

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 2: The Later Years: Mary Brennan (MB) & Nikki Milican (NM)

Mary Brennan: I suppose you could call it a durational performance that has gone on for over twenty years now. A series of conversations and shared experiences that began in 1987 when Nikki Milican - newly in post as the Performance Programmer at the then Third Eye Centre in Glasgow (now known as the CCA) - decided that my own interest in the work she championed was genuine. And that if I was not as well-informed as her, at least I wasn't displaying the usual wearisome journalistic preconceptions and prejudices about Live Art and the performers who made it.

Hindsight reveals that 1987 was a significant turning point: for Nikki, who had arrived in Glasgow because her partner at the time had relocated to Scotland; for the National Review of Live Art, because Nikki's passionate guardianship of the festival meant that if Third Eye wanted her, they had to take the NRLA too; and for me, Mary Brennan, because suddenly a rich feast of the work that excited me most was arriving on my doorstep. My life and my career were changed by Nikki and her programming. I suspect many others could say the same...

Since 1986, Nikki and I have talked on countless occasions about the National Review. Sometimes formally, when I've been writing about her programme. Often informally, after good food - she cooks superbly well - or over coffees when we've been journeying together. Here are some moments from conversations we've had both in the past and also more recently. I won't pretend these glimpses give absolute chapter and verse of what has taken place since 1987. And they certainly don't include all the names that have dropped, so inspirationally, into our reflections on times past. But I hope they keep faith with Nikki's own remarkable vision, her determination and stamina, and her appetite for keeping the National Review alive to a changing world, a truly meaningful locus for artists and audiences alike.

June 2009

MB: So why did you move to Third's Eye?

NM: At the time I was actually considering going independent, as a producer. Interesting to think back on that if you consider how things turned out in the end... The demise of the Midland Group in Nottingham had been devastating. We had been developing an exciting programme of really good work, and establishing an audience for it. By 1986, I felt that the National Review of Live Art was proving itself to be something very exciting, current, and something that had a real future. Artistically at least, we were a centre of excellence (so termed by the Arts Council) - but we weren't awarded enough money for excellence to survive. Having been made redundant, I thought the best way for me to secure the future of the NRLA festival at least, was as an independent producer.

MB: What changed your mind - did you fall in love with Glasgow? With Third Eye?

NM laughs. Then explains that her then partner preferred her to be in gainful employ, rather than depending on him to support her venture into independent production. When Third Eye Centre advertised for a Performance Programmer, she applied - meanwhile, she'd fixed for the Riverside Studios in London to take the 1987 edition of National Review as a one-off.

NM: That was a very strange year. Me in Glasgow, the National Review in London. Me wondering how I was to curate a performance programme at the Third Eye - I remember not being terribly enamoured by the space there. PS2, the upstairs space, wasn't in existence as a performance space then - the theatre company, Wildcat, used it for rehearsals. The big, downstairs gallery was the 'property' of the visual art department - they weren't keen to share! Whereas I had a small black box with seating banks on two sides and a pillar in the middle... The Centre's cafe ran on a mostly 'beans 'n' rice' menu that was popular because it was cheap. As I said, not really very inspiring.

I didn't realise, at the time, what I was going into - not just the space, but the context. At the interview I remember people going on about the *City of Culture* and I had no idea what they were talking about - except that they kept telling me "there will, of course, be more money made available for your programme because of the investment in City of Culture". Well that sounded good - but I was still in two minds, mostly because of the restrictions of the space. I had my eye on the gallery, of course... When I said 'yes' to Third Eye, I really thought it was an interim measure until I figured out what to do.

Meanwhile, there was the National Review of Live Art at Riverside - for me, the Riverside Studios offered new possibilities of scale. Just like taking it from the CCA (as the Third Eye is now called) to the Arches in Glasgow, or to Tramway in future years. Moving venue presents a new set of challenges - it always produces a different kind of festival, even if it's still the NRLA. Looking back, I can see these moves were timely, because they enabled me - and the festival - to evolve, even if it sometimes felt they were more about bringing on a whole new set of problems!

Riverside memories include the first-ever inclusion of video works in the NRLA programme. Nikki admits that, back in 1987, she wasn't all that convinced there was a place for video in the festival.

NM: You could say I was highly suspicious of it in a stupidly purist way, as were some of the old school performance artists.

But twenty years later, when NRLA was located in Glasgow's Tramway, the vast resource of Tramway 2 housed... a remarkable showcase of video works, some of them running on magnificently large screens.

NM: Well yes. That's what I mean about evolving. The festival has always responded and been open to influences beyond its immediate shores. Researching thoroughly, ear to the ground, mind open. Going off-piste, rather than following.

Nikki, remembering the video works in the 1987 edition, is laughing as she describes having to rescue Ian Hinchliffe from the clutches of the law outside the Riverside.

NM: We'd scheduled Ian for an early morning slot (*On Reflection Parts 2 & 3*) - let's be frank, we thought we'd get him on before he'd had a chance to have his first pint of the day. But so many people wanted to see his show that we had to put on an extra, afternoon performance.

However, Hinchliffe, having sunk a few glasses, had unwittingly wandered into a gallery space. Railing at a video monitor, not realising he was disrupting the nearby live performance he had - all apologies - been led outside where his interaction with a pile of building materials brought him to the attention of some passing policemen. Nikki was alerted, rushed to the rescue, with a (typical) reason as to why he should be released: 'He's an artist! he has a show to do in five minutes!' No

contest, really - the police went on their way. Hinchliffe, unfazed and a true professional, duly turned in a compelling performance. There is no record of whether the officers came to any of the remaining NRLA events... (ref. Ian's own recollection of this incident can be read in the NRLA catalogue and on the NRLA30 site. The incident can also be seen on "Hinch, A film about Ian Hinchliffe").

NM: But, each NRLA edition seems to have at least one crisis incident where someone has concerns over how their work is presented, which in turn concerns us of course. Or else, not all the correct information has been sent to the production manager in advance... Sometimes you only find out, once a show's under way, that the artist has made some 'small changes' from when last discussed or seen, or they forgot to let the production team know that it was all going to get very, very messy.

All conversation stops at this point for a laughter break and a swapping of shorthand recollections from across the decades. It goes something like this:

'The guy who turned up and asked where his tree was – "what tree? You never asked for a TREE!" *The team sourced Kenny McBride a real sapling for HEIMAT: The Eternal Quest for Home (2003).*

'That wonderful piece with the fish skins - where they were all sewn together into a mermaid's tail, which trailed along the centre aisle of the Arches (Marie-Louise Blaney, *Fish Tale*, 2001). But the concrete floor hadn't been sealed, so the fish oil soaked in and the cleaners couldn't get the stain - or the smell - out.' *The floor had to be resurfaced.*

'Who was it at Tramway, who - caught up in the moment - poured wine onto a pan of melting wax he was using and whoosh!...?' (Katsunobu Yaguchi, *iPROJECTmyCORKING – sonorous san – (drawing)*, 2007) *Alarms went off, the entire building was evacuated - artists, including a naked Ron Athey, audiences, staff - and the Fire Brigade arrived. Some people thought it was an unscheduled addition to the programme...*

MB: Right - back to those Third Eye days. You'd arrived in Glasgow, bringing National Review with you. The Riverside edition had been great for building profile down south - but I doubt if many people had even heard of it here. Did you have any doubts?

NM: Actually, I'd arrived during Mayfest - which was billing itself as a festival of popular arts, if I remember correctly. It doesn't exist anymore, of course.

You'll have to imagine Nikki's raised eye-brow at this point. Somehow the loss of Mayfest makes not just the survival, but the ongoing success, of the uncompromisingly radical National Review all the more resonant.

NM: I'd gone to the Mitchell Theatre to see Pete Brook's *The Sleep*, (founding member of Impact Theatre), for which there was a really large audience. I remember thinking, 'It's going to be fine', there was an air of creative optimism, Glasgow was rejuvenating itself, what a great time to arrive. The Art School was literally round the corner and in the early days, when I was still doing the Platform selections myself - going up and down the country looking at degree shows in various colleges and venues - I was making contact with students and their tutors, Sam Ainslie, David Harding and Roger Palmer. Roger was running the Photography Department, with some of his students creating rather beguiling 'tape-slide' pieces (Elsie Mitchell *She Watches Silently*, 1988) - no young artist does that in this digital age of course, but it was very much in vogue then. David Harding ran the Environmental Studies Department, where artists Euan Sutherland, David Shrigley and Douglas Gordon were emerging (Gordon, Richardson and Sutherland showed work at the NRLA in 1987 & 1988). It's amazing to look back and think of where some of those artists

are now. Well, we probably couldn't afford to invite them now - but it's great they are part of the NRLA history.

The big question was - where was I going to put all this exciting work? Chris Carrell, the then Director at Third Eye, understood my concerns about that small downstairs space and let me 'invade' the gallery. I think the entire visual art department went on holiday during the National Review week. It used to be in October and it had a different feel I think to the now February/ March time-slot... Anyway, the agreement was, that as long as we returned the galleries to the visual art department in the same, pristine white condition as we'd found them, then - together with the lane outside, and the roof, and some of the nooks and crannies on the office/admin level - the National Review could more or less take over the building.

It never went according to plan, of course. Artists would arrive - set up installations, then things would start leaking through gallery walls, or the floors would get covered in mud. Sunday night, we'd be working all hours to get the place cleaned up again - trying to disguise the fact that, actually, the gallery had been used for the best purpose imaginable: a feast of radical cross-art form work. We'd been using the whole building as the 'centre for arts' it was supposed to be. That's how I felt anyway, and we achieved the same when moving the festival to Tramway some years later (in 2006/2007/2008).

MB: I can remember feeling that the whole building didn't just come alive, it seemed to shape-shift. Spaces were transformed and put to new uses. Even the stairs and office floor - which were usually closed off to the public - morphed into impromptu hidey-holes for one-to-one performances or durational works. One year, someone wrote a kind of manifesto on the stairs, so that step-by-step you 'ascended' through their thoughts. It started to feel, for me anyway, that the National Review was much more than a showcase for interesting work - it felt like a wonderful, unpredictable journey where you could create your own itinerary and discover things about yourself, humanity, society - the essence of reality, as well as the possibilities of imagination - and all within the compass of Third Eye.

And again, the memories come crowding in, jostling in a free-fall of happy associations.

Here are just a few:

'Neil Bartlett, the first-ever Master of Ceremonies, holding sway over audiences as - resplendent in sheath dress and stiletto heels - he directed them around the Third Eye.'

'The pungent miasma of slowly decomposing sheeps' heads that crept into corridors, galleries - even the cafe - over the five days of Alastair MacLennan's installation, *Still Tills* (1990)... and the visual impact of entering its darkened space and gradually gaining focus on the decaying assemblage of shopping trolleys, those blindly-staring, salt-encrusted heads amid other detritus of a society obsessed with conspicuous consumption.'

(NM's note: Yes, and he nearly got arrested for walking up Sauchiehall Street with the sheep's head in a shopping trolley.)

'Bobby Baker - twirling into the cafe-bar in a party-frock made out of cup-cakes, a live and arty, wonderfully edible celebration of the NRLA's 10th anniversary (1990).'

'Geraldine Pilgrim's installation in Gallery 2 with those fishing net towers (*Shattered*, 1988) - and afterwards, dismantling them at breakneck speed so as Stephen Taylor Woodrow could set up his hospital ward for *Going Bye-Byes* (1988)...

'Lloyd Newson and DV8 - did they really do *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988) in that tiny downstairs studio?'

'Derek Jarman...'

But this is a memory that is too special for shorthand. It dates from 1989. By then, Jarman's health was in decline.

NM: National Review was the last time that Derek's health allowed him to do any kind of major exhibition. I'd always felt a real connection to his films and - just because of that - I decided to approach him about coming to Glasgow. Thinking 'oh well - he can always say no, or not say anything and just not answer my letter.' Letter... (*she laughs*) We still wrote letters to people - we didn't have e-mail twenty years ago... Anyway, I asked him if he'd be interested in a different kind of challenge - maybe an installation? He wrote back saying 'yes! yes! yes!' - and how thrilled he was to be asked. We talked through an idea: what it would need in terms of building it - somebody would have to do that, so I approached the Citizens Theatre. And that turned into a wonderfully productive collaboration. Stewart Laing was working there at the time, and helped a lot with building and painting the beds over there - we didn't have the space at TEC - then Derek assumed responsibility for the actual installation of the work in the gallery.

We were still in the Thatcher years; Section 28 Local Govt. Act 1988; concerns about AIDS had made anything to do with homosexuality a very sensitive issue for Derek to take on. And Third Eye's gallery was very easily accessible from the street - we were always very mindful of that, and we knew that Derek's confrontation with homophobia was, fundamentally, pretty meaty stuff. The individual, graphically-decorated, tarred beds were mounted on the walls depicting political sentiments, the central pillars in the gallery plastered with anti-gay tabloid headlines - and a bed placed right in the middle, surrounded by barbed wire, with two boy 'extras' of Derek's acquaintance, a constant presence. I remember Tilda Swinton - she'd worked with Derek in his films - joined them for a while. But what I remember most is how Derek took responsibility for his work, this provocation. He didn't just see it set up and return to London. He was there, every hour of the day fielding questions, answering questions - some of them very difficult, confronting - from the public who were entering the space.

He presented a wonderful talk too - which, I'm glad to say we have in our archive. And he was extremely generous to other artists, too. Gave them so much of his time - and actually, he was very ill, but he got so involved. Historically it is such an important work...

MB: You're making me remember... Derek, perched like an elf on a high stool, just inside the doors of the gallery. Lunchtime, the cafe full of the office-workers who used it all the time - and occasionally strayed into exhibitions! And seeing all these guys in suits wandering in, being confronted by images of raging homophobia offset by the sweet boys in the bed. And Derek. Gentle, courteous, taking time to talk with people. And yes, there were guys who were loudly and offensively homophobic but others - maybe men who were scared to come out of the closet, who knows? - were clearly affected by what they saw. And students, young people, who couldn't believe that this legendary figure was just sitting there, having conversations with them. You can't quantify the impact that his presence - let alone the installation - had on people.

NM: No - although I've experienced that with many artists at National Review, who've felt that degree of responsibility for their work. But Derek was exceptional. An exceptional human being - and I don't often say that. Even on the Monday, the horrible Monday clean up - always such a come-down after all the adrenalin - there was Derek, helping to clean up with us. And even then people were approaching him, wanting to talk. He must have been exhausted.

MB: At times, that week, I thought he looked almost transparent with tiredness - but there was this very spiritual energy...

NM: In a way, that's how I remember Jean-Pierre Perrault, who wasn't just our artistic patron but a great friend. Ohhh... the worst thing over the years has been losing all these amazing people... wonderful artists, irreplaceable friends.

And we sit in silence. This recollection came during conversations in November 2008. It was late evening, in Nikki's home in Devon. It was dark and rain was battering against the windows. We weren't really there - we were back, in the old Third Eye (which looked totally different from how CCA looks now) and standing in a gallery that no longer exists, paying homage to an artist who died in 1994 aged just 52 years.

Third Eye itself was heading towards an unforeseen demise. Everything had been on a high of can-do optimism in the run-up to 1990, Glasgow's year as European City of Culture. The overall programme was hugely ambitious and stretched across the entire twelve months. Third Eye buzzed with Nikki's initiatives and never more so than during what was the National Review's 10th anniversary event, which drew together a true community of artists, established and emerging. It was energising, inspiring - and probably too good to last. If you check the archives, you'll see there was no NRLA in 1991 or 1992. By 1993 there was no Third Eye Centre either...

MB: Can you - do you - want to talk about that time?

NM: After what had happened at the Midland Group - the loss of everything that had been built up there - I couldn't believe it was happening all over again at Third Eye. The crunch came as a total surprise. I'm not sure I understand it even now. I mean, I was keeping within my budget, so was Andrew Nairn (Visual Arts Director) - I never go over budget - yet here we were, back with the same old story... No money. Closing down. It was devastating. Overnight, it seemed, everybody had vacated the building except me, Andrew, and Stephen Kelly, the building's manager. The three of us just rattled round an empty building - I used the time to learn how to use a computer, thankfully it was a Mac. Up to that point I was writing letters long-hand, giving them to the secretary and they'd be sitting on my desk at the end of the day, waiting for me to sign. In triplicate. And actually, getting to grips with the office Mac Classic meant I was a bit more savvy when I finally did go independent.

God knows why it all came unstuck like it did. I felt such anger and frustration, because up until then, it had been a wonderful ride. Glasgow 1990 had been tremendous, now it was like a long, long hangover after the party. There had been the beginning of New Moves as a dance festival - I'd received Scottish Arts Council (SAC) funding for that so - even though Third Eye was closed to the public - we were allowed to run with that 'behind closed doors'. The audience had to come in the back way - I suppose you could say it all felt very underground, very subversive. But actually, that wasn't how I wanted it to be. We'd been building such good audiences for both New Moves and National Review - we'd been stopped in our tracks through no fault of our own. It was fairly obvious to me when Third Eye was 'rescued' and morphed into the CCA and the new regime took over, the venue was no longer going to be the kind of place for me, or my programme. So - seven years on from when I'd first thought of doing it - I decided to go independent.

MB: Back to the beginning then?

NM: Not quite. People in the city had got to know me a bit by then, knew how I programmed. I wasn't interested in starting all over again. I just wanted to continue building on the achievements thus far. I'd seen at the Riverside in 1987, how the National Review could grow and evolve, if given the right support. Luckily our main funders came on-side with us. Bill English, at Glasgow City Council, gave us his blessing. Anna Stapleton and Lindsay Gordon were still at the SAC - real supporters and advocates of the art form. Jill Scott, who'd been my assistant at Third Eye, joined me. You and Peter (Easton) signed on as my Advisory Board - and that was that. After years of having to be at the mercy of flaky administrations that kept going bust, I'd opted to run my own company, sink or swim...

MB: Okay - now, how scary was that?

Actually, I can tell you, it was amazingly scary and yet brilliant. The first New Moves International Ltd offices were up several flights of stairs in Elderslie Street. The walls were hung with posters and photographs from past National Reviews, the decor was classy - very Nikki, very stylish - and the two of them, Jill (petite, platinum blonde and kind of 50's starlet) and Nikki (tall, hair henna'ed, always strikingly dressed and imposing - until she smiled), were a determinedly dynamic duo. The only - only? - problem was that by leaving Third Eye/CCA, Nikki had to cope with the National Review now being homeless.

MB: Part of me suspects that, if push had come to shove, you'd have done the 1993 National Review in your own wee office - just had lots of one-to-ones and 'borrowed' the landings on other floors... but actually, you went back to London.

NM: In searching for a new venue I told myself there was no ideal stage for it and in a way, having to find new homes has often been a timely process. It's transformative in a positive sense - for me, that has been very important. I went off to Switzerland to curate the Belluard Bollwerk festival and returned to an invitation from the ICA - I can't imagine there'd be the spirit to do that now! Even then it was a strange and difficult edition for us. It was really tough, one of those editions where I genuinely asked myself whether I wanted to carry on. I felt a bit battered and bruised by it.

MB: Do you want to say why?

There's a long pause, and a heavy sigh. But Nikki is nothing if not frank and forthright...

NM: With the help of Lois Keidan and Catherine Ugwu, a two-day conference 'State of the Art' was programmed. It was to address the issues and debates in both the UK and USA around black participation in the creation and critique of live art; I remember about a dozen speakers being invited to participate in that. For the performance programme I'd invited from America, amongst others, The Hittite Empire (*The Under Siege Stories* and *Shango Walks Through Fire*) and Pomo Afro Homos (*Dark Fruit*), Judith Jackson (*The N•gg•r Café*). The idea was for artists of colour to explore issues that concerned them - but many were concerned by the venue itself, seeing it as a white, middle-class art enclave - maybe felt, I don't know, resentful that their presence there was tokenism. I've never, ever programmed work as a tokenistic gesture. I research extensively, I travel, I look for what's interesting - and whether I find it in Mexico, or Thailand, or Cumbernauld and feel it deserving of an invite to the National Review... I invite work because I think it relevant and edgy and, wonderful...not because I think it will tick the right boxes. Sometimes I think I should stop identifying artists by their country of origin in the printed publicity - I mean, what does it really matter? other than to suggest how international we are.

But anyway, back in 1993, I really thought there was something useful and positive about bringing the UK artists and their American counterparts together, so that they could exchange ideas and experiences; it was enthusiastically backed by the ICA and Arts Council of Great Britain... Hah! (*This is a rueful snort*) If I think about the programme as a whole, there were some really good things that grew out of the ICA edition. But in terms of the conference... I received a lot of hostility from some of the artists (not from the Americans as it happens), some hurtful things were said - mainly because of how they 'read' the venue as a context. It wore off a bit, over the five days - the conference was at the start - but I doubt if I would ever do something like that now. Looking back, I'd suggest it was an irresponsible ghettoising of the work - even if some of the artists were themselves keen to be 'separate' and wanted to be known primarily as 'black artists' or 'artists of colour'. I hope people found it valuable, but actually, now I think about it - it didn't really feed into our future programmes all that much. Not in the way that other artists who were there that year became involved with subsequent editions.

Cue the memories - here's a selection from ICA 1993:

'Forced Entertainment (*12AM: Awake and looking down*) - their first ever durational piece! It lasted 12 hours - afterwards, in the bar, they were drained but high as kites. Audiences had stuck with them for hours on end. It had been a journey into the unknown, a journey of discovery - a reminder that established artists need room to experiment, try new directions in their work. I think we can say history - and some amazing performance - was made that day!'

*NB. Years later Tim Etchells admitted they had been very influenced by Alastair MacLennan's durational work *Still Tills* at Third Eye Centre in 1990*

'Donna Rutherford, one of the Platform artists - and a "frequent flier" with the National Review. Doing *Ochone* in an upstairs room, no real tech-ing, no sophisticated lighting rig - just Donna, sitting on the edge of a table, injecting oranges with Southern Comfort and speaking what felt like childhood secrets in a compellingly confidential way.'

'Robert Pacitti - with *He Was a Scary Baby*. Another emerging artist - and still making strong, radical work.'

MB: Of course, I made it all worthwhile for whoever covered the foyer in sticky-backed plastic... (Theo Simms, *Ever Been Had?*). I'd broken my ankle, was still in a cast. Came out of a downstairs room - having been told the top coating wasn't coming off until later. Not true! I got stuck, like a fly on fly-paper...

Nikki tries not to laugh. And fails.

NM: We had to send two helpers to try and lift you free - but they were getting stuck. And you were getting very cross... I really did like that piece, though. It knocked the stuffing out of that whole cool 'art centre foyer' thing where people just rush in, never bother to look around at what's on the walls, or the monitors. Suddenly, they were stopped in their tracks.

MB: Years later, you know, I met a woman who'd seen the video of that piece. She said to me 'it's funny - but there was some-one stuck on that floor who looked exactly like you...' I'd got over the discomfort and tetchiness by then, and as a conversation opener it did have the benefit of getting us talking about the National Review.

NM: A bit like this! It's only when we have these conversations that I do think back. It's fun, usually I'm so caught up in trying to look ahead, onto the next edition, I don't have time to remember the high-points of the past. I make an effort not to dwell on the moments when I have just despaired because of some of the attitudes, the sheer negativity, towards what we do. We - I - have never pretended that the National Review can be all things to all people, artists or audiences. Or journalists! But we have kept going - thirty years in 2010. We've evolved and inspired others all across the UK to set up their own platforms and showcases, and festivals. And we do it all from a 'virtual office' with only two full-time members of staff: me and a general manager; with project staff only coming on a couple months before the start of a festival. It's important much of the subsidy we earn actually goes to the artists. Many festivals seem to have a huge staff these days. I need a cup of tea - d'you want more coffee?

Post-ICA, there was talk of the National Review becoming a 'moveable feast' - maybe using college campuses, rather than arts centres. But then, Andy Arnold - the driving force behind the Arches in Glasgow - made Nikki an offer she couldn't refuse.

NM: I really loved the idea of being in an incredibly raw, found space - it was before the Arches had the major Lottery-funded refurbishment, and it still had this musty, dark, rather grungy feel to it. It had its problems - when don't National Review venues have problems? - because, for one

thing, the old brick railway arches were part of a listed building, so you couldn't, for example, drill into the walls (a problem for some artists). But the architecture was just glorious.

I tend to think of my programme like an empty canvas at the start. Somehow I have to fill that canvas in a way that makes best use of the spaces, but also creates the possibility for audiences to go on a journey of their own making - they probably aren't aware of the patterns and rhythms I have in mind when I run certain things on certain days, for how long and in which spaces. Sometimes I don't have a clear idea of how things will work out until it's actually happening. Sometimes there's a serendipitous link between works that were not immediately obvious. But for me, this is one of the best - most gratifying - times of my entire year. When I sit down after the research is done and draw up the initial drafts for another National Review...

In truth, the thrilling rawness of the Arches did come with certain conditions built in. One - which on occasions had a certain charm - was the thundering rumblings of the overhead trains to and from the nearby Central Station. Another - which was more inconvenient - was the Arches' weekend identity as one of the UK's hottest-coolest clubs.

NM: I'd finish all my negotiations with the artists, explain how we could tech the spaces for them, but maybe not be able to make it exactly like the space they'd originally shown the work in, they'd need to adapt, and over the years artists would do exactly that. But then I was having to negotiate with the people running the clubs, who weren't used to sharing 'their' spaces with seating banks, or art installations! I used to have to bite my tongue, sometimes. And sometimes... I just didn't. Actually, I'm used to fighting for the programme, but this was a whole new situation. We'd be finishing the programme for the day - clearing up, safely stowing things - and the DJ's would be waiting to go 'whoosh!' into the same spaces. That meant, for me, re-thinking a lot of what I'd planned to do, it was testing for all involved but we had to make it work. It was 1994, my ambitions for the work were getting bigger - because our audiences were getting bigger, and I didn't want to let any of that slide. And anyway, National Review at that time suited the Arches very well. They needed us, as much as we needed them.

There was an extraordinary sensation that began from the moment you came along that scuzzy back alley - the entrance was still in Midland Street then, beside the homeless shelter, usually folk outside with their cider bottles - then entering into these vaulted Victorian arches. People who'd never been there, especially, felt it was all very underground - even before they'd seen any of the work!

I used to have to explain to artists, however, that - this is before refurbishment, remember - these were not enclosed spaces. There was a central aisle that ran between the archways, and even when we put seating banks in for some performances, it remained a very open layout. Never mind the overhead trains, there was sound spilling out from all the other arches - and some artists could react badly to that. Looking back, maybe I was more worried than I needed to be, or should have been. I've attended many visual art shows where there are sound-bleeds all over the place. It's just a given. But by the time we were at the Arches, a different kind of attitude to putting on work had started to assert itself - people would arrive with very precise tech specs and expect us to spend an entire day just rigging for their half-hour show. Some of the work relied so heavily on technical help the get-ins were becoming more and more complicated. At the same time, there were always other artists who just got on with it, regardless.

Our eyes meet. We both grin. We're thinking of the same performance, and it's Kazuko Hokhi's Toothless (1998) - a wryly humorous, gentle and softly-spoken piece about her mother's death from cancer.

MB: And Claude Wampler?

NM: Claude Wampler! I'd already primed the front-of-house staff to keep an eye on the younger audiences, especially, who were treating that centre aisle like a main street, running up and down, screaming to their friends to come and see this or that - totally unconcerned, unaware, that those of us with our backs to the aisle were actually watching a live performance. Just as their noise had been dealt with...

MB: ... there was this incredible whammy to the ear-drums, mega-decibels of operatic mayhem looping out of Claude Wampler's durational installation (*Bucket*) further down the 'street'. And I know it's not any kind of intentional spoiler, but still I'm thinking 'will somebody kill that sound - or kill Claude Wampler. Now!' Then - and I started to become more aware of this that year - the overlapping layers of sound pushed me into focusing more on what Kazuko was doing. There was this random, disconnected soundscape - kind of like other realities intruding on the one I was watching - and suddenly it stopped being irritating, distracting, and became as much a context as other people laughing or catching surprised breath as Kazuko told her anecdotes or unfolded her dainty paper props.

NM: That was the strange thing about it. It should have been counter-productive - to be honest, sometimes it was - but it also produced some quite unexpected moments that could never have been planned in advance. You happened on them, or you didn't. And that's definitely when I started talking more about the National Review in terms of 'taking a journey'. I could, was, making my own maps of where things could be found on the ground-plan of the building. But I wanted to encourage people to make their own choices as to what they saw, or in what order. It was, back then, more or less possible to see everything on the programme if you were very organised - and didn't end up sitting, talking in the bar. But in later years that hasn't been the case, the programme has grown so much. By then Ian Smith was our MC - and people would keep approaching him to ask where they should be. Ian was really great at explaining the daily diary - but it was still up to them to choose. Spend time in an installation, or sign up for a one-to-one. Watch a live performance, or sit in on a screening. Sorry, no - your day pass doesn't mean you can see everything. Some shows are limited capacity - you'll have to queue, which might mean missing out on something else. But actually, your day pass is cheaper than a ticket to a single theatre performance in many other venues ... so with all these choices, it's pretty good value, no?

This is not, I should point out, delivered as a cross-patch harangue but rather Nikki - with one eyebrow raised - choosing to channel an irksome memory into something flip that we can laugh about. Better, though, to conjure up the memories we cherish most from the Arches years of 1994 - 2005. And here's a very small selection, chosen at random:

'Franko B - not just because of the performances, which affected people profoundly, but because of how he really involved himself with the National Review and with the young artists and students who zoomed in on him, eager to talk.'

'Lorena Wolffer - part of 'Idols and Idolatries' in 2001, with a piece called *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?* At one point, she left the catwalk - where she'd been both a model and a skivvy, while the sound system broadcast a US Senate debate on how they should "treat Mexico" - and offered to have her picture taken with audience members for 50p. First up, side-by-side all-smiley shots. Gradually, things get a bit more up close and personal until - for 50p - there's the expectation of a snog... Not unlike the rather dismissive, exploitive way those US politicians were debating the "how much" and "what'll we get for it" issue of aid to Mexico. Hmmm.'

'Kira O'Reilly (*Bad Humours*, 1998) - black leeches latched onto a naked alabaster back. Gorging relentlessly until sated with blood, they pop off like glistening grapes... leaving two wounds like eyes trickling crimson tears. And we watch this, long slow minutes on end. Silent. Knowing - but never voicing - why we stand and look on as a woman bleeds, beautifully.'

'Raimund Hoghe (*Throwing the body into the fight*, 2005) - laying out the fragments of his childhood past, with a quiet dignity. Rejection. Discrimination. Hoghe made his experiences into rituals of exquisite performance, culminating in the removal of his shirt to reveal the reality of his twisted spine. Not in pursuit of pity, but as a silent challenge to the conventions of beauty, by an artist who understands and transcends their limits.'

'Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci...' - *but there's a story here.*

NM: Instead of sending me a DVD, or an invitation to a live performance, like a lot of artists do to attract my initial attention, Marie said 'Fabio and I are coming to Glasgow. We would like to do our show at your house.' I lived in a church hall in Kinning Park at the time - I'd had board meetings, artists rehearsing, even press launches there, so why not? They turned up. I sat in the kitchen while they prepared the space. To this day, I think I had the best one-to-one performance of their work imaginable. It's a very European aesthetic. Delicately artful. Moments when it's just Marie's own imperceptible shift of hand that's causing the carefully arranged sheets of white paper to move. It's poetic, contemplative - and not the kind of work you often see in the UK. But you'll find it - and work that is similarly thoughtful and profound, from Asia... or Eastern Europe... or - in a National Review of Live Art programme.

MB: You feel very strongly about finding, bringing in, that international work that never seems to make it into any other UK festivals...

NM: It's part of what makes the National Review matter to so many people. They come to Glasgow to see work that isn't available to them elsewhere in Britain - sometimes the work from India, Thailand, Singapore, isn't even being programmed in Europe. Connections are made with people; I travel to see the work and engage with the artists, because... simply because I believe in the artform and the command it has at its best. We've talked about this before, you and I. How sometimes on seeing a piece of work there are moments that you can't analyse or explain - they just grab you by the throat. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there's a knot in your stomach. Your whole being has taken it in. No other artform has quite the same impact. Alastair's work has often done that for me, actually.

This nudges us both back into another vivid memory - Alastair MacLennan's 1996 installation, Mael. Being based in Belfast, MacLennan had witnessed the ongoing toll of death, destruction and religious divisiveness that carried the somewhat mildly euphemistic tag, The Troubles. This durational installation brought emblematic sounds, smells and images of those times into the Arches. Not in a barrage of gun-fire or sectarian slogans, but in a spoken roll-call of the dead intoned in the dark, shadowy reaches of a space filled with rows of burnt-out cars.

NM: It was an unexpectedly difficult work to install - and it's the only time Alastair has shown me any signs of anger... no, not anger, frustration and concerns about the integrity of the piece. He'd asked for burnt-out cars and I remember thinking 'Glasgow - no problem!' Ironically, we didn't find one. We did find several wrecks, however. That year, some American friends were on the tech team - and, being amazing scenic artists, they'd painted the cars exquisitely so as they really did look like burnt-out cars. But one essential element was missing. They didn't smell like burnt-out cars. So I received a phone call from Alastair. 'Nikki - it's not right. You need to come down to the venue and see for yourself.' If it had been a Hollywood movie, the cars would have been great. But they just didn't hack it for Alastair's proposed work. So we had to take them away, set fire to them, bring them back in - the smell pervaded every part of the Arches for the whole five days. And I can remember going in at one point, just to see what was happening - there were flowers, I think, by then - and Alastair, all in black, moved out of the shadows and he placed a child's shoe in front of one of the wrecked cars before walking slowly out of the space. And that image has stayed with me ever since...

Alastair presented Nikki with the same shoe in a small plastic box of detritus from his past work at the 30th. anniversary in 2010.

MB: I know what you mean about the smell. It really clung inside your nostrils - you could almost taste the scorched metal, the melted plastic... For me, though, the moment that threw me most was hearing all these 'Brennans' on the roll-call - and wondering 'what if...' even though I was pretty sure I didn't have any relatives in Belfast.

More than a decade later, it's as if we're both smelling that oddly tainted, unnerving smell. And then one thing leads to another and triggers yet more recollections.

Anne Seagrave. Julia Bardsley. Andrew Poppy. Michael Mayhew. Richard Layzell (with and without Tania Koswycz). Liz Aggiss. Billy Cowie. Lisa Wesley. La Ribot. Richard DeDomenici. Robert Ayers. You - and many others - have enlivened the memories and conversations that I've drawn on for this brief history. Too many anecdotes and accolades to squeeze in, I'm afraid, before the pressures of time and space shift the National Review over the River Clyde - out of the dark subterranean realms of the Arches and into the airy lightness, and outdoor possibilities, of Tramway where the National Review was located from 2006 to 2008.

MB: Why?

NM: People did keep asking me that! They'd tell me how much they missed the Arches - and in the next breath go on to tell me how much they were enjoying the ambition Tramway allowed us. In part, it was all to do with practicalities. It felt as if, in terms of audience numbers and capacity, that we'd outgrown the Arches. Even so, it wasn't an easy decision. That last edition at the Arches, when - on the final Sunday - we'd stripped out the whole of Arch 2, taken down the blinds and let the daylight flood in for Black Market International (*20 Years*, 2005) to use the space across the whole of the day... They were still making work, and people were sitting watching, hour after hour, while the light faded and dusk fell. It was a very poignant event. That really was a reminder to me of how important that venue had been for the National Review. Artists had achieved some remarkable work there. And even if it lost some of its raw appeal after the refurbishment - carpets appeared in the basement spaces, walls got painted, the whole layout of the building changed - it still offered interesting possibilities. And of course we were glad to go back to those in 2009, when Tramway's own building works and change in attitude towards us meant we couldn't use it. Maybe we should think of buying tents. Or caravans.

Anyway, we'd opted to go to Tramway and for me - well I've always said these moves were timely - it meant a whole new set of challenges, but in a way it also allowed me to come full circle and return to some of the areas that reflect my own background in the work. And because we had grown a handsome audience by this time, to take more risks was fun to do - if that's not too contradictory. I could invite work that suited an array of different spaces; placing artists like Julia Bardsley in a small, intimate space where audiences could get close enough to appreciate the intricate craftsmanship in her design - but also engage with her as a performer. I could use the big main space of Tramway 1 for the politicised spectacles of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *La Pocha Nostra*. I could put a durational installation - like *The Project* (2006) by Lisa Wesley and Andrew Blackwood - in the atmospheric, self-contained environ of the Greenhouse, or Kris Verdonck's projection onto the huge chimney, or Gwendoline Robin setting herself alight on the lawns - which meant people going out, into the Hidden Gardens, encountering a completely different set of circumstances. Fresh air. Grass. Trees. Totally different from the Argyle Street diesel fumes, greasy spoon food smells and town centre bustle that's on the doorstep at the Arches.

And yes, it was white and open - had a huge ground-floor area where people could mill about. And which worked really well the year French-Mottershead were artists-in-residence (2006) and whose photographic project, *A Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody*, simply wouldn't have been possible in the Arches. But - and I always seem to be saying this - there were

drawbacks. Going into a building that's run according to local authority rules, we came up against the full force of Health and Safety regulations. The Festival's own crew found dealing with the in-house crew difficult, they weren't exactly welcoming us with open arms... And when we brought some members of Black Market International back (2007) and gave them the big Tramway 2 gallery space for five days, it had its moments! I mean, you can ask artists not to 'smoke', or 'climb up ladders', or 'make the floor slippery', or 'not to go smashing anything up without informing a member of staff first', the rules were endless, it creates potential rebellion, even in the most chilled, reasonable artists. And, yes, there was a response, but a controlled one. Anyway, the first year the fire brigade had to answer an alarm, it wasn't an artist who was responsible. It was the kitchen... Do you remember that? We all had to pile out onto the street, and Richard DeDomenici had...

MB: ... this little tea trolley, piled with sweets. And he doled them out to everybody on the pavement, like it was all a party.

NM: Where did he get the trolley? I do wonder, sometimes, what that boy has in his luggage - but he turns up, even when he's not on the programme. And a lot of artists do that, year on year, which I find charming.

MB: Michael Mayhew was there that year too (2006). Do you remember the first time we saw him perform? It was down in Manchester, at a Platform selection show at the Green Room, in a piece with Becky Edmunds.

NM: And I programmed them for the National Review at Third Eye later that year (*Sex, Drink and Fast Cars*, 1989). I used to do all the Platforms, it was a great way of keeping in touch with the grassroots. Written applications are a pretty ineffective way to select work, especially emerging artists.

MB: It's Elevator now, isn't it?

NM: Yes. And some people still think it's the same - a kind of graduate showcase - only under a different name. But it's not. There came a point where everyone was presenting Platforms, staging them as an event in themselves. At the start, we'd been the only festival offering young, emerging artists a national platform to show their work. When it turns into a kind of circuit - it's time to change. Elevator - as the name suggests - was about the next stage in an artist's involvement. When artists have already made work, and are hopefully moving forward in their career development. There aren't always the same opportunities because you're not the new, young thing anymore! That's when support can be vital. And the National Review has always been about encouraging and supporting the artist - and the adjectives 'new' and 'young' don't take priority in that.

MB: You and I don't ever talk about the work in 'ologies' or 'isms' do we?

Nikki laughs.

NM: No we don't, do we? We leave that to the academics, to some commentators and writers - actually, I just hate labelling the work. I think some of the current terminology is really off-putting to members of the public who are already having to deal with the way some in the media still insist on referring to the work as a bit weird and wacky, suggesting perhaps it is 'not for them' and feeding a sense of alienation. Or it's 'The National Review - it can be really wonderful but...' Artists can be their own worst enemies. They'll submit programme copy that even I find hard to decipher - and I've probably seen the work. And some journalists just love to pounce on that, take the cheap shot, make out their work to be exclusive and pretentious. The work can disappoint of course, in all sectors of the arts. But I have witnessed many a time when an artist's work has

been transformative for some who attended a performance reluctantly at first, or to those who may have come across it by pure accident. They became real fans.

If we can persuade 500 people to enter the National Review on a Friday night - and that's not counting the ones who couldn't get a ticket because we'd reached the Health and Safety maximum capacity - then we're not talking about some elitist art form. It's work that is surely speaking to a rather large audience, work that has integrity, feels relevant, work that audiences can relate to. For me, labels can get in the way of that. It's one reason why I stopped using the title 'New Moves' for my other festival, since that name prompted it to be seen as a dance festival. But the work wasn't actually 'dance' in the way most people would interpret that term. So those who were expecting - I don't know... something mainstream-contemporary, but got one of Rui Horta's investigations into performance and the role of the audience, could feel put out. 'This isn't dance...' Others, who wouldn't thank you for any kind of straightforward choreographies, but who are really interested in new performative directions, simply see the word 'dance' and put the brochure down... The replacement name, New Territories, describes what we do much more succinctly and is more accurately descriptive.

MB: And in 2002, when I wrote the introduction to the festival's programme, I said that 'New Territories begin where the old prejudices leave off...' And that seemed to me to sum up how you were increasingly determined that 21st century artists - and the work they wanted to make - wouldn't be compromised or misrepresented by labels that were still rooted in 19th century genres and pigeon-holes.

NM: And that's exactly why I decided to bring the two festivals (the National Review of Live Art and what had been New Moves) closer together in the spring time-line - and to use New Territories on the brochure cover (2002). Because more and more I could see that there were works in one that could just as easily be programmed in the other. And getting rid of those irrelevant divisions is how I see the National Review evolving. After thirty years, it's time to look long and hard at what's in the name. I called the work Live Art all those years ago when 'performance art' didn't seem to cover all the new ideas that were around - video, for instance. New technologies, new possibilities, new artists were emerging - 'Live Art' seemed a good way to include them. Now, it's become such a catch-all phrase and hence, rather meaningless. The world and its dog will talk about 'live art' without really knowing its history, or really care. I've seen the word 'installation' used to describe something Kate Moss was setting up - so when that happens, it's time to lose some of the labels I think.

And maybe, in a way, it's because I feel I've travelled full circle. Becoming more and more drawn to the kind of raw, performance art pieces that inspired me in the first place. Which is why I was so thrilled when I could bring in so many of the artists from the co-operative Black Market International and just give them the space to create - in the Arches, and then in Tramway 2 - to inhabit the space, and the moment, connect with one another, make work in real time. For our younger audiences that was, I think, a revelation. People still talk to me about it.

In 2011 BMI took over a space in a very raw SWG3, it was the beginning of a post-NRLA era, an undefined New Territories.

I'm not saying the programme will be excluding any of the elements we've built up over the years. Not at all. If it's out there, if it's interesting, then I'll always consider it. But it's time to metamorphose once more. The decision to stop using the name 'National Review of Live Art' was not made lightly but it is the right psychological moment to do so - and I know people will be mystified, hurt even, and think I'm turning my back on all that history. Nothing could be further from the truth. This *is* the history of the National Review - always being alive to change, initiating it sometimes, but never trailing along behind the rest of the pack. It's why we can have this 30th anniversary edition, look back - but forward, definitely forward, as well.

MB: A toast to the future then?

NM: To the future...

MB: By the way - did you ever think that the National Review would take over your life?

NM: No - did you ever think you'd end up as a critic writing about it for over twenty years?

MB: No... but I'd hate to have missed any of it. Or the conversations.

NM went on to curate the New Territories festival in 2011 that included a new strand of research and programming, TIPA (This Is Performance Art). A more expansive, ambitious, site-specific programme was planned for 2012, fully curated and ready to launch when its production company NMI had to stop trading and it has now become known as The Festival That Never Was. Maybe one day...