

Montreal workshop: a review

James Martin

Twelve barefoot people stand scattered about a room. Slowly, some begin to walk, carving straight lines across the empty space. Others join in, each walking their own trajectory. Paths cross, creating a complicated grid of collisions and near misses. Electronic ambient soundscapes trickle out of giant speakers, growing in complexity and density as paces quicken. This is the world of Optik, and no two performances are ever the same.

Kate Bligh first saw a performance by the London-based company seven years ago. Bligh, a part-time instructor in Concordia's English and Theatre Departments, was moved by its spontaneity and creativity. When an opportunity arose to bring Optik to Montreal, she suggested to founder-director Barry Edwards that the company workshop a new piece with performers from her own fledgling Temenos theatre company. Unusually, it just ran as a two-week intensive summer course. Bligh chose 10 theatre students and four music students based on 500-word application essays outlining why they were interested in the workshop and what they hoped to get out of it.

The Optik philosophy, says Edwards, is about getting inside the impulse. Jocelyn Wickett is a recent graduate of Concordia's theatre performance program and member of Temenos who enrolled in the course as an independent student. "There's no narrative, no characters. As an actor, that's a big thing to drop. Anything comes into your mind - 'This person has a wrinkle on their forehead' - and you're allowed to let that in, but you're supposed to let it go and concentrate on being present here and now: I'm standing, I'm walking, I'm looking. You're not playing any intention or story."

Sadia Mahmood, another recent grad and Temenos member, said, "The goal is to open up your senses, so that whatever stimuli you take in you can choose to act upon or not. It's a

very real exercise in being in the moment and truly engaging with being open, and with impulse."

The Optik Project culminated at the end of May with two indoor performances at the Black Watch Drill Hall, and an outdoor performance at Place des Arts. Bligh sees a need for this kind of training because it "puts performers very much in contact with why they're doing something now," rather than simply adhering to a remembered sequence of movements. "Optik's work, because it has no words, puts you smack in contact with the pre-verbal. You can feel how rich and powerful and interesting and creative it can be to engage yourself with what you feel like doing next - rather than having to constantly remember the directions you've been given."

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