



Ring: Felix Ruckel. Photo: Cathy Peylan

# Intimacy with strangers

**Andrew Brown on NOTT Dance 2001.**

NOTT Dance, in its twelfth year, yet again gave Nottingham an opportunity to sample the celebrated and the obscure, the global and the local, all within a festival that has the redefinition of dance at the heart of its mission. The reasons why Nottingham, of all places, should be such a fertile environment for creative experimentation are too involved to go into here, but the key is the presence of not only arts practitioners but also a well informed and artistically literate public. The city attracts people by virtue of its ongoing reputation and because of the facilities and organisations that are based here: the Contemporary Arts course at Nottingham Trent University has been particularly significant in putting the city in the vanguard of live and interdisciplinary arts practice, but other major players include The Future Factory, The Bonington Gallery, Powerhouse, Dance 4 (producers of the NOTT Dance Festival), Reckless Sleepers, Gob Squad, *Live Art Magazine*, Angel Row, the NOW Festival, eXpo and numerous other arts initiatives,

on top of all the usual mainstream activity that goes on in a city of its size.

Dance 4's director, Jane Greenfield, has a strong commitment to bringing non-mainstream work into the city in addition to nurturing what is already here. The investment made over many years is reflected in the often substantial audiences that attend festival events. Part of its success is the loose 'family' of artists that have gathered around Dance 4 and these relationships are maintained, offering performance, touring and research opportunities for the artists. Jérôme Bel and La Ribot are regular performers and the festival has been both supportive and visionary; indeed before NOTT Dance showed an interest in the former's work he had only performed once in the UK, some years earlier. The spin off for the festival is that its wider reputation is enhanced and it is now highly regarded on the European mainland, far more so it seems than in the UK. Nottingham benefits too, by

being perceived as a vibrant place and it is true that few other places in the country can support the diversity of activities that go on in the city.

That some of the content of the NOTT Dance programme is not dance should come as no surprise to anyone. It could even be termed anti-dance. Definitions however are becoming increasingly irrelevant. As Jane Greenfield puts it, artists in NOTT Dance 'are creating work as a result of their knowledge and understanding of the dance form. This involves an altogether different kind of dance language, one that is as much about context as content'.<sup>4</sup>

William Ewing in *The Body*<sup>5</sup> attributes the contemporary artist's focus upon and rethinking of the body as a response to scientists' and engineers' attempts to restructure and reconstitute it. Whatever the source of the impulse, the body (along with the mind) is surely the most fascinating site for creative investigation. As you might expect, artists like Jérôme Bel, Felix Ruckert and La Ribot – who all appeared at this year's festival – pose questions around the body that demand consideration. The issue is not simply around the artist's body either but the audience's bodies too. Interesting confrontations arise when art, typically seen as 'different' to real life, utilises direct experience and includes the observer in the action as its subject, particularly the case with Felix Ruckert's piece *Ring*.

Barriers between artist and performer are flexible and as members of an audience we might expect to find ourselves in situations that are without precedent. In such situations, with senses heightened, there are opportunities for the artist who wishes to, to leave his/her audience with more than just an unread programme and yet another performance to tick off the list.

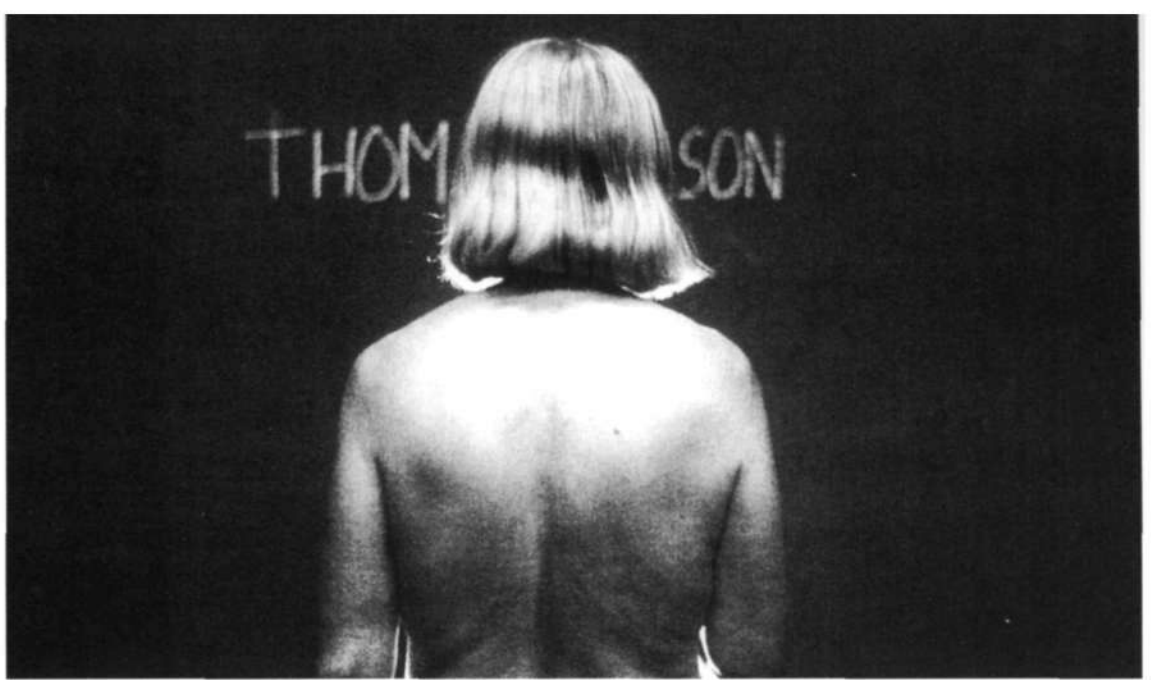
La Ribot dispensed with many of the rules for her third presentation of *piezas distinguidas*, *Still Distinguished*. Although not at all threatening herself, the work had a provocative aspect to it due to the stark imagery used and the unrelenting scrutiny that both she and the audience were subjected to. From the start, when she entered the Bonington Gallery, switched on TV monitors and left us to watch by ourselves; to the end, when she took the applause and stood, unflinching, returning the audience's gaze, not retiring to her dressing room, conventions were overturned.

The use of the naked body by an artist such as La Ribot invariably has to be questioned, because the body comes with a great deal of baggage. Primarily it provides a ground zero of style for the performer, without the 'distractions' of clothing, subject to fashion. There are undoubtedly issues of sincerity and commitment that come into play, and there may also be an intention to desensitise as this is the inevitable effect of seeing a performer naked for a period of time. In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes wrote that 'woman is desexualised at the very moment she is stripped naked'.<sup>3</sup> We approach art and sex with different hats on, so to speak. Performers appear naked and yet are clothed by their intention and the reading of their activities as art.

After the video *pieza distinguida* La Ribot reappeared and began her performance. A member of the audience who sat on the floor close to her became part of an accidental duet as the artist moved across the floor, creating a trail of items, arranged as though she was sorting out her belongings on her bedroom floor. The task complete, she lay down as though sunbathing.

Moving to a large ball of string she bound it tightly around her head, neck, shoulders and on down her body to her ankles until she was trussed up like a parcel, complete with oversized airport baggage label. Her face grew red with the pressure of the rope as she held the pose long enough for us to be asking ourselves how much longer this would continue. At length she unwrapped herself, the tightness of the cords evidenced by the marks on her flesh.

Moving on she arranged a collage of red items of clothing and put on an unconvincing hairpiece together with a pubic wig. Her feet slipped further and further apart until she went into a split, held for what felt like an eternity. Each audience member was forced to confront this unrelenting tableau vivant, the spectacle of La Ribot, her legs splayed on the floor in front of them. There was no hiding place for either artist or viewer with the room so brightly lit and the silence so deep. An odd electronic version of 'Silence is Golden' was played at this point, making its point. Finally she stood up, removed the wigs and moved to a place where some pieces of broken chair lay. Each was taped to her body in the fashion of hastily applied splints, forcing her to stand erect, arms extended like a ballerina on the top of a music box.



La Ribot's mastery of the space was total. The performance not only felt honest, it demanded honesty in return.

Nigel Charnock's *Asylum* was a bold experiment that never came off. Good to see both artists and programmers prepared to take a risk, particularly on the stage of the Nottingham Playhouse, but this 'physical play with songs' felt out of place within NOTT Dance. Charnock's provocation lay in creating a work that courted the mainstream and confounded many in the audience. My personal disappointment was that Nigel Charnock himself was not on the stage. In a sense he was, as the five performers appeared to be impersonating him, albeit without the man's charm and charisma. There were chuckles of approval from sections of the audience but the overwhelming talk in the days afterwards among people who go all the way back with Nigel to DV8 was of disappointment. However it is apparent that Nigel Charnock has moved on since DV8 and is not about to apologise for the fact.

Jérôme Bel's work is apparently simple and yet deeply enigmatic. It was unconventional programming on the part of the festival co-ordinator Ayla Suveren, to show the company's signature piece *Jérôme Bel* only two years after it was last seen here. However I was pleased to get the opportunity to experience it again and many others had missed it the first time. The performers apparently reveal all, their names, telephone numbers, bank balances, naked bodies, even their own sweat and urine, yet still remain ciphers. Bel reduces dance to its component parts – space, time, the body, with lights and music in the form of a hand held bare light bulb and a breathily-sung rendition of the *Rite of Spring*.

Words and symbols written in chalk or lipstick determine or give a name to what we see. What we do see are the kind of games lovers might play, passing the time doing things with their naked bodies. The performers gradually up the ante until the 'release' of the climax, and then wipe away selective traces of the chalk from the blackboard to leave us with a quirky ending. In the way they used their bodies, particularly in apparently passing an object around under the skin, they suggested that the body is a 'suit', or at least 'skin pants' and a 'skin vest'.

There was more of a buzz around the Felix Ruckert piece than around any I can remember. There also seemed to be a lot of people among the audience who I had never seen before, a sign that people had travelled some distance to witness this work. The mechanics of *Ring* are straightforward enough. Twenty-one performers, one for each member of the 'inner' audience. A ring of twenty-one seats on which the inner audience sit, facing the 'outer' audience who observe the proceedings from the edges of the space. Once all the seats were occupied the performers each approached an audience member and spoke softly into their ear, flattering them, making them feel good. A clap from somewhere in the room and the performers move onto the next person, thus bringing each audience member and performer together at least once. After further sweet talk, the contact becomes physical and increasingly intimate, with our hands being held, moved across the performer's body, and deep and lingering eye contact made and held. The performers hold us closely and the feel of the unfamiliar bodies trembling, hearts beating fast, sweating, is truly compelling. The contact grew yet more intimate and reached its climax with the

kissing of necks and arms. Stranger than the contact with complete strangers was the contact with the people I already knew among the performers, as students, colleagues and friends.

Susan Sontag wrote that 'art is seduction, not rape, and art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject'.<sup>4</sup> I was very much seduced, complied utterly and loved every minute of it. To conclude, we were informed that we had one minute to do whatever we wanted with 'our' performer. What ensued was a riotous display of couples skipping around the room, reciprocal massage and even, allegedly, some toe sucking.

It was over all too quickly and another audience's turn. The feelings we had experienced were powerful, more so than in practically any other art context. This was 'real'. I knew of groups who interacted with the audience in order to 'smash the art barrier' but this was far more subtle. People's expressions showed their acceptance and pleasure at the experience. For the observing audience the sight of forty-two performers carrying out unusual choreography was impressive and stirred echoes for me of Pina Bausch's TanzTheater Wuppertal of which Ruckert was a member before setting up his own company.

There was no opportunity for me to applaud in order, as Richard Schechner describes 'to conclude the performance and wipe away the reality of the show, re-establishing in its place the reality of everyday life'.<sup>5</sup> I felt opened up and desperate to tell people about it, although when I tried the words were inadequate. You just had to be there.

Another successful NOTT Dance then, with some excellent work. Other highlights included Michael Hulls' *Shadowspace* a coolly detached series of large projections showing a dancer's shadow; Déjà Donné's *Aria Spinta*, a comedic denouement of life certainties and the illusions that prop up a theatrical performance; and Bert van Gorp and Sean Tuan John's *Dances for Aliens* that left everybody smiling.

However to suggest that all in the garden is rosy would be remiss. Local politicians could demonstrate their support for the arts by addressing the City Council's paternalistic licencing laws which lump Jérôme Bel and La Ribot in with lap and table dancers, the latter from which they are presumably trying to protect us. Two security guards had to be

present for the shows of the two artists in the Bonington Gallery in order to obtain a temporary entertainment licence. What is the role of a bouncer in an art gallery? What or whom are they supposed to be protecting?

I perceive another, more serious threat derives from the relationships that are formed between art organisations and large institutions such as universities. For example, it has just been announced that due to a shortfall in recruitment across Nottingham Trent University (but not in the Faculty of Art and Design) the budget for the Future Factory, which in turn provides financial support and facilities to NOTT Dance, is to be cut by half. The apparent ease with which worthy initiatives can be blown away by distant decision makers needs to be taken on board by all those who have or are considering relationships with such institutions. ●

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- 1 Greenfield, Jane. 'Between the margins'. *Animated*, Winter 2000: 21.
- 2 Ewing, William A. *The Body*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994: 9.
- 3 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Soleil, 1957.
- 4 Susan Sontag quoted in Ben Chaim, Daphna. *Distance in the Theatre: the aesthetics of audience response*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981: 43.
- 5 Schechner, Richard. 'Magnitudes of performance' in Schechner, R & Appel, W (eds.) *By Means of Performance: intercultural studies of theatre and ritual*. Cambridge University Press, 1990: 28-39.



Still Distinguished La Ribot. Photo: Mario Del Curto