

# The NRLA – a conversation (Revised March 2020)

Given that the 30th Anniversary Catalogue is subtitled ‘A Personal History’, it seemed appropriate to directly and explicitly court the personal in this archival document. In two sections, we present edited extracts of conversations enacted between Artistic Director of the NRLA, **Nikki Milican**, and two of the Festival’s long-term supporters, artist **Robert Ayers** and performance critic **Mary Brennan**.

## Part 1: The Early Years: Robert Ayers (RA) & Nikki Milican (NM)

*Robert Ayers: Though I don’t actually recall the first time I met Nikki Milican, we seem to have been fellow travellers for so many years that it is almost impossible to imagine a time when my perception of British performance art wasn’t deeply affected by my relationship with her. As the following conversation makes plain, she and I came at performance art from two rather different directions, and there have been times when we have had our disagreements and even arguments, but there is not a single individual with whom I have maintained so enduring an artistic understanding. Nor is there anyone to whom I am more grateful for drawing great artists and their work to my attention. Thinking back it occurs to me that if I had never seen anything other than the work that I have encountered in Nikki’s National Reviews since 1984, then that would have been more than enough stimulation and excitement for most people’s lifetimes.*

*Through our various nomadries – the festival’s from Nottingham to London and thence to Glasgow, Nikki’s from Nottingham to Glasgow and more recently to Devon, and mine from Leicester to Nottingham and now back to New York City – Nikki and I have found ourselves able to gain sustenance from much of the same work. And – equally important, obviously – to know when to agree to disagree.*

*What follows is a tiny edited fragment from a conversation that she and I had on a steamy New Jersey rooftop in the summer of 2008. We covered far more topics that day than we’ve included here, but maybe some things can just be left unsaid...*

**RA:** Let’s start with the very early years. I studied art at Leeds University in the early 1970s; I remember it being very old-fashioned in the approach to a fine arts practise but basically we were allowed to do anything. It wasn’t about following a four-year course - you were there to educate yourself.

**NM:** I found college to be a very inspirational time, though not the course itself, there was a lot of experimentation in the ‘70s and many different influences. It was certainly very politicised. Music was also very important to me.

**RA:** Yes, music as well. You remember the art labs? Their spirit was very much, "Let’s abandon everything we’re expected to do and then see what happens." Maybe that’s the basic difference between the Art Labs and the Art Centres. The Art Centres unfortunately became anti-interdisciplinary it seemed to me: you were running up against cinema programmes, and then running up against gallery programmes, whilst trying to find space for performance. I think the thing about the Arts Labs was that there was a willingness to chuck everything into the mix.

**NM:** Times did seem more radical then, or are we just romanticising the 70’s? Ted Little, the director of the Birmingham Art Lab, did fantastic work at a time when Birmingham felt a little depressing. I was aware of it because my family had moved from Cheltenham and I was studying for my A Levels in Birmingham, but as well as having the Art Lab I received my true education at the Mothers, an amazing music venue on the outskirts of the city. I was becoming really absorbed

in the music scene, going to festivals at Shepton Mallet and Bath (and a little later to the very first Glastonbury). There were also the environmental fairs and county shows, the 'tree fairs', Elephant Fayres and the Festival of Fools, all of which became a rich stamping ground for performance artists. So, even as a student I was aware of something wonderful and little left field going on. When I arrived in London I became far more politically conscious, we were part of a fairly radical front that had grown out of the peace and love vibe, sitting in over issues important to us at the time. Jack Straw, believe it or not – and you wouldn't believe it now (at the time of speaking, Straw was Labour MP for Blackburn and Secretary of State for Justice) – was head of the Student Union. There was a great intermingling of the political and art worlds. And my job as Social Secretary of the Student Union was to keep the troops who were sitting in, entertained and happy with all-night art events.

We were lucky to be able to invite particularly interesting speakers in aid of 'the cause'. I remember Vanessa Redgrave coming to the college and speaking on behalf of the International Socialists. I was really inspired by all that; it was an exciting melting pot of political activists, poets, musicians, radical women's theatre...

**RA:** Before I went to Leeds I'd never heard anything about performance art, I knew nothing about it.

**NM:** I was aware of such events happening but I can't remember acknowledging the term performance art until some time later on seeing Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron (*Landscapes and Living Spaces* - an appropriate name). They were creating rather strange installation performances in Walcott Village Hall in Bath, as part of the Bath Arts Workshop's festival, the antithesis to the rather stuffy Bath Festival. At the same time the Kipper Kids were doing rude things in shop windows and Lumiere and Son were creating really imaginative street performances. So I was observing all of this and thinking this is where I really want to be. Being involved in the music business, creating music programmes, managing bands, was no longer enough in themselves, although working in the music industry at the time was quite innocent and joyful compared to what it is now. I wanted to be involved in all these other exciting activities going on and that's when, by pure chance, I was invited to join Exploded Eye, a performance company producing wonderful outdoor, landscape art performances. In 1974 we were invited to a festival of international performance art in Birmingham, organised by Ted Little and Roger Lancaster (Birmingham Repertory Theatre). The programme included legendary names in the performance world at that time, Keith and Marie, Matchbox Purveyors (Ian Hinchliffe & Judith Morris), Laila (an international group resident in Paris), Le Palais des Merveilles, Welfare State, Fine Artists (Jim Parker & Colin Barrow), Gasp, Landscape and Living Spaces, Jose Luis Da Rocha, Softsoap, Zoo, Tomek, and us, Exploded Eye (not that we were legendary!). It was one of those inspirational moments of connection for me. I still have the programme, which cost the princely sum of 10p and looks like someone designed it with a felt-tip pen.

A friend and I broke away from Exploded Eye to form a company called The Pranksters (the name of course taken from Ken Kesey's 1960s group, The Merry Pranksters – organisers of the acid test events immortalised in Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*). I was simultaneously running an arts centre programme in Bath (The Brillig). Peter King and I used to create these top hat and tails characters and situate them in incongruous landscapes as transient photographic images; it didn't matter if one person or a hundred witnessed it, it was about setting up the perfect image and then disappearing without trace. We would also create environments for days at a time, which of course we would call installations now. Peter went on to become an Oscar-winning make-up and hair artist; he was the one who persuaded me to shave off my eyebrows for my top hat & tails character and to don wild punk makeup when we did DJ sessions (and that was before punk...), so he had pretensions even then!

**RA:** So when did you arrive at the Midland Group?

**NM:** In 1983, it was time to explore something new. I had been aware of the Performance Art Platform (created by Steve Rogers) but little else. The earliest mentions of The Midland Group were as an artists' collective working just off Wellington Circus by the Playhouse in Nottingham. Gerry Pilgrim was involved in the first festival programme, and so was Roland Miller I believe.

**RA:** Yes, they were my first recollections of it as well. Originally dating from the 1930s, it was *The Midland Group of Artists*. It actually moved from Wellington Circus to Carlton Street in 1979.

**NM:** Were you on the board then?

**RA:** I wasn't on anything in '79. I wasn't even sure I was going to live in England. In 1979 I travelled to New York as part of my PhD research, and I only came back that autumn because part of the funding to travel to New York had come from Leicester Polytechnic, so I had to return to do some teaching. I think that my first awareness of the Performance Art Platform was seeing a little ad in Performance Magazine.

**NM:** That was mine too. The Pranksters were actually thinking about submitting a proposal for the Midland Group's Platform event. Instead, I went for the programming job when Steve Rogers left to edit Performance Magazine but they gave it to the composer, Jeremy Peyton-Jones. When he resigned two years later, I reapplied... Clearly I wouldn't take no for an answer!

**RA:** I knew Jeremy but I knew him as a member of Impact Theatre Cooperative.

**NM:** One of the very first performances I attended, on finally arriving in Nottingham, out at the Clifton site (of what was then Trent Polytechnic), was Impact Theatre's compelling *A Place in Europe* (1983) and Jeremy was performing with them. A lot of good performance work was happening up at the Clifton site at that time. It was Professor Barry Smith's creative arts course and he brought in several influential artists to teach with him; they and the Midland Group were the centres of activity for this work in the region.

**RA:** I remember going to an exhibition opening for John Newling at the Midland Group and meeting the publicist Jean Hunter, who told me about Clifton and Barry Smith's course, but I hadn't met him at that point. I remember they had a strange name for the season out at Clifton, *Visual Performance*. I'd never heard that expression before. I remember finding it all absolutely fascinating and thinking to myself that I should write down a few words about every performance that I witnessed, because it was clear that I had seen some really important performances by that time and it would just require a few sentences as a useful aide-memoire. Well, of course I didn't do it... The problem is that you remember some things incredibly vividly: in *A Place in Europe* I remember Jeremy playing his saxophone and walking across the stage in a strangely robotic manner, but that's about all I remember!

**NM:** There was a lot of repetition and angst in Impact's performances.

**RA:** Repetition and angst, yes. Impact also had a certain way of dressing, wearing those baggy suits, so that they always looked as though they'd just escaped from some depression. But it was a very well developed visual sense that conjured a wonderful atmosphere.

**NM:** Yes, it was a particular aesthetic, as it was with Hesitate & Demonstrate, I.O.U, Optik, Rational Theatre, and all the memorable UK companies touring at the time, whose work was defined as *Visual Theatre* – although the term, as with all attempts to define things, produced the same problems as *Live Art* and *Performance Art*. I remember Rose English saying, "What is theatre, but visual?" Nevertheless, I think it did describe a particular genre of work of the 80's but it was the beginning of an ongoing argument – which went on for years at the NRLA – about why 'theatre' artists were being programmed into festivals of live art, as if it was a great insult to the performance artist. On Sunday mornings at the NRLA we'd organise Platform Artist's breakfasts,

where everybody could offer feedback on the work – at least, that was the intention, but it always came down to those annoying arguments about definition and where one's allegiance lay. Gerry Pilgrim was part of a discussion of women artists during the Riverside edition in 1987, which I missed because Neil Bartlett and I were cleaning up the mess of spilt oil that had been left by Mike Stubbs' video installation (*Myth of Speed*): I remember cleaning up quite a lot during the early years! We were scrubbing the floor whilst this rather heated discussion was going on upstairs, with fingers being pointed at Geraldine for being a 'theatre maker' and not a performance artist. She quite rightly retorted that she had in fact been trained at Leeds College of Art. Somewhat later she reported this discussion back to me, the consequence of which was her commissioned installation, *Shattered*, for Third Eye Centre's Gallery 2 the following year. I felt strongly, even then, that the definitions were blurring.

**RA:** It seems amazing now that what was seen as a point of rupture was "did you come out of art school with a fine art aesthetic, or did you come out of theatre?" People did get very angry about it. I remember the first year in Glasgow, being in a pub on Sauchiehall Street with Jon Bewley and possibly Chris Wainwright, and they were banging their glasses down and saying, "Theatre! This has turned into a theatre festival!" And I suppose they were contrasting things with Projects UK's social sculpture kind of activity.

**NM:** The inevitable question that always seems to arise when talking to people about how long we've been doing this is "Did you invent the term *Live Art*?" I've never claimed that of course, but I know people who have, wrongly as it happens, and loose talk is how the many versions of live art history come to exist. I have witnessed talks full of derisory 'facts' but it bears little significance in the scheme of things. I had an interesting conversation with Paul Hough (NRLA's documenter) during one of our afternoons at the University of Bristol, where the NRLA video archive is held. Going back through old Performance Magazines Paul found the term live art as a misspelling. He was trying to track back to the first acknowledgement of performance art platforms taking place in Nottingham and there was some other event incorrectly advertised as *Livart* and became *Live Art*. That seemed a little improbable. It was 1979 but I believe the term may be traced further back than that.

**RA:** I racked my brains in trying to remember the first time I heard anyone use the expression *Live Art*, and I simply can't. That is surprising because it's such a different form of words, you'd have thought one would have remembered that. But it occurred to me that all the old panels that I used to sit on at the Arts Council – for Jeni Walwin and her successors – we always called it *Performance Art*. The first time you used those words in the title of the festival was in 1985.

**NM:** That was after a conversation with Neil Butler, who was running the programme at the Zap Club, and which resulted in a collaboration for that one year. *Four Days: Performance Art Platform* became *Eight Days: A Review of Live Art*, and then in 1986 I settled on *The National Review of Live Art*. Same festival, different name.

**RA:** I remember a conversation between you and me very early on during your time in Nottingham; you were feeling a bit demoralised and you said, "They lied to me, they told me there was an audience here."

**NM:** I was a little surprised after taking over from Jeremy Peyton-Jones that there appeared to be no appetite for performance art beyond the walls of the arts centre. During my time in Bath I was introduced to some wonderful artists and whilst at the Brillig I had the opportunity to work with companies like Crystal Theatre of the Saint and the early Forkbeard Fantasy. The wonderful thing then was the ability to create excitement about what we were doing through word of mouth, rather than spending thousands of pounds on marketing campaigns. Artists made work with or without Art Council support. They would sign on as unemployed and use their dole money to survive. They were creatively radical times, as alluded to before. So, you can imagine, I was just a little disappointed on arriving in Nottingham in 1983 to find that there was little interest in this work that

I was now so passionate about. My gut reaction was that we needed to change the public's perception of the work the art centre was doing and the apparent alienating term *performance art* was unhelpful. It has become meaningless to me now, but at the time changing the name from *Performance Art* to *Live Art* was about adopting a marketing strategy in order to develop an audience. Changing the terminology was merely a pragmatic approach in trying to reach out to more people. I was desperate to find the ways and means to survive; it was a very fickle time in terms of funding and we were in an extremely vulnerable position - if we couldn't prove there was an audience for what we were programming, we would lose our funding.

**RA:** At the time, Nottinghamshire County Council in particular were beginning to ask questions about the funding of the Midland Group in general.

**NM:** The Arts Council considered us one of the few *Centres of Excellence* in the UK but that didn't mean we were protected from funding cuts either locally or nationally. I remember the County Council considered us to be rather elitist or, at best, maverick. It was the time of the miners' strikes and people's allegiances and priorities affected what we were doing.

There were three major funding clients of the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it was then, and they were Projects UK (Newcastle), the Zap Club (Brighton), and the Midland Group (Nottingham), which I thought was a really interesting balance because we were all delivering a different aesthetic and approach to promoting this field of work.

I never liked the idea of presenting performances in nightclubs, but the Zap did it really well, I respected them for it. Neither did we have the ways and means to undertake the ambitious site-specific works that Projects UK were so brilliant at. So I think it was a very clever choice of clients back in those early years of funding live art; a very small group of presenters by comparison to today's activities.

**RA:** I was on the Arts Council Committee called the Performance Art Advisory Group, and I suspect that the triumvirate of grant recipients was already in place when I got there. But I agree, I loved the arrangement of three different places presenting live art in completely different ways. They all had their qualities, some of which did prove to be incompatible eventually. But it did seem to work extremely well, and each place appeared to have their particular supporters on that committee: there was the artist, Chris Wainwright from Newcastle, who was a big supporter of Projects UK. I remember Paul Burwell (Bow Gamelan Ensemble) always piping up in support of the Zap Club; and I made sure the Midland Group stayed in the loop. Strangely enough, it all began to come apart when people started to ask – and this was probably at about the same time that people started saying it should be *Live Art* and not *Performance Art* – why London didn't seem to be getting much of a crack of the whip? To my embarrassment I would have to admit that I was always a little bit against London because I used to think that London had everything, including access to lots of cash.

Going back to the early Midland Group years though, I didn't realise, until I was writing my contribution for this catalogue that the Robert Ayers and Company performance, *Falling*, was in your very first festival (1984).

**NM:** It was quite ambitious to take that on in my first programme.

**RA:** Ambitious? It was insane! We had a company of about fifteen, and a maximum audience size of about twenty, and we took them on a tour of the normally off-limits part of the building – including a fire escape where we built elaborate cardboard sets that could be installed and removed in a couple of minutes. Then we took the audience out into the so-called sculpture court where they could see things happening up on the roof, and I jumped out of the window of the old performance studio, naked and breathing fire! Ridiculous!

**NM:** It was very much a site-specific piece, although we probably didn't define it in quite those terms then. We wouldn't get away with that now of course, marching a blindfolded audience down all those narrow back corridors...what with present day fire regulations and health and safety issues.

**RA:** It was amazing. I wouldn't even dream of doing anything like that now. How old was I? I was 30. That's what you do when you're that age and full of ambition.

**NM:** It was great to re-imagine the building and confuse people who thought they knew it so well. I really enjoyed my first edition, which was a lot different in ambition then to what it is now, the scale of it has grown beyond belief, you just need to compare those early programmes notes to this year's brochure. Little did I know then what lay ahead for me, or the festival.

The Midland Group wasn't as well resourced as say the ICA in London but I did love the place. Rather ironically I believe it's a job centre now, which is about as dispiriting for me as knowing that Laura Ashley now inhabits the defunct Brillig Arts Centre in Bath.

As with most art centres of course, the Midland Group's main focus was on the visual arts and I and the artists had to create miracles in a black box at the top of the building, with no lift! The more enterprising groups of performers would invent ingenious ways of hiking their equipment up four or five flights of stairs; most notable was Forkbeard Fantasy who much preferred to spend time in the pub next door than lift heavy flight cases up those stairs, so they were very quick in employing pulley systems and volunteers.

I also quickly redeployed a back (storage) room as a dressing room, somehow persuading management to agree to installing a shower and the necessary basic accoutrements needed by touring artists, who, up to that point I think, had been changing behind one of the theatre flats.

There was something quite nice too about walking through the empty galleries before opening time and being able to have a private moment with whatever exhibit was on that month. Particularly inspiring were Robert Mapplethorpe and his photographs of Lisa Lyon, which at least got me going to the gym! But there were many visual artists I was able to encounter up close and personal for the very first time. It was educational.

I also enjoyed being able to finish work and head downstairs to the cinema to catch up on a really good art cinema programme. During those first months I was getting bedded into the place, I already had my eye on the spaces for other purposes of course!

The place became a little modish in the latter years, with a newly built bar that backed onto an inner sculpture court that was also used for performances. One group of artists did take umbrage at having to perform next to the bar, despite having undergone a site visit some weeks before and accepting the set up. On reflection, the "refurbishment" was just the beginning of the gentrification of Hockley, an otherwise scruffy end of town that would be unrecognisable to me now I'm sure.

Eventually things hit the wall at The Midland Group. Antony (Bellekom) and, before him, Fred (Brookes) - the former Directors - probably didn't tell us the whole story of what was going on in the boardroom discussions. Perhaps they tried to keep everything as positive as possible, but for me it was such a shock to the system to realise things were now so bad that we were being made redundant!

**RA:** Well, I know a lot about that because I was on that bloody committee. I think the County Council talked East Midlands Arts into doing their dirty work for them and to my amazement - because I'd always been a bit of an irritant to the powers-that-be at East Midlands Arts - they asked me to be on a panel to consider the future of the Midland Group. But, from the very beginning it was clear that there were people there who'd been given a far closer briefing than I'd

been given, and they seemed to have accepted that the finances were beyond salvaging, and that we were never going to be able to turn it around. All we would be doing, they insisted, was throwing good money after bad. They gave Antony an absolute roasting, poor guy, but it wasn't his fault. The damage had been done way before he arrived. And I'm ashamed to admit that I wasn't courageous enough to stand up to the rest of the panel and say, 'But wait a minute ...' I always wished that I'd come out with the comment that Paul Burwell had made: 'Whoever said an Arts Centre was going to make money?!' The truth of the matter was, it had never been given a funding basis that was going to allow it to work.

**NM:** I had felt for the period of time I was involved in the Midland Group things were changing for the better. I believe we had been successful in improving the profile and the perception of what we were doing in the performance department and had also recently, that same year (1986), returned from a triumphant trip to the Edinburgh festival, where we'd presented the work of Anne Seagrave, Rose English, Man Act and Teatre de Complicité (who won the Perrier Award). It was an unusual showcase of work for The Fringe.

My time in Nottingham was fantastic, I look back on it fondly, but it was when the NRLA landed in London the first time that I came to realise there was really quite a lot of interest in it and indeed, a growing audience for the work it presented. The then director, the wonderful Charlie Hansen, invited the festival to the Riverside Studios as an interim measure, whilst I was in the process of moving up to Glasgow. It was 1987 and I was still unclear about the future of the festival, little did I know just how much it was going to evolve.

**RA:** I remember it as a really memorable event. I remember it being flooded! I remember it being a really vital event.

**NM:** Let's say, there were a few memorable incidents that year! I'd become more at ease with it being the *National Review of Live Art* by this time. I was in my fourth year as its director, so I was feeling comfortable in taking it forward. It seems a shame to reflect that we had to go to London to find a larger audience, the crowds did take me a little by surprise.

I was so grateful to the Riverside for giving us a home for that year of transition, but it was pretty difficult because they were in the midst of a refurbishment, so we were more or less working on a building site with all the banging and the drilling and workmen hanging around. There were several talks in the cafe area with artists like Richard Wilson competing with the drilling, a bit home from home for him of course, much like a Bow Gamelan set. And in one corner was Mona Hatoum's commissioned piece (*Matters of Gravity*), which, if you read her text now, was an entirely appropriate piece for the site in which she found herself for the duration of the festival. I would suggest the NRLA has always had to work in challenging conditions! Admittedly, it wouldn't be the same being in a plush theatre complex with acoustically defined spaces. It goes with the territory really, but let's just say Riverside was a little testing at times. BUT, we did have an edition that year with some very strong work emerging from the Platform, including what turned out to be an extremely exciting cohort of students from the Glasgow School of Art, including Douglas Gordon, who we then presented at the Third Eye Centre the following year.

That year was renowned for several incidents, one being Ian Hinchliffe – with whom I always got on well and liked a lot. He was an artist who conveyed a sense of edginess and risk. I remember deliberately programming him early in the day (before the bar was open!) The little back room where he was performing could only fit about twenty people: So, much like it is these days, punters were annoyed when they couldn't get in, especially on seeing people who did gain access, emerge looking a little shell-shocked, and um, excited. With so many wanting to see him, Ian agreed to do a second performance. As was indicative of the times, there was no discussion of money either, Ian just agreed that he'd love to do it again. We scheduled a 4 o'clock "repeat", which meant, unfortunately, a lot of drinking time in-between...

It was also the year when screened work became a permanent component of the programme. The previous year had featured single screen video works by four artists, alongside a massive installation created by Hidden Grin, an offshoot of Rational Theatre. *Overseen, Overheard, Overlooked*, was an exhibition/performance using walls of monitors that took over the main Midland Group gallery. Steven Littman and Stephen Partridge took that opportunity to persuade me video art should henceforth be taken seriously in future NRLA programmes. So, with their help, we organised a pretty ambitious video programme, with installations as well as single screen monitor pieces. There were some performance artists who still felt a slight suspicion towards the 'video monitor' but by the Sunday we'd cleared all the video from the gallery and the foyer and in its place a very beautiful meditative installation piece was taking place in the gallery (Ian Halcrow & Antoni Malinowski's *Life Drawing*). It wasn't possible to see the entire gallery from the entrance and just before rounding the corner there was a video monitor showing the live action of the performer in the main part of the gallery. Of course Ian didn't see the live performer, he just saw the pesky video monitor and started throwing verbal insults at it. Ian, despite appearances, is very sensitive about other artists' work but on that occasion hadn't realised it was actually a live performance. I had no option but to ask the technicians to eject him from the building. I thought nothing more of it, I just assumed he'd calm down (sober up) and come back in at 4 o'clock in time for his second performance. A little time later someone approached to warn me that Ian was about to be arrested, the neighbours had called the police because he'd been seen doing strange things in the builders' skip just outside the Riverside Studios. I went out to explain to the policeman that it was OK, he was an artist booked by the festival and in fact was about to go "on stage." As if by magic, Ian slowly stood up and said, "sorry mate it's 4 o'clock I need to get myself prepared." So Ian performed again and of course was a great success! Someone out there has \*footage of the incident too, it would be lovely to have that in the archive...

(\* The incident can be seen on the dvd *Hinch, A Film About Ian Hinchliffe* and he alludes to the incident in his essay on this site)

But he wasn't the only person we had to eject from the premises that year. We were organising Friday night banquets in those days, with invited speakers, and I'd asked Alastair Snow to take it on that year. They put up a marquee outside by the river but there was a terrible rainstorm and everything got flooded. Alastair had invited a guest artist speaker (from Holland) who decided to show his art work in the café (unbeknown to me). At lunchtime the catering manager spoke to Neil Bartlett the MC, about several complaints he'd received; evidently the local businessmen hadn't take too kindly to looking at porn videos while they're eating their lunch! Clearly I had no option but to turn off the video monitors. The next thing I know I'm being assaulted by the artist for censoring his beautiful art work. Thankfully I had Neil to protect me and I had the pleasure in asking the artist to leave the building. It did set up big debates around the festival about censorship and freedom of artistic expression.

During the year at Riverside Studios I had already taken up the job at Third Eye Centre and thankfully it had been agreed that I could bring The National Review of Live Art to Glasgow the following year (1988). Again, it was one of those serendipitous experiences you have along life's journey. It coincided with Glasgow winning the accolade of Culture Capital of Europe (1990) and that had allowed for a huge investment in the cultural life of the city for three years leading up to it. It was a time when the Third Eye Centre was re-assessing what it wanted to do with its future programme; my arrival and that of Andrew Nairn, who ran the exhibitions programme, gave them the opportunity to look at the artistic policy of the entire Centre. It was a very exciting time of change and evolution for the place.

Up to that point, the Third Eye Centre programme had been embedded in old school Scottish theatre. Chris Carrell, the centre's Director, was passionate about Scottish writers and publishing, so there were in effect three of us programming. It was an interesting mix of personalities and ideas, I think we worked well together. Our most creative meetings usually took place early mornings in the Baby Grand. Chris Carrell was also very keen on culture from Eastern Europe,



which allowed me to look at experimental theatre and performance from that part of the world far more rigorously (ref: *Polish Realities* and *New Beginnings*, as well as work for the NRLA). It was a new challenge for me, extremely instructive. Most importantly, the NRLA had found a new home where the actual programming budget wasn't going to be a huge worry, and with new money promised to bolster the year round programme of work. It was also at that time that I initiated the New Moves dance festival, it all started to feel really positive again. On the other hand, the physical spaces I had to work in were not ideal and the first rather unpopular thing I had to do was to ask the resident company to vacate the building. They were charming people, but it was time to change the culture of the place. I needed them out of the building to be able to do what I wanted to do. I can't remember the repercussions of it all, I just got on with my job, insensitive as that may sound. The vacated space at the top of the building became known as PS2, which came to epitomise the new culture, an experimental space where artistic risk was the norm, but for that first year we had to run it without a public licence. When I look back it was amazing what we got away with, the extraordinary work we managed to situate in that space – a peculiarly long, narrow room that opened up at the bottom with wonderful Greek Thomson windows. That space, if challenging, allowed me to think more ambitiously and we began to offer artists commissions and residencies. It was the first time too that we were invited to present work at Tramway, the space found by Peter Brook for the staging of the Mahabharata. Neil Wallace was programming the venue which, under his guidance, grew into such a significant stage for international contemporary theatre and dance throughout the 90's and naughties. He, with Bob Palmer, was also heading the 1990 Culture Capital year of Culture. I found them both to be really inspirational and supportive, always positive when presented with ideas, however challenging. Glasgow to this day, I think, produced one of the finest cultural capital years on record and certainly helped change the image and fortunes of the city. Glasgow also presented a rather fine Garden Festival prior to all that and in 1988 we were given money to commission Bow Gamelan Ensemble, Forkbeard Fantasy and the Guerrilla Squad to create work specially for it.

## THE SORT OF MIDDLE YEARS...

### **[Performance art and risk:]**

**RA:** When John Jordan did that thing with the straw, was that the same year as the artist with the exploding milk bottles? I remember you and I being in that smoke-filled room and climbing out on to the roof of the Third Eye Centre and you were livid! You were ready to explode!

**NM:** Well, I do believe artists have to take responsibility for their work! That piece was invited after a Platform selection event in Cardiff. The selections didn't all take place as public events, especially if they were in an art school. Antony Howell was teaching at Cardiff School of Art in those days and he was not too bothered about his students abiding by any health and safety regulations. I remember two pieces that year where we were placed in very close proximity to artists who were utterly out of control. One of them was the piece you're talking about. I remember thinking at the selection event whether I should risk taking it, so I suppose it's my own stupid fault. But, part of me wanted to take that risk, it is an important element in some artist's work after all. However, if he had had a bad accident, well it would have been really difficult to explain. Thankfully the accident never happened to a member of the public, it happened to the artist himself, and a very good lesson was learned! During the same festival, the other Cardiff artist proceeded to nearly electrocute himself. There was the 'wonderful' moment with him standing over an ironing board in a bath of water and attempting to plug the iron in at the wall. As we sat mesmerised by the stupidity of the action, Rob La Frenais, who may have been there reviewing it for Performance Magazine, thankfully shouted out, "STOP!!"

Thereby preventing the NRLA's first accounted death. Had the artist been electrocuted on stage that probably would have been the end of the festival there and then...

**RA:** Mmm, yes, that would have been difficult to explain ...

During the 1980s there was still an assumption under late modernism that being further out than everyone else was like holding a badge of honour. I think that what you are talking about, “How risky is it? How dangerous is it?” is a really interesting part of that history. But as you say, from the producer’s point of view it was always like having to walk a tight rope – which is probably the wrong form of words! It was the same for the artist and you do want to support them in these things and not be a censor. That was my instinct, anyway. I always wanted to do things that people would be knocked sideways by. Those things weren’t necessarily “dangerous”. I’m reminded of a few things, like during Industrial and Domestic Theatre Contractors Platform piece: someone sliced open a huge melon and hundreds of flies flew out. I just thought it was one of the most fantastic things I’d ever seen. Absolutely amazing but wasn’t dangerous. But it does seem to me that for the producer there was always the will to give the artist as much room to manoeuvre as possible, but then you felt like a fool when they simply ignored any kind of common sense.

**NM:** Nothing much has changed in that respect. There is the fine line between risk and being sensible when it comes to public safety, and to the artist for that matter. But I think it’s gone to ridiculous extremes these days, where one can barely move without filling out six pages of a risk assessment form.

Trying to be sensitive to a performance art practise, I have to make allowances for a degree of risk, of course. With the invited/commissioned artists, I have trust in them to deliver work of quality, that may occasionally appear risky but will be executed with the utmost responsibility to themselves and to the public. There’s always an allowance of course for a degree of failure that can come with ‘artistic risk’, which you can forgive when the quality of the idea is sound. That’s different to any inherent physical risk that you speak of.

**RA:** Right. That’s exactly the sort of thing that can give you problems with your health and safety officers. I remember when I was still at Nottingham, right after they closed down Kira O’Reilly’s show in 2002, I had meeting after meeting with the health and safety people there. They were trying to be as understanding as they could be, suggesting that it really shouldn’t be any problem for the artist to be able to write down exactly what was going to happen at any given moment. And I said, “Well there is a problem, because part of the virtue of some of this art is that you don’t actually know what’s going to happen.”

**NM:** Mmm, you can imagine what it was like during our second NRLA year at Tramway when Black Market International was in residence in the gallery for five days. Twelve of them, each given a risk assessment form, wanting detail of everything they planned to do day on day, hour by hour! Can you imagine? It was bad enough telling Black Market they couldn’t smoke in their space, let alone explain the need of rather OTT risk assessment form, pretty difficult too when English is not your first language. Somehow we managed to appease all concerned but during those five days the inevitable happened of course: Lee Wen up a ladder, Alexander Del Re tripping people up with tape across the public walkways, it is impossible to babysit artists and neither am I prepared to. There has to be a level of trust when working together but of course they are going to take the piss if they feel the rules are extreme. Some members of BMI used to smoke all the time whilst they’re working. Personally I think it should be more a matter of the public making their own decision about walking into their space, or not.

Black Markets’ response in this instance was to rebel a little and walk around with placards stating, “Rules are stupid,” and writing the risk assessment rules on the gallery walls. Which Tramway technicians insisted they erase. I understand the pent up frustration that such lack of reasoning produces and yes, I sympathised with BMI, absolutely.

**RA:** They do tend to have a streak of, as you say, rebelliousness.

**NM:** And one hopes they never lose that. And I do think the artists who are really in control of their work know exactly what they’re doing, and what the risks are. My job, as long as they aren’t

being silly, irresponsible, or offensive, is to support the artist wherever and whenever possible. In the earlier days of the NRLA of which we speak, I cannot remember it being quite so draconian.

**RA:** Absolutely, that has to be the basic principle. And this is not something that is very often articulated. People more often say, The National Review of Live Art is fantastic because it has built up a community of artists but the other fact is that it has allowed artists to articulate the sort of work that probably would not have survived otherwise.

**NM:** and now it blossoms...