

# Hybrid

the performance really began, and it achieved its moment of high drama as he cruised through the Doisneau exhibition unwitnessed, except by non-audiences who neither expected nor wanted him there. Mostly they pretended they couldn't see him at all in an intriguing twist on the audience's usual readiness to suspend disbelief.

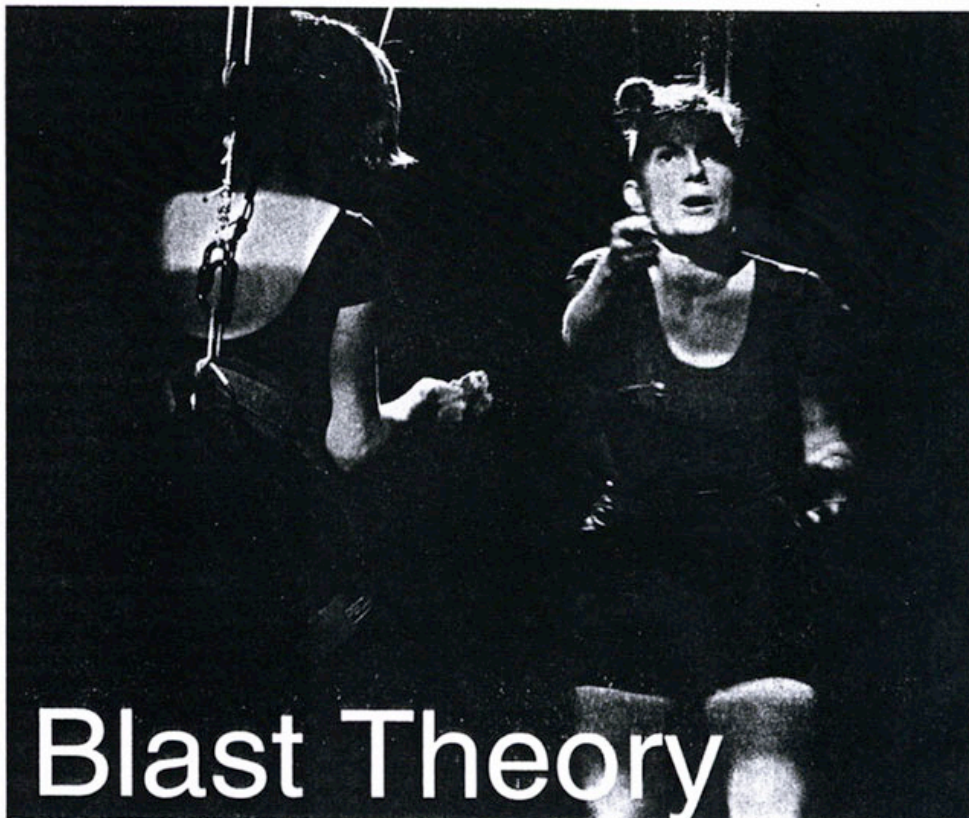
In the more conventional confines of the Purcell Room, Annie Griffin entertained eager audiences with *How To Act Better*, an audacious little show consisting of La Griffin in decollete black velvet breaking the first rule of stage acting by standing resolutely with her back to the audience, talking into a video camera which projected her face large scale above the stage. Where Rose English discusses, disguises and digests the bones of theatrical artifice, Griffin lays them bare with the mildly titillating effect of a sex manual: is there a technical way to cry and will she do it for us, live on stage?

Well yes, Griffin demonstrates a hearty talent as well as a wholesome disrespect for both onstage and offstage traditions. She particularly enjoys provoking us, a theatre audience, with the greater subtlety of celluloid, but it was precisely when the celluloid failed her (the video had a loose connection) that we really understood the full impact of that difference. Bereft of the security of a camera, the performer is thrown back on her old-fashioned theatrical skills. Deprived of the reassuring compulsion of a screen, we the audience are again exposed to the danger and immediacy of the theatre. The spirit of theatre had its revenge that night.

Where *How To Act Better* was a knowing, parodic exercise in form and genre, Blast Theory's *Chemical Wedding* was a passionate, earnest exploration of themes around HIV and AIDS. Apparently eschewing the apostolic succession handed down from Sarah Bernhardt via Griffin, Blast Theory wrestle with ideas and subjectivities: panic, surveillance, attack, constraint, distortion, mutation, symbiosis, victimisation. On screens are projected computer-generated images of microbes, B-movie panic-mongering and exquisitely indistinct pictures of performers and audience doing where we're there to do. Here live video is not used to expose the process but to provide another layer to the environment: the aesthetic and the paranoid.

"Tell us something about HIV" shouted a heckler, missing the point as two performers engaged in a repetitive and lyrical movement suggesting the body's struggle with itself, while two more threw books across them like science's increasingly desperate attempts to intervene. A voice-over speaking statistics was lost in the mêlée but it's not facts we need. Newspapers, factsheets, adverts, helplines tell us facts about HIV; what we now need are the emotional and imaginative resources to deal with those facts.

And by the end of the performance it becomes clear that Blast Theory are not so far removed from the Bernhardt tradition as we might have supposed. They have understood very astutely about pace, structure, crescendo. *Chemical Wedding* ends with a rousing and emotional finale (the more so because of the borrowing of Michael Nyman's music) with two women connected by a pulley-system to each other and two buckets, a pile of sand and long spoons. Hell is a feast with a spoon too long to use, so they say; heaven is discovering you can feed your



## Blast Theory

THEY HAVE UNDERSTOOD VERY ASTUTELY ABOUT PACE, STRUCTURE, CRESCENDO. CHEMICAL WEDDING ENDS WITH A ROUSING AND EMOTIONAL FINALE

neighbour with your long spoon.

Bobby Baker and Fiona Wright provided an unlikely double bill on the second night. Whether by accident or design, the conjunction gave a revealing perspective on different generations of feminist performers. As her show, *Drawing On A Mother's Experience* tells, Baker was in that vanguard of contemporary female artists who had to clear their own space in the jungle without the help of maps and at some personal cost.

Baker adopts a comically self-effacing, slightly ridiculous persona, a pedigree out of Joyce Grenfell by Victoria Wood. She gently pokes fun at the Jackson Pollock school by chucking Guinness, stewed blackcurrants, fish pies and black treacle onto a white sheet. She steadfastly refuses to take herself seriously. Yet the blackness is clearly discernible and not just in the treacle. Each ingredient which soils and stains the white sheet takes on a totemic significance, just as did the objects she attached to herself in *Kitchen Show*. Helene Cixous writes that the act of writing is so total an activity that traces of the true poet remain in the writing - breath, blood, sweat, jouissance. This, if anything, is what genders writing. So it is with Baker's "drawing". She lays it all out before us, then, chillingly, it is erased; a total white-out is effected with nothing more (or less) sinister than two packets of plain flour. It is the antithesis to Mark Rothko's splattering of his own

blood on a canvass; it is anti-heroic and desperately real. In the light of this, Baker's refusal to take herself seriously in her stage persona is profoundly challenging. It is only if an audience dares to do it for her that her work has been understood. It is so easy to laugh.

Griffin and Wright belong to a different generation and already they are starting from a position of confidence. Griffin adopts the same weapon of humour, though for different ends. Wright inherits the confidence and takes it further again. She is not humourless, but her approach is confrontational, sullen, aggressive. Her anger is overt and her mocking is not gentle.

The experience she draws on is received as much as lived, melodramatic and referential, just like Griffin. *Swan Lake*, the Tragic Heroine, the doomed bride "staging her own petite but ecstatic death"; each is lined up for the firing range. Wright is interested in shock tactics. The bride in long veil but only her underwear; unveiled to reveal a shaven head; the performer pissing, first squatting, ladylike, then standing like a man. She dares to compare the tragedy of her petite bride to Christ's crucifixion ecstasy. Could she have done all this without the historical precedence of Baker and Griffin and their like? Would Blast Theory be able to ignore gender as they do without Wright's dogged questioning of it? CB