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Breaking new ground

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[0 comments](#)

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Celebrating 30 years of cutting edge work at the National Review of Live Art.

It wasn't made to last. Back in the early days of the NRLA there was a "live fast, die young" energy to the work: it instinctively resisted the (now commonplace) process of photographic documentation. You could shrug and remind today's assiduous archive-makers that the technology wasn't so compact or as sophisticated in the 1980s, but actually the artists who gathered together at Nottingham's Midland Group were focused on immediacy, and the "here and now" is always transient.

By the time the NRLA was marking its 10th anniversary, Nikki Milican had embraced what would become her future path as its curator-director, and brought this showcase to Glasgow when she moved into programming at the Third Eye Centre (now the CCA). Was it a sign of those 1990 times, with Glasgow basking in the kudos of being European City of Culture and every iota of that talismanic status destined to be captured on video or in print for posterity? Was it because academics were increasingly building careers – and degree modules – on the back of live art, analysing the performances and methodology of practitioners who didn't recognise the jargon dissecting them? Whatever the reasons, documentation was edging into the live art frame.

Geraldine Pilgrim, a member of the influential (and by then defunct) visual theatre group, Hesitate And Demonstrate, would have shown the audience at her 1990 talk some footage of their work, but the only reel of Super 8 film that had been found in someone's shed was of a night-time event. A few flaming torches punctuated the minutes of grainy darkness. It seemed to sum up an era, a mindset, that was history even if we couldn't see it in action. Everyone, including Pilgrim, laughed. Somewhere, in the NRLA archive that is now housed at the University of Bristol, there might be footage of that moment.

Pilgrim herself, now continuing a solo career, has been a vital, creative presence in several NRLA's since then. She's back again this year, with a performance/installation called Not Waving But Drowning. Everyone who's scheduled to take part in NRLA 2010 has been in the lists before – a masterstroke of planning on Milican's part, and a fabulous way of greeting the 30th anniversary of the National Review. There's a special edition catalogue, too, with essays and anecdotal contributions from the genuinely great and the universally acclaimed good who don't just represent the thrust of times past but encompass the forward-thinking provocations that characterise new work at home and abroad.

It's these artists, whether established or emerging, that have compelled Milican to keep faith with the NRLA even when times, and funders, seemed unsupportive. She can still recall, almost physically experience, the pole-axing shock of the Midland Group's demise. She'll tell you, "It was devastating. We had been considered a centre of excellence by the Arts Council of Great Britain. And I believe we did really good work at Midland. I felt the NRLA, especially, was establishing itself as something very sound, something that had a real future. But we weren't given enough money for excellence to survive."

NRLA might have ended then, in 1986. No-one would have blamed the now unemployed Milican. Instead she fixed for the Riverside in London to stage a National Review in 1987 while she adjusted to living in Glasgow and working at Third Eye. She'll laugh at the memory of her "take me, take my festival" conditional acceptance of her job there, and how the advance planning for 1990 seemed to promise windfall budgets for NRLA initiatives and the associated programme of new dance she had in mind. Unfortunately, Milican and the NRLA were homeless again not long after that bravura 10th anniversary.

Milican turned independent, set up her own company and fielded not just the NRLA – relocating it, as necessary, to London's ICA then back to Glasgow into the Arches and subsequently Tramway – but the New Moves International season of radical dance-works that were subverting boundaries between different genres and experimenting with hybrid media. The two festivals now run under the New Territories banner.

Last year, she was awarded an OBE for her services to performance art. Typically, she declared the honour was really in recognition of the artists who made the work. Without her belief in the integrity of their work, however, a good many of the most inspirational artists would never have found a platform in this country.

In previous years, their countries of origin featured in the brochure. Poland, Singapore, India, Croatia, Mexico, Thailand and Australia are some of the places Milican has reached out to. This year, participants are alphabetically ordered and nominally stateless. For the locals – and there is a healthy contingent of Scottish and UK talent – this blanks out the possibility that ticket-holders might choose international players as a more exotic option.

Next year there won't be an NRLA. Milican isn't pulling the plug. "I'm not saying the programme will be excluding any of the elements we've built up. It's time to evolve. This is the history of National Review. Always being alive to change – initiating it, but never trailing behind. It's why we can have this 30th anniversary edition and look back – but forward as well."

New Territories 10 runs from March 2-21. NRLA 30 takes place at various venues from March 17-21. Visit www.newmoves.co.uk.

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