

Our Kind of Homecoming

‘The NRLA is my holiday, my community, my family, and just as the Christians go home for Christmas, artists go home for the NRLA. It is my homecoming, where it feels unnecessary to explain the core of my passions, because everyone there feels the same.’

(Nic Green, NRLA artist, CTP graduate)

Without the National Review of Live Art, without Nikki Milican, the BA in Contemporary Performance Practice (CPP) at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Conservatoire) would look very different, in fact it may not exist at all.

Arriving in Glasgow in 1995, I believed that the training offered to the students at the RSAMD was largely about classically based acting. Notwithstanding the successful graduates in this field, I felt as a newly appointed academic that the RSAMD needed to respond to our changing culture. Glasgow in the mid-nineties seemed to me, an incomer, to be a vibrant city, culturally diverse, still feeling the after-glow of its year as European Capital of Culture in 1990. The CCA was programming performance in its post-Third Eye, pre-lottery funded refurbishment days, (another crucial Milican connection) Michael Boyd was packing the Tron with his adaptation of Janice Galloway’s ‘The Trick is to Keep Breathing’, ‘New Moves Across Europe’ inhabited Tramway and other venues, and in 1996 the then biennial National Review of Live Art invaded The Arches. I challenged my conservatoire colleagues to consider not just the ‘training of actors’ but the ‘education of artists’ and the result was the BA Contemporary Theatre Practice. Nikki Milican, significantly, was the first ever external examiner.

Ever since the beginning of the CPP course in 1998, I have insisted that the students are ‘off timetable’ for 5 days in order to attend the by then annual NRLA. Where else could my staff, my students and I see in excess of 70 artists programmed in one place over 5 days? What a feast of performance, installation, video screenings, talks and debates, what diversity, what teaching materials! Engaging in radical performance pedagogy in a conservatoire context felt challenging at best, subversive at worst and our annual NRLA enabled us to feel, just for a while, that we weren’t the ‘crazy’, ‘whacky’ ones, we were standing on the shoulders of performance art giants trying to see further. As graduate Nic Green said,

‘NRLA is a kind of yearly landmark, like Christmas or Ramadan, except not religious. Ritualistic, but not religious. Since my graduation I have continued this annual festivity. Not being religious myself, I feel entitled to my special festival, just as the Pagans, the Christians the Jews and Muslims are entitled to theirs.’

I have witnessed countless students having their ‘initiation’ into this world, watched the way the work challenges, provokes, moves and changes their lives irrevocably...Kamal performing with Raimund Hoghe, Sayjay, Bill, Mark and Kate mechanically manipulated by Stellarc, Naomi stroking Ron Athey’s supine body, Ross taking it in the arse from Violetta... and more, so many more.

Since its first graduating students in 2002, 12 CTP graduates have been selected to present work at the National Review of Live Art. Three graduate artists have been selected as some of the most promising young artists and have been commissioned as ‘One Year On...’ artists and two have received subsequent commissions. These artists’ lives have been changed by the NRLA.

For the rest of us, we continue to cherish our annual homecoming, a homecoming that unites the past and the present. It’s amazing to feel like you’re coming home with old friends, and in your own city as well.

Deborah Richardson-Webb

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