

## Ian Smith MC

As far as early days go ... someone, somewhere, owns a photograph of Nikki Milican, Paul Burwell, Neil Butler and myself squashed on top of a hotel wardrobe (possibly in Nottingham). And nobody knows why...

I became involved in the whole NRLA shebang as the Zap Club MC in the mid-'80s when initial collaborations were made, and popped into the role of MC sometime during the '90s. I honestly don't know how many I've done.

But here are my longstanding rules:

**Rule number one:** I must swan about with an air of approachable dignity and a veneer of assumed confidence. This allows people to assume that perhaps they know me, whilst actually they are wondering 'Who the hell is that guy?'

**Rule number two:** At all times maintain an aura of understanding and impartiality – like a butler who may have deep and arcane knowledge of the wine cellar but who would consider it inappropriate to comment on a customer's preferences.  
It's a pose.

I know little or nothing about anyone on the bill bar the 'old lags' that I may have shared some early days with. Being pre-occupied myself with 'face to face public theatre' I do not inhabit the 'live art' world on a daily or even weekly basis; know little about the current circuit or the current hit parade.

No, I simply study the programme diligently in the days preceding the festival; ascertain who has the live cobra, who needs the 17 chandeliers, and which are the blood groups of those in peril.

**Third and final rule:** I studiously ignore differentiations between newcomers, students, veterans, dames, kings, queens or jokers. Everyone has something to say.

I have seen everything from astonishing brilliance to astonishing arrogance presented by senior and junior artists alike. The battle-scarred veterans have stories to tell and attitudes to explore that the innocent could not (and should not) pretend to approach. But by the same token, fresh eyes see the present human condition in a way that cannot be glimpsed through the cataracts of hard-won experience.

Each informs the other. And it's a wonderful thing to behold from the touchlines.  
(Stepping over the touchlines is also a delight. I have had the honour of presenting several of my own pieces over the years, installations and lectures, which have occasionally given rise to the awkward diplomacy of introducing myself).

To the uninitiated I always explain the NRLA as 'a huge swimming pool of stuff that you just have to dive into'. It's invigorating, refreshing, and very good for the soul. Just get soaked. Remember, the rest of the year we bathe alone.

However, anecdotally, I am duty bound to remain impartial and aloof regarding the work presented over the years. Mind you, the young women who built a wall out of bricks of fat over about twelve hours and then ended it by solemnly dedicating it to 'the Women of Iraq' genuinely delighted me for all sorts of reasons that I just don't have the space to explain. (Oh, and I quite liked having my hands gently washed with perfumed soap made from a guy's guts. What other job has perks like that?)