

Stephen Taylor Woodrow – Station House Opera

In 1985 SHO was commissioned by NRLA to produce a new piece **A Split Second Of Paradise**. We had previous experience of the Midland Group, Jeremy Peyton-Jones having programmed **Ultramundane** there in 1983. This was our first experience of Nikki's inimitable style: intense and supportive, clearly intent on bringing together something special.

The piece was a radical development of an idea we'd had about costume for a previous show, where performers wore breezeblocks gathered about them, slowly moving them one by one. For Split Second we had 400 blocks, which seemed an enormous amount. The simple moving of blocks across the floor became an exercise in transformation, in which block structures constantly mutated from one form into another as the apparent needs and desires of the performers dictated. The constant effort required to achieve action and change seemed a fair echo of real life.

For the six performers, coming to grips with moving two tons of concrete blocks quickly, fluidly and elegantly over and over again in rehearsal was a daunting mental and physical challenge. We had just about broken the back of it by the time we came to Nottingham and had to do the get-in – where we were confronted with a performance space at the very top of the building. Even though a team of volunteers helped us chain them up the stairs, it seemed to take hours. Rehearsing after that pretty much killed us. In the future we resolved to do our planning with little model blocks, not at full scale.

The piece itself (in its first manifestation) resolved itself at Nottingham. Walls became furniture became statuary became paving became towers became dresses became a field of grass in a choreographed ballet of physical matter. At the end a performer sitting on a chair was buried by a bigger chair built on top, which in turn was submerged by a throne built by a third performer on top. The winning builder then kicked a row of breezeblock dominoes that crossed the stage and went down the stairs, showing the audience the way out.

After Nottingham the piece was refined further, and was in Venice in 1986 during the biennale. After this it became a very successful piece in its own right, as well as instigating a long history of breezeblock pieces that grew in scale, some of which reached 12m high and weighed 40 tons, and were seen in Europe, the USA, Australia and Japan. In Nottingham we went through a pain barrier to reach a place where we found throwing concrete blocks at each other was no longer mad and stupid, but exhilarating.