

**Post-show discussion with workshop participants and spectators,  
chaired by Susan Melrose**

**Susan Melrose (SM)** I have been watching Optik since 1991. I have watched them through development and changes of performers: addition, subtraction, lousy reviews with people walking out half way through and slamming doors, many successful moments, interesting moments. So I'm completely committed to it. Completely committed to it. So I thought that I'd talk about perversity. [*Laughter*]

**Barry Edwards (BE)** The word has come up in the training quite a lot this weekend.

**SM:** I wanted to talk about perversity because it seems to me I have to be perverse to go on watching the same thing over and over again. Obviously it's not the same thing even when it's the same performers. Each time I see it with the same performers and the same percussionist it's completely different. And I started to wonder tonight what it was that I was coming to see - apart from extremely pert noses and wide, wide eyes which I can't stop looking at whenever I see Alison in performance. For the rest it seems to me that there's something wonderful that happens and then something very curious that happens. And I particularly wanted to talk about that, and to find out other peoples' opinions with regard to that. Because it seems to me that we are drawn in in a number of phases into something, after an initial point rather reluctantly I think, some of us, and I was watching degrees of unease and anxiety which of course I feel myself every time I come to see Optik at work. Watching those degrees of anxiety, unease, ennui she said Frenchly in order not to say boredom [*laughter*] although Jan Kott said that Japanese Noh Theatre is like absurdist theatre because of its boredom and you can't say anything to Jan Kott, or you couldn't while he was still alive because he was so ancient. He talks about boredom and I think that boredom is quite interesting. It seems to me that there is a fluctuating boredom all the way through this and it's a necessary part of it. And then there's a perversity that takes over and I was trying to look at the different phases of this

taking over. It's something which happens that is like a loss and I was trying to pin it down more particularly in terms of the something that happens in the performers and something that happens in the spectators and with the performers and spectators. And at some point it seems to me that the performers lose their energy and after that point they make a number of attempts to resuscitate it. And as soon as I start to use words like resuscitate, lose, then I've had it, I'm cooked. So let me say again I'm completely committed to the process. And so I then start to think what is this perverse thing that happens and who's doing it to whom? I thought it was very marked to night because I saw a marked loss of muscular definition in the performers at a certain point and at that point I started to notice my gaze slipping. Now Forced Entertainment do this wilfully. There's always a moment in Forced Entertainment when there's a dissipation of energies, the energies fall away and they almost dare you to stand up and say please stop, bring me coffee, if you want me to stay here and watch this I need something to keep me going. So I am not suggesting that Optik is alone in doing this but it was particularly marked tonight I thought. And to bring it back again to something tangible its a loss of muscular definition. Now I don't know if other people felt that but it did make me wonder why this . . .there was an attempt then at renewal and I thought about the cyclical and the notion that for the cyclical to work there has to be some kind of death and then some kind of renewing. And the renewing has to be equivalent to the moment of starting and it didn't seem to me that that was happening. It wasn't an equivalent to the moment of starting so it didn't seem to me to be cyclical. And when I was thinking all of this and of the notion of a loss of energy I started to think : when Alison starts moving again and tries to draw my attention back and that's my self indulgent way of relating to you in performance *[to Alison]* it seemed to me that the repertoire of performance options had already been learned by us all. We knew what could happen so there's an exhaustion in the whole process there. And I thought about why we keep staying watching her and this is when the notion of perversity comes back in again: we watch through perversity. And hope *[laughter]*. Always hope.

**Observer and / or participant (O / P):** I'd like to say that when the energy..when it's lulled, when you say that there was a loss of muscular..something

**SM:** definition

**O / P:** definition, I didn't find it boring, I found it equally interesting, because, well, something was still happening.

**SM:** Yes. I suppose that when I say boring I don't mean it as a complete negative term. In the same way that Jan Kott didn't mean it negatively when he talked about boredom in Japanese Noh Theatre or in absurdist theatre. So I think it's an uneasy edge thing. And I'm supposing that when some people started to leave its because it had slipped over for them, while remaining interesting for the rest of us. I think it becomes very dangerous at that point.

**O / P:** I found it very.. .I found the slow walking very relaxing, quite hypnotic and I found it was equally nice to watch the performers individually and just watch..just let my gaze be sort of.. anywhere and see things peripherally. So I found the slowness quite meditative and when they started..when the performers were moving quite quickly I noticed myself getting much more agitated [SM Yes].. I started wanting to chew my chewing gum again or um.. [laughter] do nothing. I don't know, for me, tonight, I've actually enjoyed the slowness much more.

**O / P:** I was interested in the facial expressions changing due..I guess that was the same..with the..muscular energy slipping and then something happened in the face. At one point Alison smiled through the glass and I thought who is she smiling at ? And then..I don't know your name but [Simon Humm] in the beginning you had this line between your eyebrows..it was like, really determined. And I thought that was really interesting. And when that..when you became relaxed, after the first moment of stillness..or long moments of stillness, then all of a sudden something else changed, and so if I didn't get to see someone's face then, then all of a sudden I was just listening to the rhythm. But it definitely pushed the edge the same way Forced Entertainment does but in a different way. But then I was the survivor on my bench..so..[laughter]

**O / P:** I liked the fact that it.. I don't go to see..I go to the theatre and I don't go and see dance but for me, the taking away of the whole idea of narrative, story which I..seek when I go to the theatre..um..I felt well this is maybe why people go to see dance because there's no attempt to tell a story. There's just sort of myself sitting here being affected by the movement, and I was able to unwind, and I enjoyed not having..um..to..it was very undemanding..you know like stripping away any attempt to tell a really interesting yarn or story it was just ..it was very freeing.

**O / P:** But I felt there were moments of dialogue, of a story if you like. I mean, whereby..um Jerry and Simon dialogued. You know to me that was very intense and to me that was ..um..you know that..that gave me room for..um..um..establishing a story maybe and then the fact that Alison was away and that she was on her own ..doing her own thing..um..there was this kind of almost ..conflict in a way. There was an edge there. To me. Also when she comes towards..um..towards Jerry and he backs off and he goes away again. And in fact Alison's expression , her face, changed. And so again, to me that was some kind of..um..a dialogue and of a..you know..of a..um..he was refusing her to a certain extent and..and I thought that was a kind of a story. And then at the end I thought, to me that was extremely important when you, Alison, and Simon, I felt you synchronised, and it just.. to me it brought the whole thing together..and it really..worked.

**BE:** One of the things I find myself thinking quite a lot, having done the training work with people is the difference between the ambiguity in the still image, that we looked at: when you're still, and when somebody's still, are they there so that I can see them or are they there because they're somehow just wanting to be there. And we explored that quite a lot. And then for me the challenge is: is that possible within the framework of movement, the movement that then brings with it all the question of linear progression, as one thing follows another. And also: where does movement come from, where does this movement come from and where does the movement stop ? And we have been looking at that in the training. We talked a lot about the 'when' of movement. But because when you place it into a performance, the 'when' also becomes critical in

performance. And you can find yourself, I think, being obsessed with certain 'when' moments. Like 'when will this finish' [*laughter*] is a key thing, and..

**SM:** But also will I know when it finishes..

**Various** Yes [*laughter*]

**BE:** The fact is that you don't, you won't: it is an obsession, you find yourself just full of it somehow, that's..I'm quite interested in where those things come from. And what that..how that's to do with the movement. And what the performers, what the relationship it's possible to have with that kind of thing. This is where we talked about perversity in the training as well. Because if you're too compliant with it of course then you start to round it off, you start to..it doesn't..it disappears. [**SM** Yes] And that is to beg the question altogether about why we're perverse which you don't think about. You do sometimes..but then I think that something for everyone to answer. What is it you're looking for ? What is it you're wanting to do ? And then want becomes very important. So, suddenly switching from that, you look across and you see Alison sort of jumping up and down - I could see her over there, and you realise that almost two hours in and she wants to do that. And I'm fine, well, she wants to do that. Then what does she want to do ? And so on. And you're just faced with that because she's not dealing with something which is ..which she has to do, within a structure. And what happens when you remove all of that. Its quite interesting, quite frightening.

**O / P:** But you know. You see, that's interesting. As a director, you knew what the structure was and what wasn't the structure. And an audience..I didn't know..I thought well that's what they're supposed to do now. I didn't know whether that was or wasn't the case..so. I didn't mind not knowing that. I obviously had a different experience..to the whole thing

**O / P:** Can I ask a question ? And that's to do with the performers and what you do before the performance, what preparation if any there is. Is there any structure that they're coming from. What..that sort of thing.

**BE:** Some of that is to do with what I've just been talking about in relation to what we've been looking at in the training - it's a personal process. First of all we're looking for independent response. But independent from what ? Independent from a framing in time, mostly. So that you remove reason for doing something, the reason being an outside agency usually like someone saying 'I want you to do that here' or 'do it on a count of five' or even 'do it with rather crude chance mechanisms', like 'if a three comes do it like this'. Although it's related to chance because what's ultimately interesting is.. why bother with all of that..is because you're looking for something spontaneous, something random, something that isn't fixed, that can be surprising and unpredictable. Now, the challenge is how to frame that within a knowing performer. A performer can't..we've found this in the training..a performer can't just begin to think I can do whatever I like. I'm going to be random. You end up being very unrandom, patterned, and fitting into some very tight constraints. So, we have developed..I suppose it's like a rule system (but we never really use that phrase, or that word) which is that you always work with what's ahead of you, and that you have a sense of being aligned in the space: but that is fluid. You're aligned at any one point: we've looked a little bit at this in the training, not a great deal. But normally speaking, in a fixed technique, you'd fix..you'd know where you were in relation to that wall, and behind you and so on. And then you'd know that you'd moved four steps forward and moved over there. But with this technique I'm attempting to give the performer a sense of where they are at any time and also with that in constant flux. So that if I move forward, I'm also moving my whole alignment forward. Not only that but I'm affecting everyone else's. I may be in a line of three and if I turn that three is very different. So that's embedded into it as well.

**SM:** I've always been intrigued by Barry's choice of performers. And watching performers in Optik who didn't stay because they didn't..they couldn't work within what was given. And you've worked with these performers for a long time. It's very curious,

because it seems that there's a very rigid set of options at any moment but you have absolute freedom to operate within those systems of options. So if you multiply that by four, including the percussionist, you then have four people operating in what seems like a very narrow set of options which then liberates them into everything that's singular about that performer.

**O / P:** When you were walking slowly, that for me would have been a very good end point. And you agree with that [**Jeremy Killick** Yes] You must have some sense of..I don't believe that a performer can go and perform, in anything without some sense of..

**Jeremy Killick (JK)** That's really interesting. It all comes back..after..after it. I have all these things..after the show

**O / P:** Surely those things must have been in there subconsciously

**JK:** I never..if it had been in there, appeared to me as an end, I would have done it. But I didn't. But then I suppose maybe the artist takes up on that after the show, looking back on it.

**O / P:** You're not influenced in that sense during the show ?

**JK:** No

**Alison Williams-Bailey (AB)** You do build up an acute awareness. And there was a point at which in that performance I became very aware of the complexity of what we were doing. I walk down the street every day but that's a lot simpler than what we were doing. In fact it was infinitely complex and the degrees of sensitivity required in the performance are so finite - in fact I can't grasp it. And so in some senses I think . . . I feel it involves such a high level of...artistic engagement as a performer. The scary thing about it is that you can't...you don't have control. You don't have control at all, no control.

**O / P:** You mean by that that you can't express that artistic..you can only express..

**AB:** You have it, but you don't have control. When I started the performance I just thought it was going to be a failure, tonight. And I was really scared. And..and then it sort of came through, and it went further and and it went further down whatever road it went. A lot of performances work out that way.

**O / P:** So what would have happened for it..for you not to have felt like that ? So at the beginning of the performance you felt did you that it was going to be a failure ? And I'm interested to know what could have happened at the beginning of the performance for you not to have felt like that ?

**BE:** I always feel like that.

**O / P:** If you said it was going to be a failure you had some idea of what that failure would be. Why..what would have made it a failure ?

**SM:** This is free-floating anxiety.

**AB:** I just had this idea that I was coming down this line and that we three performers were just going to be kicked off as it were..into the universe and completely..just..never come together. And that would be a failure. That would be a failure. And I was desperate to... Because I remember, we ran round the space before..really strong. We were so together. It was a real buzz. And suddenly..I was..shit, where are they ? And I was desperate to get back to them and I thought I never would. And then I just walked the other way. And I thought oh that doesn't matter, that doesn't matter..

**O / P:** I don't think it could have failed. What it was..I couldn't see that..it didn't seem to me to matter what you did, given the things that you were, let's say, allowed to do. I mean, there was a moment when you came off the bar you'd been swinging on, then you

came walking up and you decided not to step over the bar or..and you just walked back again. And I was thinking, I wonder if she's going to step over that bar ? Oh.. no. Did you not step over the bar because you knew I was thinking that, or because the audience might be hoping you would ? But then again, I was thinking - she can step over the bar, that doesn't matter.. [*laughter*] Nothing would have mattered, do you know what I mean ? Just a little detail like that, but for the whole thing, it wouldn't have mattered whatever you did. So long as you didn't just leave and go to the pub, you know. That's interesting.

**AB:** I had the feeling that perhaps we would.

**O / P:** What, go to the pub ? [*laughter*]

**AB:** So what do we do ? Just walk off, go out..or what do we do ?

**SM:** Unfortunately, I am being told that we have to finish there.