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On a chilly Sunday evening, two men and a woman walk back and forth across a dusty floor. The space is softly lit. A large iron frame hangs from the ceiling, three perspex rectangles stand upright, and musician, surrounded by drums and other percussion instruments, sits silently in the corner. The audience, dispersed in several lines facing and adjacent to one another, are barely seated, yet the performance has inconspicuously begun.

We are in Union Chapel's converted performance space, watching *Optik*. The performers continue walking and turning in an even paced rhythm. One of them may reduce or extend the distance of the walk, but the regular, purposeful tempo remains the same, with each 180 degrees turn precisely executed. Just as I begin to glance elsewhere for alternative stimulation, I realise that one of the performers has taken up a new pathway and therefore completely altered the spatial dynamic. As other performers slowly begin to make other choices, the subtle shifts and layering of movement rhythms take on a diverse and complex texture. From what appears on the surface to be radically limited material, the subtlest of changes becomes invested with great significance - and it's here that *Optik*, conceptually and theatrically, touch on the most magical of moments.

Prior to the performance, *Optik*'s director, Barry Edwards, assisted by movement director Paul Allain, had led a two-day workshop introducing selected performers, musicians, visual artist and writers to the work. The controlled use of breath and energy, so apparent in the performance, derives from Eastern mind-body movement techniques, which Edwards uses as an impetus for training sessions. In one exercise, the group was required to find a spot in space and look at it from different perspectives, taking into account peripheral vision and point of focus. Twenty minutes or so later, they were invited to 'look at the act of looking'. Although this may seem a fairly routine drama exercise, the improvisation was played out with an intense and silent concentration, and embedded

within its apparent simplicity lay a body of complex relationships. Social taboos were broken as people stared at each other, disregarded the formalities of personal space and came within millimetres of another body - or else voyeuristically surveyed someone from afar. It became an ideal forum to explore the power and politics of the gaze. Each member of the group was part of a complex interplay: between active and passive roles. Whereas the individual had some control over the former, s/he was virtually powerless to the latter, and on occasions would simultaneously be 'the looker' and 'the looked at'. One performer later referred to a loss of control, or sense of absence, when someone moved out of her gaze, but a visual artist talked about the form and texture of the other bodies, underlining the objectifying potential of the gaze.

Central to this work is the question of what initiates movement, which Edwards describes as an impulse of awareness. Two women were given a task that involved walking towards or away from each other and jumping. The only permitted manipulation of these quotidian actions was through the regular characteristics of movement - the space-time-energy trinity. At first they limited their options to walking back and forth at a steady pace, and to jumping with minimum energy - creating a bland and monotonous texture. Then a man entered into the exchange, and disrupted the dynamic with vigorous and unpredictable jumps. One of the women challenged him through zealously 'pogo-ing' off the ground to match his height, daring to do so only inches in front of him. This was no longer simply an exercise, but an intriguing dialogue of equality, intimidation, competition and retreat.