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THEATER HEUTE

The British theatre is alive! In spite of all the financial difficulties the island's independent scene continues to be active and creative, richer and more varied than the German equivalent has ever been. In both countries, free theatre exploded in the late 60's. However, in Germany many "revolutionaries" - Stein, Zadek etc. - joined the established system to change it from within. Not so in the UK. Here, the independent scene continued to be an important part of the cultural landscape, even if, over the years, it has lost a great deal of its initial co-operative spirit and political motivation. Many names have disappeared, many new ones have arisen. In the early 70's Barry Edwards was already exploring the theatre of time, space and chance. His influences: John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Grotowski, Artaud. In the 90's Edwards' chosen ground is still the edge of performance. His experiments are as interesting today as they were then, only more so. At the moment no-one seems to question theatrical parameters and basic rules as boldly as he does with his current performance project: OPTIK.

The doors of the Lilian Baylis Studio open for business. The spectators walk along a gallery. On the same level, a row of large windows gives a view onto the street. Stairs lead down into a brightly lit space. A drum kit and groups of chairs leave wide corridors and a square space just off centre. The seating design is the first hint that no conventional theatre will take place tonight. The spectators choose a seat, look around, start quiet conversations whilst waiting. Three men and a woman enter the room almost unnoticed - more spectators? They do not sit down, but walk around leisurely. The drummer sits at his instrument. The transition to the sudden silence is almost imperceptible. Where did the impulse come from, the quiet agreement to start?

The light is unchanged, the audience does not disappear into darkness with the beginning of the show: spectator- and performance- space are not separated. This is the first violation of common theatre practice, and by no means the last.

The four performers Patrick Driver, Jeremy Killick, Alison Bailey, and their German guest Bruno Bachem, move with a different tension now. They have left speech behind. Instead, action comes from a deeper, sensory contact.

The technique is a movement-repertoire of "either-or" options (lie/stand/walk/run/turn 90,180,360 degrees) and the mental rule "nothing has to, but everything CAN happen". The driving force is impulse, internal, external, both, from drummer Simon Edgoose, from performers or from spectators. Outside of this technique nothing is choreographed, no development is planned, everything occurs in the moment.

Three performers slowly walk the length of the room, synchronizing their speed. They seem to cut a path of energy through space. After observing for many minutes, the fourth performer sprints across the slow lanes of the other three. Sparks fly, the four run towards and away from each other, suddenly spread out in the width of the room. Two turn at right angles, walk a corridor along the wall whilst performer no.3 runs up and down between two rows of seats. The fourth moves towards him in slow motion. This is OPTIK. Human constellations are formed, they fall apart and form again from scratch. The performers play with all of this: with each moment, with the unpredictable, and so with the expectations of the audience. Traditions of dramatic action, narrative structure, indeed any of the recognisable Aristotelian principles - all are unceremoniously ditched by OPTIK. This work is the ultimate "open text". A spectator can simply enjoy the aesthetics and the fascination of the game : impulse, geometry , chance . They can even cross the boundary between observer and observed and become an actor themselves.

In Poland in 1993 a spectator got up, took a performer by the hand and walked with him. Before long, a third of the audience was on its feet, accepted and trusted by the company. This was OPTIK's first interactive experience. Many have followed during successful performances in Germany (Giessen, Erlangen, K ln) and Egypt. At Sadler's Wells the British audience is more reserved.

A sudden drum-roll : the four stand in a line unmoved. Their stoicism provokes amused

comments from the audience. One performer eventually starts moving. Up the stairs , through the gallery-door and outside. We see him walk up and down past grinning passers-by. Another border is crossed, the one between public and performance space. All borders are permeable to OPTIK. Their work teases theatre convention: it is playful, provocative. It is a taste of freedom, not only for the performers, but also for the audience. If the spectators meet OPTIK even halfway, the most incredible things can and have happened. One thing always happens: a different kind of attentiveness takes over, a chink of light through the doors of perception, as hard to open as ever.

Edward's early work explored ritual and collective experience in the spirit of the 70's. In contrast to that, watching OPTIK every spectator sees a different performance. The OPTIK experience is individual, chopped up. Edwards' current work is at the pulse of the time - one of the reasons why it is so very controversial.