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TOTAL THEATRE

In order to 'read' a presentation from OPTIK it is necessary to recognise progressive performance work at this period in history as part of a culture of widespread intertextuality, and not as discrete examples of obsolete texts which relate to (at the same time as they are fundamentally distance from) certain broader social contests. Indeed one would struggle to find any current and critically acceptable counter to this belief. Richard Schechner has long since seen his prophecy of a spate of "in between performative genres" realised, to cite examples, in the Wooster Group's belief in classic text as public property, Robert Wilson's 'found language' as new-artefact and Laurie Anderson's cute and electronically eclectic persona, supporting his suggestion that post-modern performance resides most naturally at the hybrid point where mass culture merges with esotericism. The cutting edge of performance is shaped like a star rather than a spear, forged from the same traditions but striking out in different ways.

OPTIK use no high-tech equipment (no video screens here) yet this creates a focus of almost Grotowskian proportions, with the essential dynamics of time, space and human contact re-examined through a forward seeing eye.

OPTIK's essentially textless performance is concerned with creating a series of loaded moments, each of which is but one of a potentially limitless variety of possibilities, the spatial, physical and connotative ramifications of which are interpreted/mediated by the individual spectators. Unencumbered by the English language split between the visual 'spectator' and the overtly aural 'audience', the French commonly refer to the witnessing of theatre as assister , and this perhaps, more so than Barba's semantically participatory spectator is entirely relevant to the process of attending an OPTIK performance, where the viewer provides the specific frame within which the event unfolds.

OPTIK's art is at once international, European and domestic in that whoever watches is

empowered to decide on and define that which is seen. This signifies the emergence of a radical shift in any consideration of the spectator's (spectators') response, for where the watcher's prime role is/was that of consumer, any real sense of reciprocity is denied in favour of a closed and ultimately sterile relationship. Not unsurprisingly, Herbert Blau recognised this (and more) when he argued that the 'traditional' theatre audience no longer exists, stating that the once accepted sense of community collective is already a thing of the distant past. OPTIK's is performance which asks questions rather than proposes answers; essentially, however, the dialogue created is an internal one: to see the event is to share it, yet the only answers to the questions provoked are provided by the self. Critical theory (or, as is often the case, the theory of critique) is no magic key to this work. The creation of a context - a base from which to enter the debate - is not important here. Parallels and precedents simply shift the focus away from the now: from the danger of encounter to the safety of account.

OPTIK's work is important because it recognises, and because it releases the dynamic between the watcher and the watched in a prescribed space at a given time, nurturing the essence of theatre at the same time as it creates a performance experience as fresh and distinct from any crippling notions of Aristotelian unities as one could wish for. The work itself is not easy to discuss. The danger of distortion looms large. What can be said is that OPTIK's is most definitely not a theatre of representation, imitation or even preordained signification. What it is amounts to the vehicle for a new and necessary authenticity; a post-semiotic performance where the improvisation (for nothing thematic is ever prescribed) flows along a current which has everything to do with truth and nothing at all to do with psychology. Not so much the trawling of emotion memory as the presentation of a sometimes emotional now. For if life is viewed increasingly as other than an object then the concept of reality must read as essentially imposed. Traditional notions of realism therefore become lies based on false assumptions: a standardised imitation of a propagated myth. As the very process of meaning-making is revealed as implicit in post-modern performance practice, representative narrative (if it intends to survive) is given no choice but to make way for a complex and collagic series of information structures. Like the viewing of a Rorschach inkblot, the work of OPTIK is at

once abstract and immensely significant: a percussionist plays as two men and a woman walk, run, touch, stop, turn and lie down at will - but the word 'will' here is perhaps confusing. This has less to do with will than with faith in the utilisation of a highly developed performative instinct, creating an improvisation with form rather than with content, which is comprehensively removed from the increasingly felt notion of the process of improvising 'text' as something akin to an exercise in spontaneous banality.

The patterns created by OPTIK are the result of the somatic intelligence of the four performers freed by the confidence of director, Barry Edwards, who stresses a fierce resistance to the director-performer-performed continuum of the usual theatre process. There is in OPTIK's work an absolute absence of artifice, to the extent where personal process and formal articulation create a seamless blend of performance which is not so much a synthesis of form and content, as a unique exploration of the very context of performance. The result is something which appears to be ritualistic, and it is. For despite the fact (if theatre has any facts at all this is surely one of them) that degenerated ritual amounts to little more than spectacle, the important thing here is that OPTIK's concern is with the ritual of performance rather than performance as ritual (not to mention that even more deadly and often seen subterfuge, the performing of dislocated ritual as something of transferable spiritual value). Grotowski himself has stated that the valuable performer is a person of action as opposed to one who is able to accurately impersonate another. The austerity of OPTIK's work, the concern with the raw, physical presence of the body - performance to the extent where art as commodity gives way entirely to art as shared event - is related to the para-theatricality of Grotowski's post- production research.

OPTIK's work is more vital than the bulk of contemporary theatre practice on tour not simply because Edwards' explorations cannot be found in any other company's work, but because it is the company most concerned with (re-)discovering the quintessentiality of performance. OPTIK's work works by means of a complete refusal to leave the experimentation in the process and the process in rehearsal; as such the company is investing the much-maligned word 'experimental' with a genuine authenticity and rigour not seen for many years. It is impossible to leave an OPTIK presentation without

considering the points where process becomes product and work in progress stands as performance; where the presentation of self is seen as sufficient; where content, theme and meaning are subordinate to the physics of the space; where divisions between the watchers and the watched are made fragile to the point of breaking down. These questions are at the very heart of contemporary practice. No company is cutting deeper, quicker or with less compromise than OPTIK.