situation, what do you (the audience) think? I suppose this takes us back to the question of lack of climaxes, because that does sound rather clinical, in practice I don't think it is necessarily. But the fact remains that a scene like the encounter between the desert woman and the stranger in Short Sighted is an occasion for inferences and innuendo rather than a ding-dong confrontation. This is not to say that there are not moments of physicality. That is different. In that scene in particular there are very strong moments of largely unexplained physicality. The woman suddenly buries the man's head in a bowl of water. But it is an eruption, not a development. It disappears after the event.

Stewart: And yet what appears to the audience sometimes as unexplained 'happenings' are in fact very logical from your point of view. They have a reason for being there.

Edwards: Oh yes, they are there as a result of a specific artistic decision – of course.

Stewart: You don't put them in just then because you think it's getting a bit flat, unless it can be justified from the storyline?

Edwards: Well, yes, but the sequence of events is never purely musical or purely abstract. There is a sequence, a theatrical sequence that logicalises the events, so the eruption in Short Sighted when the desert woman thrusts the man's head into the bowl of water (the man seems to be her servant in some way) is a kind of mirror echo of the relationship those two performers had between each other when playing Figaro and Rosine. That is a link, so the eruption of physicality is not gratuitous, but on top of this, within the scene itself there is a rhythmic or a bio-mechanic necessity, which makes the pace and quality of a movement right for that particular moment. The whole pace of the opening of that scene is long held moments. There comes a time when a decisive break with that is called for, but the details are chosen from other considerations based on the overall location etc. This again makes me think of the Japanese theatre. The performer has to be evenly paced, almost calm for long periods, and then be able to turn out a tour de force of speed and physicality that can come as a complete sensation. This calls for very good control. There is no long build up, and no gentle let down afterwards. This quality in a performance keeps the audience on a knife edge because it is generally unexpected. This is ultimately a technical matter, but a lot of work that I have seen lacks this quality of variance, the unpredictability in pace, mostly because performers pay too little attention to *stillness*. It is only through the stillness that moments of uproar can appear as strong as they should

Stewart: I think that quality of stillness, of just 'being there' is very hard to master...

Edwards: It is a vital skill however, and this is what can sustain longer periods of very economic playing. An example of this is the fishing scene in One Spectacle which lasted over twenty minutes, with hardly any action, no dialogue apart from the bird sounds each actor was using, and which finally erupts in the ridiculous mooing and bellowing at the finale. These kinds of scenes establish their own momentum, as audiences begin to tone down what they are looking for, and they notice more detail.

Stewart: Someone described one of your performances as going on a shared journey 'with people you never got to know very well, but were familiar, familiar with me, and my past, familiar with the wholeness in me rather than with any bit of me'. This seems to lie close to Marcuse's view of art as trying to reach wholeness through alienation.

Edwards: Well, I find the idea of wholeness, of human potential, and of extending that potential through art perhaps, very important. In fact when it comes to describing what my pieces are about, I think I've said before that each piece is, in a way, attempting to say, in a very broad way, the same things. Each piece has a similar kind of a longing for understanding and is posing the same basic questions. In each individual piece you are trying to raise people's interest in these questions. If ever the question of empathy comes into these productions, then I like to think of it as empathy with that feeling of questioning, rather than with any particular character, or situation. It's not that I don't want empathy and I think Brecht is much misunderstood on this point. It is a fact that some people have become very moved by the overall timbre of these pieces perhaps because it has tapped a general, non-specific longing or nagging for them. A Freudian might call it one's essential aloneness, but this is all conveyed through the medium of humour or comedy in the end.

It is, however, a fundamental humour that asks you to laugh at the piece and at yourself. I think this is one of the bases of comedy that even putting up the deckchair becomes a vain attempt at defining the world. In putting up the deckchair it becomes, like the world and people around it, reduced from a functional object to a collection of canvas, wood and other bits all contriving to thwart attempts at coherence. The great comedy masters, Chaplin, Keaton, Tati have all been aware of this; you see something for the first time in a way you never have before.

Stewart: This is helped by pace again isn't it? Your actors and props are set at distance from one another, and as an audience one has to watch all the time. One cannot be a casual observer and hope to 'pick up' on the story later, as it were. I suppose one is tempted to say that the audience is kept watching or looking for some resolution which never actually arrives, but in a way that is the central point of your performance.

Edwards: Yes, but without hints along the way about a possible resolution, a possible code-breaking story line, then people would switch off, it would be totally abstract.

Stewart: But people are not used to watching objectively or in that sort of detail are they? They want the characters to be clearly defined, a logical story-line and some kind of resolution. You are asking your audience to suspend something of this.

Edwards: Perhaps there is a way of doing this which is more accessible but as Brecht said, the pieces are complex because life is complex; it's difficult to get round that.

Stewart: But you keep the actors apart from the audience. There isn't a direct two-way relationship.

Edwards: Well, in every show we toyed with the idea of having a performer address the audience in a direct way, cabaret style if you like, but there is something about it I find unsatisfactory.

Stewart: And yet the actor-audience relationship is a communal relationship isn't it. They have something to communicate to each other.

Edwards: Yes, that that was why we used live music I suppose, that always supplied a strong element of communication in a very direct way with the audience.

Stewart: ..and yet music is the most abstract element.

Edwards: But it's a highly emotional medium too. The music, even when live, is rarely watched as an actor is watched by the audience. Their ears are at work, but they are watching the action, coloured by the emotional tone of the music. The two activities together create an important kind of stage atmosphere, and when you have the audience's attention on something then it can often be developed in an amusing or comic way.

Stewart: But that kind of attention demands to be looked at with almost innocent eyes; the innocent eyes which, through knowledge begin to perceive what it expects. It's as if here, you have to reverse that process and go from knowledge back to innocence again, particularly from the visual point of view.

Edwards: Yes, you have to remove a lot of debris, the clutter of everyday associations that often gets in the way. By clutter I mean the normal meaningful context that a narrative script would entail; the scenery, the emotional history of the situation etc. Removing these essential signs of meaning you leave the

audience searching for bits of meaning all over and so they see things that normally would have only been given a brief glance. Dialogue also becomes a monologue with another monologue. If you create original dialogue between two new characters, then before too long all the audience wants to know is what happens next to these two people; they begin to *care* about these people, they become *sentimental*.

Stewart: Yes, as soon as one identifies with a character one isn't really looking in the same way.

Edwards: Audiences are very prone to do that! Perhaps this is why so much attention is given to the writer and design and other non-narrative elements are given lower priority.

Stewart: Your own sets are not sets in the normal sense, are they? They're more like giant props.

Edwards: The basic aim was to have a set that had a quality of ambiguity. That could be one of several things, and also something that would tour. Normally you have a set for something, but if you want the design to have an identity of its own, you can't just say to your visual artist I want a set for Barber of Seville. That wouldn't be right, but since the piece is still in development, the design has to remain flexible while being built. It is a tall order; it's the opposite of the normal working relationship! That said, it's a way of working, of keeping flexibility and developing alongside one another that I also use on scripted productions. It is a demanding but exciting way of working, I don't like the idea of someone arriving at the beginning of rehearsal with the design complete! I like a lot of interaction between the different elements which ultimately develop an exciting relationship between the music, action and design as Optik does. Sometimes you turn mental somersaults in order to

see a logic between two scenes that you have developed and want to see run concurrently. The first few scenes are never a problem. The audience is new to the event, everything they are seeing is new and they are taking it all in. There seems to be a structural law which says that you can have two or three scenes where you can make a change each time and the audience will go along with you. But then somewhere around the fourth change of scene you reach a crucial stage, either you make a change with a narrative logic, or story line or you change it in an abstract way, it becomes a collage, drifting from one thing to another. It's usually about twenty minutes into the piece. So you've got twenty minutes grace as it were to introduce things without a link as such, then the audience reaches a point where they say, right, what's this piece about? At that point you've got to give them a clue, or a hint of the plot. If you don't give a narrative hint here then the collage, the abstract structure takes over and the audience will stop looking for narrative and this is what you don't want them to do. So at that point you have to give something concrete, you also have to reintroduce something that you have already used and the reason for its reintroduction is a crucial sign for the audience. For this reason, it's much easier to have a story which you disrupt than to have a collection of scenes and then look for hints of narrative in them. I place quite a lot of importance on the story which you then dislocate, particularly a well-known story, a classic. This also allows your stylistic contribution to be made clearer.

Stewart: Talking of style, do you see it as one which uses 'integration' of the artist?

Edwards: Well, definitely.

Stewart: You said before that you didn't use integration as a tool, but that integration was in the nature of the work.

Edwards: Yes, I work with the overall strategy for the piece as theatre, and with the actor, of course. I don't actually use a concept such as integration; well it isn't actually a technique is it? It is a critical concept, something which comes after the event.

Stewart: One of the problems in work that sets out to be integrated is that of form. The form of the individual arts used often dominates their use and although joined each remains clearly identifiable. Your work appears to use to different arts out of necessity, not as form, but as signs and symbols of communication. I don't know if it would be fair to say that your work reminds me of the tale of the Indian elephant. The elephant was brought to the village for exhibition and was to be displayed in the only room large enough to accommodate it which unfortunately was found to have no windows. Seeing it in its entirety therefore was impossible so the villagers were allowed in to touch the elephant. Each touched a different part so that when the elephant was described, each understood it only in respect of the part he had touched. As one's own experience changes, so the perceived reality of your work will change. Nothing, as you said, is specific and the wide range of possible associations allow for endless new perspectives.

Edwards: That certainly states one of the objectives of these four Optik shows.