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Nikki's tales of the unexpected

MARY BRENNAN

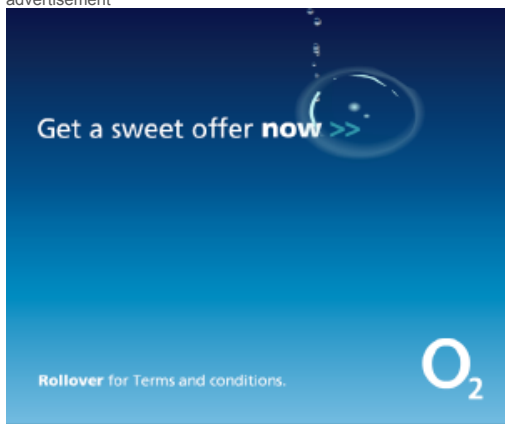
February 10 2009

Expect the unexpect-ted" is the unofficial watchword when engaging with the diverse attractions at the National Review of Live Art (NRLA) - back at the Arches, Glasgow and opening there tomorrow night.

It's unlikely, however, that the NRLA will harbour anything quite as unexpected as the envelope, piled up with weeks of other mail, that greeted Nikki Milican on her return from annual leave.

Jet-lagged from a trip Down Under, the NRLA's artistic director couldn't quite process the words "Cabinet Office" and when she opened the envelope "It was just gobbleydegook," laughs Milican. "It had been a long flight, I was too exhausted - just thinking, What is this? I actually had to get someone to read it to me, only to realise I was supposed to keep it quiet for the next month. A bit of a shock, really."

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The shock was being awarded an OBE "for services to performance art".

Given that most of what Milican has programmed and supported throughout her career operates from a distinctly anti-establishment vantage point, the notion of being honoured this way both amuses and bemuses her, somewhat.

"I do wonder if anyone from the palace or the Cabinet Office has seen what I do. But I am very grateful for the recognition - though I think it's as much for the company, New Moves International (NMI), and all the work we've done over the years.

"It hasn't exactly been plain sailing since I went independent in 1993 - year on year there have been what always feel like the same challenges. Explaining to funders, yet again, why the work is so important to the audiences we've built up over time. Defending our corner, as if we still had something to prove after almost 30 years. Trying to convince people who are outside the live art' sector that the work really matters. Is increasingly popular. Isn't generation-specific - and you can't say that about every festival.

"I'm probably on my high horse at that point - and probably in a way that will strike some listeners as arrogant and difficult. In my how dare you judge us - especially when you've only been in your post for six months' mode."

She's laughing as she injects this shrug of self-mockery into a thumbnail sketch of circumstances that would have drained the commitment out of many directors after five, 10, 15 years.

Milican has been on the case since she took over curating the NRLA in 1984.

'Next year is the NRLA's 30th anniversary. But it doesn't matter how old a festival is, as long as it's fresh and vibrant'

In the nine years before she set up her own company, she worked for other organisations - back-packing the NRLA like a bonus to add to her own skills as a programmer and talent-diviner.

Glasgow's CCA (then known as the Third Eye Centre) was one of the venues that basked in instant kudos when Milican came on the scene in the late 1980s. When she severed those connections to go independent, however, the NRLA was rendered homeless. Since then it has had to negotiate with partners who already have plans of

their own - and sometimes the unexpected forces Milican and her company manager Colin Richardson-Webb to improvise against the clock.

"We are, yes, back at the Arches this year." She's frank, but factual rather than gossipy-snide.

NRLA 2009 has not gone according to plan. Building work at Tramway and clashing diaries - available dates and empty spaces just wouldn't match up with Milican's programme - meant finding another billet, fast. "It was quite serious for me when I realised I would have to move venues. Again. It meant a further set of challenges - but that's what keeps us from getting into a rut."

She sounds remarkably calm, but with doors open at 5.30pm tomorrow, any kind of foot-

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stamping or yelling meltdown would be pointless. And though Milican will, by her own admission, gallop in on her high horse if she scents any kind of run-around, she is also the kind of consummate professional who can make a virtue out of necessity.

"Being here at the Arches does create a different programme. Tramway allowed me, over the past three years, to build on the more visual art aspect of the programme and since, historically, performance art does come from visual art, it was a great joy for me to have that volume of space in Tramway 2, to experiment, have real scale of ambition. To have those outside areas, too - putting installations in the Greenhouse, projections on that chimney - opened up other possibilities.

"But the Arches has welcomed us back with open arms - being wanted is very nice feeling - and no-one I've spoken to seems to see it as a down-sizing or a backward step. Which is great, because actually the festival itself is changing and evolving.

"Maybe I can't have such a prominent visual art strand here, but there are new beginnings in this year's mix. New perspectives and new people. Next year is the NRLA's 30th anniversary - look out: it will be evolving still more. I don't think it matters how old a festival is, as long as it's fresh and new and vibrant and of the moment. That's what's important."

With that in mind, Milican is offering two separate programmes with the tag Vocal Sonics. She describes them as "the adventures of the human voice". They feature, among others, a Contemporary Inuk Throat Singer from Canada's north called Tagaq and the UK's Phil Minton, whose solo voice improvisations are akin to a "sonic road trip". The voice made visual, the voice as a palette of sounds that can create innovative poetry - in all, the kind of brave new vocalising that has rendered audiences world-wide speechless with delight.

Canada is also supplying 2boys.tv, with a piece called Phobophilia that caused one critic to enthuse over "an experience as thick, dark and sensual as the velvet curtains that engulfed the audience".

Our own Donna Rutherford, a regular presence on the NRLA stage, pops up in a new guise as a DJ, Miss ElectricGypsyland.

There are video screenings, choreographies - but not what Milican classifies as "dancey-dance". These are radical movement pieces that don't automatically tie the body to conventional techniques or aesthetics.

Elsewhere, six Belfast artists will conjoin across seven hours in one space to create a durational, simultaneous performance where onlookers can watch how - as with the unforeseeable coincidences that inform everyday life - the individual readings, actions and visual images can suddenly connect and startle our expectations.

Milican murmurs that she doesn't think any other UK event affords a group of artists the licence to experiment in the moment - either in standalone fashion or with a degree of interaction - so that audiences can share in a performance that is spontaneous, ephemeral, unpredictable. Expect the unexpected at NRLA 2009 - you won't be disappointed...

- The NRLA runs from tomorrow until Sunday. Times vary. A day ticket allows access to all events throughout the day and to the Festival Club. Some shows have limited capacity. Saturday evening's performances are at Tramway, starting 7pm.

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