

Susan Melrose Edwards' practice: a research paper

The end of shared significance

Barry Edwards' latest live work is an instance of a complex performance metapraxis. The primary focus seems both banal and mysterious : what are the bases for performance decision making, by metteur en scene and performer in both the pre-performance and the actual performance work itself ? Are the decisions made of similar implication and 'meaning' potential for all participants - that is for the artists and for the spectator ?

The idea of shared significance and a common coding for new performance, implying the existence of a consensus as to performance effects and affects, has been the common currency of recent and not so recent performance practice. Edwards' work at the very least offers the possibility of a radically different perspective. It challenges the need still to be constrained in the 90's by a sort of shared agenda. It proposes a precise shift away from the certain ways of seeing and processing new performance.

The emergence of 'performance'

For example, language as a model for analysis of Edwards' current work does not seem to be particularly useful. This model supposes the pre-existence of textuality or discursivity to help provide a framework for 'understanding' the performance.

Edwards' performances are 'textless' in a significant way. What he achieves is the establishment of a complex and fragile 'enabling structure' to performance. 'Performance' *emerges* as an exploration. Edwards probes those aspects of human difference which become visible / audible when performers are asked and required constantly to make decisions about actional choices within a space and located before an audience (with all that this entails).

Texture not textuality

What is most significant in this directorial / creative technique is that it eschews masterly and single-sourced control, avoiding as it does so, any useful analogy with authored text or indeed 'textuality'. It is possible though, to talk in terms of 'texture'. But who 'textures' the texture? This supposes a weaver. Edwards invites us to stay within 'the one', but to imagine instead a number of weaver / spectators - and hence of textures.

Singularity and specificity

Edwards' practice is fluid, not fixed. His work opens itself up to the singular contributions of individual performers and is then able to explore this performer-singularity itself. He also makes available to each performer, in performance conditions, the space and the responsibility for split second decision making processes which bind each performer into the wider human and material structure of the performance event itself.

His work goes further than this: by refusing to cede to ready 'capture' through established conceptual frames it obliges the spectator and spectator / analyst to seek out new means to approach its specificity. The shift from the Newtonian scientific principle, to the notions of indeterminacy, openness, quantum and chaos theories seem at the very least to authorise us to contemplate the implications of Edwards' performance 'singularities'.

The structure requiring the exposure of singularities in Edwards' work guarantees to the performers an element of discovery and surprise in actual performance conditions. This surprise feeds in turn into the performer - spectator relation, without producing - and this is vital - a producer / performer / receiver complicity in 'meaning production'.

There is a particular tension in the performers, multiplied and converted by their relationship with the spectators, but the performers' felt-experience and perception of what they are producing is both unfixed in advance of the event, and secondly radically different from the globalising and 'zoom-in' qualities of the spectators' view.

The performers that Edwards has worked with in **Optik** all differ in terms of gender, body size, energy mode and ethnicity. In as much as their conjunctions in the performance space are not given in advance of any performance, what emerges to the spectatorial gaze is a range of actual performance juxtapositions and complex images. Without an a priori orchestration they are both 'unwritten', 'unauthored', possible but not necessarily probable in their specificity. In performance one or other of these curious conjunctions will, for one or another spectator, resonate with 'something else' in that spectator's own stock of felt-experiences and their after images. What is interesting is that although the range of felt experiences will for any audience have a certain 'identity' in common, they will be differently activated at any moment by different individuals.

In order to come to terms with the way Edwards' latest approach to performance operates we need to go beyond fixing, generalising and down-breaking procedures and move into the notion of multiple and diverse frames and into pluralism, indeterminacy and the singular.

Technique not tyranny

It seems paradoxical but is central to Edwards' technique, that such a degree of openness and uncertainty in performance is made possible precisely to the extent that the performers are provided with firm and stable enabling performance structures.

Edwards' work is an exploration into difference, but his methods are radically removed from those conventionally associated with 'the performative'. Convention based on agon, conflict, structure, characterisation, imagery, sets up a framework in which difference is the vital operative.

Such a framework, as this is practised by performer, writer, metteur en scene or 'collective' versions of these functions organises and controls the internal differentiations within the performance. This forecloses upon and effectively refuses any exploration of performer-singularity as a performance end in itself. Instead performers dance to a single tune: either to the metatext of the director (individual or collective) or to the discourse of the mise en scene, or to the writerly schematisation. That tune, internally variegated though it may be, remains a single source intervention, even if it subscribes to an apparently multi-voiced fragmentation.

Edwards has turned his back on this top-down organisation of difference which 'contains' and constrains the performer. In its place he engages in a different kind of intervention, one that establishes strict parameters. These parameters offer to each performer the same range of binary options: "you can any of you do this, or that, at any moment, in terms of what you feel and what is going on". It is in the ways in which performers differently work with this strictly assembled and appointed 'sameness' that what appears is their own performer-singularity. In the pre-performance situation ('rehearsal') Edwards energises, refines, intensifies this singularity. It is however, always differently taken up, in performance, both by the performers themselves and -always differently - by different spectators.

Edwards' technique as outlined here creates performance that is not univocal. It is not textualised in advance, nor as it develops. We might see it as 'orchestrated in its main lines' but the 'orchestration' is never evident in its detail. It cannot be readily or usefully textualised in the event since it is not 'stable' from performance to performance, despite its strategic or stabilising components. Nor is the singular performance event particularly responsive to specific discursive input (though it is obvious, but of questionable value, that we can formulate after the event what the 'meaning' was). Edwards' performance emerges instead as a shifting and fragile oscillation between the enabling structure and multiple instances of singular input.

The active spectator

In Edwards' work decisions are constantly made to truncate actional formations, to curtail the production of anything which might serve as indice to spectator inference in terms of a meaning filled stereotype or discursive formula. This pushes the spectator into an active role: s/he will either essentialise the performance ('it means in itself') or s/he will process the often uncomfortable experience it offers. Edwards' refusal here to permit an engaging with conventional meanings - as it is experienced by some spectators and some performers - needs to be seen as such: a political intervention into performance. This is dangerous : it still has to 'work' as performance - to dance for us. Edwards' is not afraid to take enormous risks, and his singular challenge in this period of his work comes from his refusal to overdetermine the appeal to the spectator. By withholding a determining 'structure' and making instead a fragile structuring in the instant a matter of performer somatic judgement, he gestures explicitly toward a humanist belief in the performer which we might think to find, though certainly in a less acute exploration, in all performance practice.

Opening the cage door

In Edwards' performance framework what we see is thought as somatic intelligence at work, breaking free from the stranglehold of the Idea. Edwards releases the performer from the pre-encoding of a writerly or directorial logic, enabling them to explore the complex sensory interrelations and muscular options, a complex of 'moves' within the spatio-temporal (but not thematic or hermeneutic) constraints set up in the performance space.

Edwards' refusal to foreclose is vital. He does not start with a text, automatically valorised as an author's work, or with a conceptual project, similarly valorised and

invested in the person (or function) of the metteur en scene . The performer is literally at a loss, and knows / shows it.

His pre-performance work begins with simple instructions (“either this, or this, here or there or over there”) and the performance grows in tune with the discovery performers and Edwards make as this action develops Edwards’ achievement lies in his enabling what can be seen here, the process of discovery, the delicate balance of human strength and fragility , to energise the spectators and compel their gaze.

Body intelligence

Edwards’ initial direction is binary: either stand / or run within the given space, at your own speed and when you determine it. But the multiplication of this direction by the number of performers means that the variables become numerous (infinite). The performers build up a repertoire of either / or options (stand / walk / look up / lie down / voice / look / roll / use water / use wall etc.) from which they constantly and differently select in terms of minute fine judgement. The judgements are not based on thought, but are certainly dependent upon performance somatic intelligence. The capacity of the performers for sensing and acting as part of a group and in a contained space and observed by others is constantly tested by Edwards. “When you determine it”, in these conditions, is again a banal and mysterious matter of fine attention (acute concentration, listening to what is around, sight, starting or stopping large scale - but never minute - movement) and fine judgment. It is a question of what we might call cunning, but also of lucid somatic artistry, always negotiating within and between a complex overlay of physical frames, conceptual frames and energy fields. This technique challenges the supposition that for intelligence to be at work the Idea must constantly precede the act, thereby controlling its materiality. Edwards trains his performers to develop what we can call a somatic intelligence, a thinking body at work (from virkje: ‘pushing against a burden’), alert to the energy fields around and to the learnt intelligence acceded to through the central nervous system.

A performance physics

Edwards works on individual body type, movement type, muscular control, tension-focus, breath-work and voice work to develop intensity of energy focus in each instant. His constant pre-occupation is that the performers abbreviate and intensify each activity. This seems to be in order to ease the performers away from their tendency to slip into the automatism, conventions and myths of both everyday activity and of established performance modes.

The tendency towards actional stereotypes can be actually encouraged and applauded in some kinds of current performance modes. In moving away from them Edwards counters with the quest for a complex energy focus in the moment of action. He concentrates instead on the singularisation of one somatic action from another.

The consequence of this is that as the intensification of energy at a specific point peaks within the continuum of the performance, the singular *unity* of the performer is experienced. The performer is not fragmented.

'Forgotten history'

Through different resonances for different spectators Edwards' work appears able to access the spectator's 'forgotten history', and via many momentary conjunctions in performance to coax it into experiential existence.

On the other hand, the automatism, learned and conventional behaviours seen in much other kinds of performance, whatever the original intention, can seem predominantly to *reassure* the spectator. Edwards would argue that in so doing they release the spectator from a committed personal attention (participation) and an active way of seeing.

Refusing the voluptuous 'quick fix' of certain kinds of performance practice, it is this revitalised and re-energised spectator involvement that his work now engages.