

TIM CHARLES

PLAYS AND PLAYERS

On Tour with Optik

This autumn Optik began a national tour with their new show *Stranded*, their fifth since their formation in 1981. *Stranded* is partly inspired by *The Tempest*, and the text has been provided by Lou Glandfield of IOU. However, Edwards will only use the text as a basis for developing the show. Edwards's work with Optik is the culmination of a mature style that has evolved during his work in performance art over the past 15 years.

Pre-Optik Edwards worked extensively as a director, principally with Ritual Theatre, an experimental group whose performances were based on Grotowski-type improvisation. The development of Optik was foreshadowed in aspects of Ritual's work, notably the use of music to elicit an emotional response. Ritual differed from Optik in that it lacked the visual design and cultural dimension which is central to Optik's work.

As the name suggests, Optik is concerned with the nature of sight and in theatrical terms this means developing a detailed relationship between the actor and the audience. This is achieved by portraying a series of what Edwards calls 'moments of coherence' in which a subtle interplay between image, sound, action, expression and humour combines to liberate the spatial narrative and produced a unique brand of visual and aural theatre. These 'moments' are structured to make the familiar seem strange by defying expectations and posing questions. Heavily influenced by Brecht, Edwards believes that 'the theatre can create the epic from the mundane'.

What is unusual about Optik, is Edwards's use of cinematic techniques to produce images within the dynamics of a dramatic performance. To construct a scene, Edwards begins with the setting, a relationship between the characters with a view to their eventual transformation. The structure operates to a visual intelligence, guided by what Bunuel

called 'the logic of desire'. Music is used cinematically, to develop the narrative, create tension between each moment, and to dissolve one scene into the next which is an unusual technique to use in the theatre.

Initially these 'moments' are structured around crucial props, a la Buster Keaton. However Keaton's reverence for machines sharply contrasts with their presentation in Optik's work. Whereas the former tended to personalise machines, in response to the mechanical optimism of the age, Optik shows the alienating effects of industrialisation, which is the response of a post-nuclear society whose inhabitants haven't been freed from dependence on the machine and have suffered as capitalism has declined.

The use of cultural contrasts is a crucial part of the structure of Optik's work. These provide a setting for the 'moments' to operate. In the first show *One Spectacle* (1981), one such example was the surreal sight of an oriental peasant reading *The Dandy* at the start of the show. Another notable aspect of the first show was the integration and interaction between sight and sound, which was facilitated by minimal dialogue. The prominence of sounds, musical and otherwise suggests that a system of non-verbal communication was being used which filled in the space created by a lack of dialogue and operates to a similar system of logic as syntactically organised speech.

The question arises whether someone who uses cinematic techniques to produce memorable images, wouldn't be better suited to working in films. Edwards thinks not, because by working with a cinematic technique in the theater he is 'getting the best of both works'. The value of preserving images has to be balanced against the importance of working in a live medium. In addition, whereas a camera can guide and distort the focus of an audience by special effects, onstage it is not difficult to trick an audience and direct them to focus on one specific detail when they can see everything. This poses a challenge to the theatre director, whilst giving him a greater degree of freedom to construct the illusion and the artefact of the film director.

Second Spectacle (1982) was the first show to feature specific film references and was,

appropriately, set on a deserted film set. Edwards cites Jean-Luc Godard as a major influence, particularly his use of contrasting images and his absurdist humour. Like Godard, he refuses to employ conventional narrative technique although this is for artistic rather than ideological reasons. Optik's work never amounts to a direct statement; it has a more universal and emotional appeal, pitting Eastern mysticism and stoicism in the shape of Clive Bell's exotic sounding instrumentation against images of the stress of Western Civilisation.

In *Stranded* Edwards plans to introduce tensions between artifice and nature by contrasting the Baroque setting with a desire for nature, *Stranded* has many possibilities. Whilst it could be seen as a model for a contemporary Britain, Edwards is pre-occupied with the fantasy element that people need to add a touch of glamour to their lives. In which case, in the midst of a deep recession there might be a contemporary connection.

Edwards is acutely aware of the limitations of language, which he thinks is too one dimensional. Instead he communicates by creating a unique visual and aural collage of multi-textured images. With *Optik* he has succeeded in dissolving the traditional boundaries between sight and sound and in expressing the inexpressible.