

## **Barry Edwards in interview with Paul Allain**

### **Optik's visit to Egypt**

**Barry Edwards (BE):** Our visit to Egypt came in between our tours of Poland and Germany and included a the major event, a big outdoor performance in Damanhur, Alexandria. Our work had been geared towards Europe, particularly Eastern Europe and this was the very first experience, certainly for me, of going somewhere completely outside of the European tradition. Our first reaction was to the environmental change i.e. towns, villages and cities were not organised in the same way as in Eastern Europe with its Communist footprints. An immediate sense of change came also from the noise, the population difference and the boundaries of interaction between people. It took a long time to discover what those interactions were, for example the constant movement of people in a very public and very nosy way. The impact of that was enormous to begin with.

**Paul Allain (PA):** At that time the Foreign Office would not support your visit, advising Europeans not to travel to Egypt. There was some risk involved.

**BE:** Not only was the Foreign Office saying that, but the British Council Office in Alexandria were ambivalent, suggesting that our work was 'not appropriate' to the region. In western arts terminology it was an unofficial visit so there was in advance a feeling of physical and creative risk which was a powerful mixture. Once we got to Egypt that risk seemed to disappear completely. It was clear that we were not there as tourists but that we were visiting to make contact and exchange. However, treading in European footprints we were implicated here in a way that we weren't in Eastern Europe. Certainly the number of Westerners we saw were very few so we really were isolated as well as being obviously implicated in the history of the area.

As we leave Alexandria's city boundary we pass through an army checkpoint. Suddenly we are in the rural landscape of the Delta. Water buffalo plod through the fields, a camel is snoozing; a man cajoles a herd of sheep over a small bridge, scenes with a history of thousands of years. We are now in Africa.

**PA:** How was the performance informed by this context?

**BE:** In theatre terms the work does not seek to entertain by adding to a satiated arts market, but by contacting more fundamental human desires for fulfilment, purpose and interaction. I feel the visit drew out the values of the heart of the work in a surprising and quite powerful way. The creative risk remained as a strong force, but gradually a sense of deep purpose began to settle on the company. The alienation and ‘provocateur’ status that the work generates in the western context began to dissolve to be replaced by a feeling of necessity, of being wanted, located which is a surprising feeling for western performers. I put this down to our growing awareness of the history of Egypt. It is a rare feeling for western artists to be ingénues, the newcomers and for the first time our simplicity of approach, our self imposed naiveté and vulnerability were right. It was entirely appropriate for a performance taking place in a country whose cultural tradition predates Europe’s by centuries.

In a western context, the work tries to put in place a technique that engenders risk or looks at unpredictability and spontaneity in performance, the ability to make theatre a live event. There is an exchange or a contact that goes on between people at a simple level either as a spectator or performer actually in the event and in the space itself. The company is not coming with a pre-packaged thing using tricks and techniques to make it work. What was evident the moment we got to the sports centre in Damanhur where we were going to perform was the sheer scale of what was going to take place. How do you put that vulnerability into the scale of an event where maybe a 1,000 people will turn up? In those circumstances, it is quite another thing to start talking about risk and vulnerability! We therefore spent quite a lot of time working on ways of pinning down the event so that it would not simply vanish and yet could retain key aspects of its unpredictability. That led to interesting results. Certain aspects of the opening section were recognised by the spectators as a sort of dance-theatre. When one of these sequences came to an end the audience started to applaud. That was very reassuring and from that moment on there was contact.

Arrangements are confirmed over cups of Turkish coffee. There is not a bar in sight, people are drinking tea, coffee or fruit drinks. We start to set up technically and to rehearse the possibilities in the space itself. By 2.00pm we have to stop. The temperature is around 110 degrees Fahrenheit and Jerry, one of the actors, has been rehearsing bare from the waist up and is now very red.

We asked for the swimming pool to be filled up with 12cm of water and the seats to be arranged not completely end-on but around the space. Every time we turned around something was added; lots of flags, bunting, big pictures of flowers and of the President, then a huge green carpet. We had no option but to involve all of these in our performances. You are offering yourself at that point, you are a visitor, you're strange and you're not coming to throw something at them but to be there, to offer contact.

**PA:** The performers don't have any decoration or choreography or costume to hide behind and in this context the European performer, in particular I think of the young woman, Allison is very visible and vulnerable. It inverts the historical pattern of colonial dominance. You are putting yourselves forward in a weak way whilst at the same time presenting yourselves as something to be watched and observed. It can be very intimidating.

**BE:** Indeed, the Egyptian company were very richly dressed; rich clothing with a whole array of colour. You could say there was a kind of irony in the fact that as western performers we were almost impoverishing ourselves in the event, but this irony is double edged. The force of the western 'poor theatre' aesthetic somehow evaporates in the Egyptian setting. It is pointless, as western performers, to claim a poverty even in theatre terms. There was only the reality, our presence, the human drives and desires that make people want to make contact, observe and interact with each other; a kind of fundamentalism in performance. It was a work that offered nothing but itself.

One of the actors had broken away and was running the length of the pool. From then on the event seethed with interaction and bursts of clapping and whistling. The noise was

constant, young men were climbing the lighting posts to see better, to see the English woman who was by then climbing out of the swimming pool soaked from head to toe.

**PA:** A richness comes in allowing the audience to participate rather than sit and watch.

**BE:** It's important to talk about the flow of energy between the performer and the spectator. What I'm doing is trying to reverse that flow. You are not saying, right I'm a performer sending everything towards you and you take it or not; I have got everything you need and here it is. We try to generate the flow both ways. That became quite apparent during the performance. People at first sat quite still and only slowly began to move forward; the younger ones especially, began to run and walk with the performers, timidly at first and then inching forward. People allowed themselves to watch in a more and more obvious and animated way. There was a moment when Alison, the dancer, came out of the water and stood on the edge of the pool. What on earth can you say to three or four hundred people who are looking in bewilderment at you? She was presenting herself as saying nothing and everything. She had got out of the water and was standing there. Then at that very moment rather than moving away, and this is part of the technique and training, she actually walks forward into that very vulnerable moment. The people then see her in that weakness and strength heading towards them. It's a mixture of delight and horror at the same time. She comes very close to them, engaging that moment of contact between them, asking for that to be explored. Then when that moment is over, she moves away and something else is happening. That unique moment is over.

I was aware that I was the focus of attention as a group of young students gathered round me, eager to know what was happening, who we were and why we were here. It was intriguing and somehow great fun to hold a discussion on the performance while it was actually taking place.

**PA:** What was your perception of the performance?

**BE:** The noise was constant throughout so it was very different from the performance that we had just given in Cologne with a very intellectual audience, who were attentive in

a very respectful way, which led to long held moments of introspective silence. Here it was a huge communal turbulent event. In the western context we stress the individuality of each performer, challenging the debased western myth of ensemble or collective. That was reverse in Egypt; the performers were faced with a terror of being alone in such a huge event but also faced with an obvious communality that rendered provocative individuality meaningless and pointless. The three performers worked together a great deal in order to stabilise the event but also to connect with the pleasure of that other communality.

**PA:** How will the Egypt experience inform what the performers do from now on?

**BE:** The Company has remained together through the Polish, German and crucially the Egyptian tours. I think the Egyptian experience had a fundamental impact, particularly on Alison. She said that she discovered the humanity of the work when she was in Egypt; it was a very moving experience for her.

A coach is laid on to take us back to Alexandria. As it is a new Mercedes with obvious tourist connections, we have a military and police escort. The atmosphere is tense, since the escort is good in one way but with it's flashing blue light it is also making us just about as conspicuous as we could be.

The danger with our work is that faced with an alienation in the western order it will try to validate itself in terms of the avant-garde or western notions of technique. That leads you to a kind of sterile meta-theatre, a theatre about theatre. The Egyptian experience really did test the work by probing its fundamental basis; I keep coming back to this idea that simplicity isn't just a theatrical notion but a very powerful force in terms of human nature and desire. You attempt to work constantly against the consumerisation of the human being. That is what Egypt taught us.