

NASEEM KHAN

TIME OUT

The space is quite dark, when the performers one by one - quietly - enter. There's a pause, then two of light flickering oil lamps. And slowly the musicians begin, one at a time. Notes and phrases, on strings, flutes, the occasional brass and a male voice used like an instrument. It all seems random and unrelated at first, but slowly creates a shifting exploring pattern. After a time three actors join in, in order to extend the sound, via abstract movement, into a visual dimension.

'The whole thing' says Barry Edwards, director of Ritual Theatre gently, 'is about awareness and a very sensitive type of relating to one another.' Each show develops entirely by improvisation - it depends on the decisions of a performer and his/her response to each specific moment.

When they first started, said Barry, they tended to pack in too much, and what they expressed through sound/movement was just 'very broad emotions'. They had, he said, to work hard to do nothing. But 'we're gradually painting finer and finer'. Anyone familiar with Zen will recognize the aim and the exercise: an attempt to isolate, appreciate and live in the essence of a single moment, and to see in a clear-eyed way all its possibilities. It needs a shared concentration among both audience and performers that is not easy to come by. 'The audience is vitally important to the group all the time' says Barry vigorously. 'It's all for them'. And that illustrates their view of ritual. The emphasis is on experience common to everyone there. The emotional stages that the things go through are I think universal. It's not a question of going to an audience with something like a message or a plot. It's based on the experience of music, which has incredible power.'

I suppose you could call it ritual too, because you find that sort of fusion, that sort of experience, more in non-print cultures. There, sound had much more power - like

trumpets destroying Jericho. We've still got the facilities for that sort of appreciation. It's just that we're not using them so much.'