

JOHN ASHFORD

TIME OUT

Ritual Theatre: ritual could suggest a host of things, as Barry Edwards, the group's director is the first to admit. From magic to actors leaping all over the audience. 'Theatre' suggests spoken words and a text. None of this - or even 'meaning' - has to do with the Ritual Theatre group.

There are six performing members, three musicians and three actors. The musicians play bassoon, viola, flute and percussion, and have all come to the group through bands (Comus, Henry Cow). The actors do not use words but sounds, with the music and physical action. The entire performance is improvised around a very loose formal structure, beginning with gourd and light percussion in darkness. This will last for perhaps twenty minutes, concentrating the attention of the audience on listening while the musicians move about exploring the acoustics and spatial dynamics of the environment. A silence follows - or rather the absence of sound. Then a long viola note builds into a lightly textured musical passage involving bassoon and flutes. Slowly the actors move according to the atmosphere created by the music, and begin to develop sounds - possibly with many repetitions, like a litany. The final section explores new musical areas with bells and percussion, perhaps becoming more strongly rhythmic, while the actors attempt to unite what has happened during the performance with the audience and the music into a single image.

It's difficult to find a label for this kind of work. Maybe it's music theatre, maybe it's sound poem/ performance. Barry feels that the term 'ritual' is right since the attempt is to re-create the spirit of ritual where everything is connected and related to some kind of survival process - a celebration of people in a space together. It may not have anything to do with a literary meaning, but according to the reaction of the audiences it has a lot to do with emotion, like pain and joy. As Lindsay Cooper, another member of the group put it, their aim is to find a kind of performance which is 'too exact for words'.

Rehearsals produce many good ideas, but they are not formally incorporated in the performance. Eventually they might be reworked during an appropriate moment in performance - but when that happens depends on the audience, the environment, the moment.