

## Rob La Frenais Memories of the English Dream (Midlands Version)

These are a few musings on Performance Magazine No 44/45, published in winter 1986, which I edited and which contains a review of the National Review of Live Art for that year. Holding the magazine, now a collectors item, in my hand, looking at the up-and -coming Annie Griffin jumping out of the cover, flanked by Ralf Ralf and Marty St James and Anne Wilson, staring at it as if it might transmit some form of forbidden knowledge, this particular issue manages to convey a queasy sense of time-travel through its anachronism. (To test this theory I recently handed it unannounced to some 23 year old artists, who were quite shocked that it was published in the year of their birth.)

Issue 44/45 is interesting in several respects. Priced at £2.25, 6 dollars and, giving the game away, 10 Deutschmarks, it manages to hold its own in production values, albeit with a colour cover and black and white interior, because a series of graphic designers Caroline Grimshaw, Robert Carter, Jerry Arron, normally working in commercial consumer publishing had started to use it as their playground, albeit with a riot of typefaces and odd use of picture inserts, one of which makes me look as if I, as editor, had undergone a sex change and had become Annie Griffin for the duration. Reading it today has a startling effect on the memory, like those experiments on geriatric patients where enclosing them in an environment exclusively decorated and with aural and visual media from 20 years earlier puts a spring in the step and a gleam in the eye...

Memory studies is one of the interesting new cross-disciplinary academic areas to have recently crossed over the horizon. I am increasingly being asked to reflect on my own memory of many performances made before the age of instant documentation on the internet. The human software is increasingly under questions for its efficacy to undertake this task. For example, I was recently asked to reminisce about a performance, Pain-Tings by Anne Bean at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle in 1987 in which I took part as a live reviewer instantaneously opinionating on a manual typewriter about the work as it was created. A sort of pre-computer blogging experience, there is no actual record of the work, although the 'pain- tings' still survive. A while back, as a curator, I was invited to view an exact replica of a site-specific work I had curated 19 years previously. (Blood Hyphen, at Woodbridge Chapel by the late Helen Chadwick in Edge 88, then at the Barbican). I was amazed at how similar it was.

These impressions are increasingly relative. As editor of Performance Magazine from 1979-87 I attended many National Reviews of Live Art including the original Performance Art Platforms at the Midland Group in Nottingham, then later at Riverside Studios in London and commissioned reviews and in some cases wrote them. This double identity leads to some confusions and I can

think of many cases where I was challenged to justify an opinion which I had not written personally but had allowed to go through the editing process.

(Of course, Performance Magazine was famously culpable in this, allowing some reviewers to adopt pseudonyms where a conflict of interest was an issue. The glamorous Julia Orkney was the secret identity of both the writer Chrissie Iles, now senior curator at the Whitney, New York, and the late Steve Rogers, writer and editor)

A contemporary example of this caused me stare at issue 44/45 once more and refer to 'The English Dream (Midlands Version) a back-to-back review of the 1986 National Review of Live Art written by myself and Steve Rogers. I would like to tell Jonathan from Ralf Ralf (whom I re-met recently at a christening party) that it was NOT I who wrote, 23 years ago, "I am worried that unless their undoubted skills can be harnessed to some richer material they may get no further than a few appearances on childrens television". That was Steve. I understand that despite Steve's words Ralf Ralf continues to have a cult following in many parts of Europe. This is similar to Akademia Ruchu, of whom I concluded, in my part of the article: "Akademia Ruchu skillfully, jubilantly toss in the air all those preconceptions and fiendishly juggle with them...the bulb smashes, the facade drops, to reveal a woman in white, windswept. Stunning.' I was told, 10 years later, this review had secured their ability during martial law to continue to travel outside Poland. That was me, though those pesky designers dropped my credit, adding to the confusion. In the end it was Annie Griffin who went on the TV, to some success.

Looking back in that issue of the magazine, I notice Steve and I did another double-banger, this time about Rotterdam's long-defunct Perfo festival (I got to cover Karen Finley's transgressive possession, which lead a member of the audience to intervene and close down the show). Here Steve describes the early performance group Dogs in Honey, to whom he is kinder: "Dogs in Honey use the idea of the dissolution of the individual as a central theme to the work of art. Just as they disembodiment their voices through the use of microphones so they disguise their own identities through the use of grotesque rubber facial makeup which gives the appearance of the face being in the process of melting...action and identity are destroyed by the force of the sado-masochistic relation of the two performers" You're gorgeous, in other words. Now we have YouTube it is interesting to see the rise of 90's emo (did that term exist?) group, Babybird, founded by one half of Dogs in Honey Steve Jones. Ironically, notes Wikipedia on Babybird, 'You're Gorgeous' a dark tale about a model being lured into an unsavoury photo-shoot, has become a standard wedding party anthem continuing to be requested to this day. Also interesting is the recent YouTube video of Babybird's revival 'Back together' which looks as near as damn it similar to a Dogs in Honey performance 20 years later. Steve Rogers continues to presciently describe Steve Jones's solo performance at the National Review as throwing up 'a range of ideas

around the idea of beauty, physical attraction, image, vanity and narcissism as well as gender and sexuality and voyeuristic relationship of performer and audience' Time to go off and make best-selling pop records then.

And the passions that Performance Magazine aroused! "Doff This Bonnet before it becomes a Tea Cosy" roared David Gale and Hilary Westlake, affronted at Steve Roger's scathing review of Lumiere and Son's Deadwood at Kew gardens (I quite liked it by the way, before they come to get me), which was 'riddled with so many specious arguments and errors of fact that we are compelled to remark that with radical critics like these, who needs the bourgeois.' The National Review of Live Art was, in a certain era, the place to come and drink and shout at each other like this, a live version of the magazine.

Issue 44/45 also makes me think of the ones who have left the building. Here, I describe Marty St James and Anne Wilson at the National Review as 'two highly experienced artists who are going for the Big Gamble'... using the techniques of Laurie Anderson, they substitute for the American Dream the English Dream (Midlands Version). Steeped in the lore of Tony Hancock and the Archers, but leaning heavily and uncritically on the imagery of Mills and Boon, they lay out a lengthy ironic saga...punctuated by the chimes of drawing room clocks, delineated by progressions from Crossroads through Eastenders and Dynasty. At the end of it all lies Camelot, both the myth and the Englishman's home." In this case it was a video of a Hackney tower block, and this Midlands art couple *de nos jours* are a couple no more.

More seriously, death is beginning to overtake us, as it must, but early deaths always bring us up short. Steve Rogers who took over Performance Magazine after me, died of AIDS (his voice and opinions still resound in my head to this day). Paul Burwell died from exposure outside his boathouse in Hull - after excess of alcohol, (and now, just as I am writing, Pina Bausch, who lifted so many of us in the arts in the UK from small-island syndrome, from cancer.) I was at a performance of the Bow Gamelan Ensemble at the Liverpool Biennial recently. But the Ensemble were only two, Richard Wilson and Anne Bean. Paul Burwell, who died two years ago was the 'silent performer' but his presence might have been evoked by 'Phil The Messenger', a spirit medium contacted by Anne Bean. It certainly felt like he was there to me. It seems only yesterday that I was standing in Paul's murky basement with a deadline to meet, waiting for him to type his column as I was standing there, or recklessly jumping in the Thames from his boat, or shouting "I WILL not go quietly into the dark night!"

Finally I will relate my favourite National Review story, which does not, fortunately, end in death. The event has now moved from its Nottingham home to Glasgow. Two emerging artists, Luke

**commissioned essay for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NRLA catalogue 2010 © the author 2010**

Mckeon and Lawrence Harvey. One is sitting clothed in a full bathtub. The other is doing the ironing, with a real iron, plugged in to the mains. I'm sitting near the front. I have been nearly blown up, blindfolded, kidnapped and left in locked rooms in my professional life to know that the illusion of safety of being an audience member is just that, an illusion. Slowly the realisation dawns on me that the artist with the iron is about to plunge it in the bathtub. So it is me, the idiot, the magazine editor, the twerp who thinks life is more important than art, who stands up and shouts "Stop! Don't do it!" The performance stops, I have played my role, the artists are alive. Afterwards, I ask if they would have gone through with the action had I not intervened. Of course! The iron was on a trip-switch. I leave you to decide if this was actually safe.

While researching this piece, I was asked if I could find a picture of myself, Paul Burwell and National Review Artistic Director Nikki Milican sitting on top of a wardrobe in a hotel room somewhere in Nottingham. I can't even remember if it was in that bloody boarding house with the parrot. What we were doing there and how much we had drunk I do not know, but I could not find it. It exists as a memory only. Maybe in a near future sci-fi scenario they can download it from our brain, if any of us survive for the 50th anniversary.

Rob La Frenais