



theatre in wales

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Performance

trace:
Installation Artspace
Debra Savage

Latino America
at Chapter
Aparna Sharma

NoFit State
and New Circus
Jeni Williams

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Uri Katzenstein@trace gallery
(photograph by Phil Babot
courtesy trace)

trace: Installation Artspace

Debra Savage

Away from Cardiff's city centre on a terraced lined street in Adamsdown, the black door of 26 Moria Place is initially unremarkable. Only the small brass plate engraved with the word *trace* provides a clue that there is something unusual about this particular house, a house that is home to a small but internationally renowned performance space.

Since its conception by curator and cohabitee Andre Stitt, *trace: Installation Artspace* has developed a life of its own. *trace's* front room has attracted performance artists from around the world, including names like Jimmie Durham, Eve Dent, Stuart Brisley, Irma Optimist and Valentin Torrens, and as *trace* reaches the end of its fifth season, it has already become a main focus for performance art in Cardiff.

Performance art has always had a considerable presence in Wales. Phil Babot, an artist who has been living in Wales since 1981, believes that Cardiff is 'the strongest centre of performance art outside of London'. The opening of *trace* in 2000 with a performance by Alistair Maclennon coincided with an overall shift in power within the Welsh performance community. The bi-annual Cardiff Art in Time (CAT) Festival was coming to an end, and a number of artist-led initiatives were beginning to spring up across the country. The result of these two simultaneous changes led to the development of what Babot and theatre programmer James Tyson refer to as 'performance hubs', including Ointment in West Wales, Coed Hills in St Hilary, tactileBOSH in Llandaff, and Chapter Arts Centre and *trace* in Cardiff. They have become a network of initiatives that work primarily in conjunction with each other, linked by the formation of Second Wednesday, a forum dedicated to providing a critical discourse for Welsh

Jeffrey Bird, Holy Ghost, 2004 (photograph by Phil Babot, courtesy trace gallery)



performance and live arts. The overall effect is to produce a varied artistic landscape, enhancing the position of performance in Wales. As Stitt explains, 'it is really important for a healthy creative culture to have many different strands'.

trace's own role in this network has mainly been defined through Stitt's own practice. Time spent squatting in London during the 1980s, for example, provoked an interest in the distinction between the private and public, the domestic and artistic. 'Because of how I've always lived,' he tells me, 'art has taken place in a domestic situation.' The decision to establish an artspace in his home was therefore a natural progression of this interest: the front room, intended as a studio, became a temporary, then permanent exhibition space.

Similarly, Stitt's practice as a performance artist and his involvement in a number of peripheral art activities has led to a distancing from the traditional art market. Along with other artist-led initiatives, trace feeds into notions of promoting artists, autonomy and networks, allowing artists to develop away from the pressures of a more consumer-led market.

'Performance art is ephemeral – it is constantly changing and shifting, and that's why dominant culture has a lot of problems with performance art, because it can't be defined and in a sense, whoever is making the piece defines what it is they're making in the time they are making it. That can often be confusing to people who want an outcome or end product,' Stitt says.

In trace, the work produced focuses partly on how it will contribute to a wider dialogue. In general, as performances tend to occur as part of an event or festival, it can be difficult to focus on one particular work, or view it in relation to itself rather than the work by which it is framed. trace, however, highlights the work of one artist, and challenges that artist to experiment with his or her practice. In other words, Stitt asks: 'How would it be if you took this artist and placed them in another context?' and 'How

does what you make and what is left change and transform over two or three weeks, and perhaps become an exhibition?'

The first challenge for the artist is to create a piece of work to take place in a small room under the gaze of an audience. The second challenge comes from Stitt himself, who encourages a durational artist to produce a performance that lasts one hour, for example. This approach, along with the mix of artists who have performed in trace, has resulted in a diverse use of a very ordinary white room. *Fore Mien* transformed the space into a golfing range, with John G. Boehme driving 600 golf balls into an aluminium-clad wall. James Cobb & Bob Dog Catlin's *Our Children* created a live sonic backdrop for a series of manipulated prints depicting images of tattooed children. More recently, the room was split in two to create a tarpaulin swimming pool by the High Heel Sisters, *Art Holes*. The final challenge comes from the requirement that each performance produces an exhibition by leaving behind a residue, or trace.

These notions all feed into the debate surrounding performance and live art, engaging with issues such as how to approach or document the work: 'trace is a way of making exchanges and keeping that dialogue going, that idea of art as meeting, that the meetings continue,' says Stitt. In trace, this can be as practical as a meeting between artist and curator in order to secure a show and discuss the performance space, or between the artist and audience, with the relaxed atmosphere of the pre- and post-performance gathering in the kitchen facilitating conversations. The biggest meeting, of course, takes place between the artist/audience and the work. The open and experimental air of trace enables a head-on interaction with ideas and concepts, both on the night and as the exhibition of trace materials develop over time.

The final stage of meeting takes place on an international level. This has taken the form of projects and exchanges such as the 2003/2004 RHWNT with Le Lieu,



High Heel Sisters, Art Holes, 2005 (photograph by Phil Babot, courtesy trace gallery)

Centre en Art Actuel in Québec, 2004's Dadao Live Art Festival in China and the presentation of a season of Chinese live art later this year, as well as more local collaborations with events such as Chapter Arts Centre's *Experimentica* festivals and 2002's 'Something for the Weekend' at Gregynog, Newtown. This is taken further by research, publications and trace: annex, an occasional series of events that takes place outside of trace's usual programme. As James Tyson says, this hive of activity has earned trace the reputation of being 'a sharp reflection on the international world of performance art' and is 'unique and to be much valued in both gallery and performance situations'.

Over the next five years, trace will no doubt change and develop. The directions it will take are unclear, but it will maintain its sense of experimentation and play a part

in developing a performance dialogue within Wales and on the international circuit, a dialogue which is being written into the very fabric of the house. According to Stitt, 'there are layers of traces behind the paint, there's drawings and text on the wall, the floors have been painted and painted so you get a scabby floor with all this residue underneath it.' In other words, trace will continue to be a living space and document of all the transitions that have occurred within its walls.

trace will be ending its fifth season with an installation evening featuring Cosey Fanni Tutti on 28th May. For more information visit www.tracegallery.org

Debra Savage is a freelance journalist based in Cardiff.

Latino America

Aparna Sharma

Aparna Sharma reflects on her participation in a three-week workshop earlier this year run by Argentinean choreographer, Andrea Servera, at Chapter Arts Centre as part of their Latino America season.

On a hazy winter morning, amidst the clutter of a cosy café, Andrea and I sit to talk. Far away from the textures and smells of habitats familiar to us, we grapple with the weather. And also, in a sense, with the environment we are in. Andrea can barely speak English. I cannot speak any Spanish. A translator sits between us, and we soon realise words are failing us (and the translator too). But our conversation is resilient: this is how it has evolved during the course of the three weeks that we spent working together. Dance and movement were the vocabulary for me and the dozen other artists who attended a residency led by Argentinian dancer and choreographer, Andrea Servera, at Cardiff's Chapter Arts Centre, which is one of those unusual spaces where cultural interface is not prefixed with the often celebratory and somewhat callous term 'multi-' or 'cross-'. Instead it is the 'inter-' marking cultural contact that is sought here. The three-week-long residency was part of Chapter's *Latino America* season of art and performance from Latin America, featuring programmes such as our workshops with Andrea, which explored the dynamics and possibilities of cross-cultural interaction.

My work with Andrea led me through moments of appreciation, tension and extension. We work with different media which are crucial to our artistic expression. Besides contemporary dance, Andrea choreographs for fashion and film in Argentina (her most recent film assignment

was *The Motorcycle Diaries*). She has travelled widely, and has studied and danced in varying idioms such as hip hop and tango. Though contemporary dance is her preferred artistic vocabulary, she also incorporates various textual influences – literature, poetry, music and theatre – in order to extend the boundaries of her work. Aside from the dynamics of movement, she is deeply engaged with improvisation and composition. Commanding a sinuous ease with the body, Andrea seeks any interaction that involves what she calls the 'play of difference'. So her workshop invited a varied group of artists who work in dance, performance, music and, in my case, film.

Influenced as I am by the secular ancient Indian discourses of spiritualism and yoga, the medium of film has been for me the most intense source for meditative introversion, which I have translated into experimental films and video work. It was my current academic focus on cross-cultural encounters and the dynamics of movement within the moving image that initially took me to Andrea's workshop, though I have to confess that, besides some occasional and simple lessons in classical Indian dance while at school in India, I have never really felt equipped or sought expression in this medium. At the workshop my participation was expressed through my use of a video camera.

It was the difference itself between the different media in which we work that sparked a dialogue between Andrea and me, an engagement that demanded of us an alertness towards our aesthetic inclinations, and that also resulted in an interaction marked by constant interrogation. It involved negotiating the specificities of our media to explore the possibilities arising in our contact. Andrea tells me now she was aware of our differences and so she did not compel me to participate in any of her exercises. But I couldn't help being drawn in.

Camera: corporeal and beyond...

Bodywork with Andrea is as intense as it is engaging. With her, dance is not so much



*All photographs by Diego Vidart
(courtesy Chapter Arts Centre)*

about learning a style or method. It flows from and is the culmination of honing one's awareness of the body, the emotions, and of one's relationship with one's environment and fellow dancers. The breath is central to the whole process, and becomes analogous with body movement. Being and meditating with the breath lent refinement to our movements; when breath and movement were combined, they created a distinct dance vocabulary.

The work was rigorous and not easy to understand in the first instance, and I was immediately confronted with the problem of how I would translate my body work for the camera. At first I played as an observer, studying formations and movements. But in some measure I was uneasy about being an outsider: I wasn't just content to look on. In the second week of the workshop, seduced by the ease and rhythms of the environment, which were enhanced by the variety of music that Andrea had brought with her, I started to dance among the group with the camera in my hands.

Like most independent filmmakers, I have appreciated the hand-held camera for its closeness to the body. At the same time, I have repeatedly pondered over whether aesthetic possibilities can be extended beyond the hand-held camera being nothing more than 'shaky', contrasting diametrically with camera movements realized with sophisticated gear such as the track or the crane. But my camera

movements evolved along with the dance work, emulating its pace and poise. The camera started to assume a kind of corporeal dimension: it became more than an eye simply looking at an object. Its corporeality was, however, complex: it was no mere extension of my body, nor a response to movements between dancers. The camera was intimate with the body, yet distinct from it.

Together, Andrea and I discovered how much we liked the moments when the camera felt increasingly hypnotized in the play of movements. In such instances the image was disturbing: it no longer offered a smooth, accessible or sustained perspective. It would get close, then distant; rotate along its axis, move erratically and then steadily – as if with a will of its own. It became fluid, uncontained as it was in any fixed role or function.

While I was dancing, there were occasions when I had to hand the camera to a fellow dancer. What was remarkable was that there was no jarring of the image as the camera changed hands: its rhythm and sense of composition were maintained. This was crucial, given that some of my dance partners had never held a video camera before (and were a bit perplexed and hesitant about confronting it). The implication of our bodies in a common vocabulary of movement seemed to make the camera transcend the differences between us.

However, the imagery generated did not lend itself to a smooth integration into the performance Andrea was developing. This piece was a medley of movements, each distinct in its texture and underlying emotion. It traversed assorted arcs, and quite indiscernibly raised the notion of the woman as a subject in a variegated manner. Without any singular narrative, it served as a space where the artists shared and combined the material developed amongst them. The camera work contrasted sharply in feeling from the performance, and though derived from the movements incorporated within the piece, it was not offering a complement to it. It was decided that I would present clips from my work at

the end of the performance, which would provide the audience with a sense of the workshop and the possibilities I had encountered. The two, the performance and the video work, would stand apart and yet be implicated in each other.

The woman subject accessed in movement

For Andrea, it is the exploration of a 'within' that is inspirational and the source of creativity for her. This exploration serves as the means for converting the commonplace into a unique form of dance in which gesture and poise are key.

In her compositions, Andrea does not turn to words or text out of habit or practice. In fact, words, according to her, can sometimes be an impediment to the semantic construction of a piece, 'limiting' the work into a fixed matrix of meaning and context, she says as her hands break crusty bread while we sip coffee together. Andrea is subtle in her suggestions. For her the performance is not a presentation; it is more a conversation with the audience in which neither party has any fixed role or responsibility. 'The process of art is more complex than any identification can allow,'

she adds with her characteristic shrug. It seems that the pleasure for Andrea is in engaging without naming; the performance is like a gust of wind, and the dust caught up and dispersed on the breeze scatters itself over artist and audience alike.

Some sequences in the performance echoed familiar and on occasions clichéd encounters and sensations, while others spilled over with a freshness and crispness akin to abstraction, making the entire piece gripping, yet understated and poetic in nuance and execution. Andrea exploited moments of cultural specificity and difference through the performance – when the performers spoke in their native languages (including Spanish, Polish, Italian), for example, or through costume, which was most obvious in my brief appearance, when, wearing the saree, I danced among the group with the camera.

However, the insertion of the local, here the Argentinean setting, was expanded so that the ironies and humour of cultural disparity that dotted the performance became submerged. Andrea could have limited herself to particular instances of the local, like the card game of *Chancho*, or particular musical scores that pulsed with



characteristic Latin American rhythms. These instances would have served on their own to lend the necessary flavour less elaborately. Given Andrea's preference for form and experience over immediacy and identification, this was an aspect that did not make the performance any the poorer, but it did collide with it.

The opening of the performance remained perhaps the most powerful enactment of the Third World female subject's complex identity, when the protagonist rose from an innocuous heap of earth at the corner of the performance space and moved among the other performers in the space seeking water. The closing of the piece was calculatedly yet poetically tied to this opening, when the dancers dropped glass cups that smashed on the floor. Emerging from moments of action on a grand scale, this action came across as small yet attentive. Its impact was also heightened by the accompanying music, which indicated a colossal scale and sense. Evocatively, the woman subject we encountered at the beginning of the piece was re-inscribed here, paralleling in a sense the fierceness of the transgressive Hindu goddess Kali.

At times the woman subject was confrontational, addressing the audience directly. Her voice and expression were interrogatory. Then she sang aloud in a primal tone that was at once demanding and seductive. The performance was also smattered with occasions when men and women slipped into bodily attraction, enacting flirtations, equations and seeking romances. And then there were rare moments when the woman with an air of conscious carelessness turned her back to the audience, unrelenting and articulate. She emerged as determined but undefined, unassumingly weaving newer narratives. The multiple modes of dance the performance was composed of – the communal and merry, the acrobatic and the abstract – testified to this development.

The making of meaning

The Third World artist has been appreciated in the First World, and on occasion literally reified, for articulating the displaced subject

of history and pursuing political struggle. Indeed, the urgency that underpins this occupation cannot be emphasized. Yet radicalism, as Andrea's work indicates both in its content and form, is not the hallmark or sole definition of the Third World artist. The complexity of the Third World subject, which comprises the rich and multiple textures of socio-economic and cultural reality are more intriguing and informative than a vision that isolates struggle and glorifies instances of militancy. As Andrea says to me: 'There's lots more than Che Guevara and poverty in Latin America. The picture there is a far more complex, multi-layered and sophisticated than that image.'

In retrospect, working with Andrea seems to be less about dance or choreography and more about accessing a space of difference and distinction – the 'inter' between subjectivities and cultures.

Andrea's work uses markers of culture – language, dress and modes of performance – but situates them in the context of the themes and thoughts the work evokes, and equally in terms of the engagements that arise between artists. As a result, cultural specificity is not restricted to an unquestioning employment of quantifiable markers held in a tight template devoid of re-appropriation, critique or contradiction.

Peppered as Andrea's work is with humour and pleasure as well as frustration and melancholy, it offers the artists and performers an understanding of culture as a multi-faceted, living and breathing notion. Andrea herself asserts that the 'involvement of the self' is principal in the making of meaning.

To me, the benefit of our interaction is manifested more in my video compositions than in the performance. I shall wait to dance again wearing my Kanjivaram silk saree, with my camera near to my body. Pointing outwards, yet looking inwards...

Aparna Sharma, an independent filmmaker from New Delhi, is studying for a PhD at the Film Academy, University of Glamorgan.

‘Circus with Heart’: New Circus and NoFit State

Jeni Williams

*Theatre is . . . like bread . . . like a necessity.
Theatre is a form of religion. It is fun.*

– Peter Schumann, founder of Bread and Puppet Theatre, 1968¹

Last summer I went with a friend and her son to Pembroke Dock to see NoFit State’s latest show, *ImMortal*. It had been touring Britain to the kind of ecstatic reviews that script every company’s fantasies, and we were excited. The silver big top couldn’t be missed: erected just outside the town, it glittered like a fantastic spaceship in the late August sun. But inside was a circus show that was as extraordinary as that exterior: a promenade show with acrobats and fools performing around and amongst us, with live music, with hula-hoop dancers, trapeze artists, with aerialists on rope and tissue tumbling above our heads. All three of us were entranced. It was no surprise when *ImMortal* was awarded the (increasingly prestigious) Theatre-in-Wales Award for the Best English-Language Production of 2004.

Circus as Theatre

NoFit State is not a theatre company of course, but the categories of theatre and circus are hardly clear-cut, with physical theatre and dance performance as the most obvious cross-overs. The company doesn’t see such categories as relevant, and the fact that *ImMortal* was directed by ELAN’s Firenza Guidi and choreographed by dance artist and choreographer Jem Treays is indicative of its performance base. Indeed, NoFit State have always worked with other kinds of performers. In 1995 they worked with Music Theatre Wales, Splott State Circus, Rubicon Dance and Circus Space to produce *Autogeddon*, a multi-level, multi-stage show in a warehouse on Cardiff’s Dumballs Road. Based on

Heathcote Williams’s anti-car poem, the show featured car-based sculpture and percussion played on car parts. It closed with fireworks erupting over two cars as they burst into flames in a head-to-head crash. Far, far closer to Brith Gof than Billy Smart! A further measure of the links between NoFit State and the rest of the performance community in Wales is that one of their founder members, Richie Turner, moved on to work with the Welsh College of Music and Drama, became a Director of CADMAD (Cardiff multicultural arts organisation), and is now the Wales Development Officer for NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts).

I spoke to Ali Williams, a founder member of NoFit State in 1987 and now Chair of their board. She prefers to describe



All images courtesy NoFit State

NoFit State as an 'ensemble-based collective' that produces 'mixed-media circus theatre spectaculars', and she relates their practice to the similarly multidisciplinary experimental companies that exploded into Wales in the 1980s: Brith Gof (1981), the Magdalena project (1986), Volcano and Green Ginger (1987), Music Theatre Wales (1988), Earthfall and ELAN (1989). In the midst of this ferment the Aberystwyth Centre for Performance Research was established in 1988. Seeing the lack of a Welsh circus tradition as providing freedom to experiment, Williams says that it's no accident that no English and no Scottish companies are doing their kind of work.

The 1980s were not just a time of radical formal experiment but also of shifting relations between theatre and audience. Welsh companies like Spectacle (community theatre) or Small World (Theatre for Development) were set up as early as 1979, and Theatr Powys even earlier. It's between these two poles of radical and community-based theatre that NoFit State's theatrical work is best seen.

Williams points out that where traditional circus was seen as autonomous commercial enterprises which required no public funding, NoFit State is a registered charity with extensive outreach educational and community learning schemes that enable those with no circus connections to enter one of the two main circus training schools in Britain: Bristol's Circomedia and London's Circus Space. Eight of the *ImMortal* performers have come through their community workshop; one individual who started with NoFit State at the age of fourteen is now professional. The company receives Local Authority support from Rhondda Cynon Taff and funding towards touring from the Arts Council of Wales and the Arts Council of England. The lion's share of their support comes from ACW, who helped them acquire the silver spaceship, and who have funded training and apprenticeship schemes. Their first Welsh-language circus tour takes place this autumn.



It is this interrelation of experimental and community theatre that I find fascinating in NoFit State's work. They describe themselves as 'circus with heart', and they succeed in combining cutting edge theatre, video, dance, music and interactive technologies with community group involvement. Ali Weaver, the poised Hula dancer and aerialist from Australia who was one of the stars of the show, has done circus work with companies all over the world – including iconoclastic Spanish company La Fura del Baus – and she said that she had never worked in a company like this. For NoFit State is no 'ordinary' New Circus either...

New Circus

New Circus is popularly thought of as 'circus' without animals – a homogenising simplification which obscures the huge

range of different activities. Rather than a utilitarian response to growing concerns for animal welfare, the absence of animals is best seen as marking a shift in the meaning of the circus. There have always been tumblers and clowns, but the classical circus as a distinct form was the creation of an eighteenth-century British cavalryman, Philip Astley, who supplemented his equestrian displays with acrobats and Elizabethan fools. Classical circus dramatises an Enlightenment desire to control the physical world, the human body and the animal world, a control reinforced through the autocratic ringmaster and the parodic antics of the irrational clown. In New Circus the clown is more of a character and less of an archetype, and the master has disappeared, along with the trained horses and 'wild beasts'. With the loss of that stabilising masculine centre, New Circus reflects the dislocated vision of the contemporary world, its attention shifting away from control over the natural world to questions about the limits and possibilities of the human.

Developments in circus clearly reflect what has happened and is happening in theatre. The bourgeois text-based drama and the proscenium arch theatre associated with it are as much eighteenth-century constructions as is the classical circus. This kind of theatre is squeezed on two sides: on the one hand by the mass attractions of the long-running spectacular musical which dazzles its admiring spectators, and, on the other, the desire for engagement that produces the unique moments of site-specific work or the intense intimacies of small-scale physical performance. As the brief overview that follows will show, new forms of circus seem to fall into one or the other of these categories: disengaged spectacle or intimate experience.

For a long time the company that seemed to define New Circus was Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil, started by Guy Laliberét in 1984. Like much of the radical performance of the time they were influenced by the Situationist

rhetoric of Guy Dubord and the practical example of Peter Shumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, which had electrified Paris at the height of the 1968 student rebellions. Shumann claimed theatre is 'a necessity' like bread – or religion – and he has kept to a ritualistic 'poor' theatre. But, like the former 'pro-Situationists' who are now advertising executives, or the industrialists who exploit the techniques of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to increase market domination, Cirque du Soleil seem to have become the very kind of circus to which they were once opposed. As their shows become ever larger and their sets ever more extravagant, the company becomes ever more corporate. It has even – with 'spectacular' irony – established a base in Las Vegas. Pierrot Bidon, who founded Soleil's best-known rivals, the post-punk French troupe, Archaos, cuttingly dismissed Cirque du Soleil as 'the McDonald's of circuses'.² Archaos thrilled their audiences with danger and repressed violence: in their most infamous act, performers juggled with moving chainsaws (it did end in tears.) Despite their differences, the companies share an emphasis on control, spectacle and skill; neither aims at intimacy. Other strands of New Circus do, however: the smaller-scale French Cirque Plume (set up by puppeteering jazz musicians in 1984) emphasises humour and connection, as does Cirque Éloize, the Canadian company (established 1994) which played the opening season at the Wales Millennium Centre to general acclaim. These shows seem closer to the idealistic roots of 1980s radicalism. In a recent interview, Cirque Plume's founder, Bernard Kudluk, testifies to the ongoing influence of Dubord and Bread and Puppets. He sees New Circus as reaching out to new audiences, providing 'a bridge between live shows and the people who never go to them'.³

What, if any, is NoFit State's place in the New Circus frame? As they themselves point out, there may be other British New

Circuses (Bristol's Dark Horse, London's Mamaloucas), but no one is doing the same kind of work. They seem more grounded than Cirque Plume, more intimate than Cirque Éloïze. Their speciality, as in *ImMortal*, is the promenade show in which the audience is brushed by performers swarming up ropes, where the trapeze artist's breathing is audible as she skims over their heads. Their shows require not only performance skills but intricate choreography to work with and through the crowds: there can be no safety nets when an aerial dance takes place over their heads. When Toby Philpott wrote about the 1995 Autogeddon show in the circus magazine *Kaskade*, he highlighted the evolution of this particular strength and related it to a passionate involvement with the issues: 'The show expanded the [poem's] themes, employing video, slides, circus skills, rapping, dance and humour, while keeping the audience alertly scanning the space, editing their own experience, a bewildering sensation like being at a festival. Attention might be drawn to specific areas by sound and light, but there was always a feeling that you might be missing something elsewhere.'⁴

***ImMortal*: the show**

When I spoke to Firenza Guidi about directing *ImMortal*, she was very clear about what she was attempting to do. She believes that New Circus is no different from classical circus in its view of the body as a machine: 'Lots of the performers had fantastic skills [but there was] a tendency to focus on a single skill. That was what we started working on.' She wanted to bring out an emotional aspect to the performance with everyone doing everything, seeking 'moments of total involvement, transgressing all categories. Men climbing ropes in high heels for example...'

Such transgression is familiar to anyone who knows Guidi's work, which frequently returns to and reworks earlier motifs, such

as the archetypal figures of the bride, the mother, the lovers, or the archetypal community expressed in choral singing. Guidi always draws on a substantial key text: for the National Youth Theatre, for example, it was Goethe's *Faust*; for this show it was José Saramago's allegorical *The Cave*, which won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature. The fact that *The Cave* is deeply influenced by Plato's 'noble lie' goes some way towards explaining *ImMortal*'s subtitle: *Coming Out Alive*. It would be difficult to get much further from mechanical bodies.

This emphasis on sensuous pleasure is as suspect in radical theatre as it is in circus. Many of the better known radical groups and performers challenge audience identification and/or pleasure as part of their attack on the traditional forms of theatre or dance they seek to subvert, fragmenting the narrative line to disrupt links between audience and performers. But NoFit State bring a narrative line into a traditionally spectacular and fragmented form... and they unashamedly seek audience pleasure.

In *ImMortal* the total engagement of each individual created a sense of growing, infectious delight. It was a show of extraordinary and surprising beauty: as a bride progressively unravelled her twenty-foot skirt, her vulnerable legs were exposed, hanging within skeletal hoops; a kilted man somersaulted with pantomime embarrassment above our heads, repeatedly tucking his skirts up; demonic black-coated angels twisted and coiled on swathes of tissue; and two clothed lovers slid over each other's bodies, making love on a swing. But the success of the show rested on the rhythm and integration of those moments: balancing individual act against ensemble work, spiralling figures suspended high up on ropes were set against a detached moment when (for example) three insouciant women stood on a small stage, drenched in purple light, casually drinking glasses of water while spinning fluorescent hula hoops.

This was very much an ensemble piece that gained its overall impact through the interrelation of its various elements. Saramago's narrative seemed valuable for the performers, who needed a sense of how the varied elements could be integrated into a whole. For the audience, however, the narrative was less essential and the performance was like a haunting, inexplicable dream. We recognised the archetypes, we saw love, joy, anger, sexual delight – all this drew us emotionally to the kaleidoscopic performance before us. This emotional bond was what mattered, not the narrative in its detail. Coming out alive – as necessary as bread. This is where NoFit State's circus theatre excels, leaving its spectators with a sense of elation and beauty at the end: for a show that espoused a philosophy of *carpe diem* there could not be any better.

Jeni Williams lectures at Trinity College, Carmarthen.

Notes

¹www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/papers/Schumann.html (18/3/05);

²Brian D. Johnson: 'Cirque Du Success: The Montreal circus has reached the top with a mix of ethereal athletics and business savvy,' *Maclean's*, 07-27-1998; www.cc.utah.edu/~gem16460/cirquedusoleil/success.html (19/3/05);

³Stéphane Besson, Interview with Bernard Kudluk, *Revue Théâtre Universitaire* (Jan 1999);

www.cirqueplume.com/plic_ploc/indexb.htm (18/3/05);

⁴'Autogeddon: The Final Reckoning', *Kaskade* 16: 1 (Oct-Nov 1995); <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/toby.p/Autogeddon.htm> (17/3/05).

NoFit State are touring Wales in May and June: see www.nofitstate.com for full details.

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