

Challenging *Elitism*

Spill Festival

Spill Festival welcomes new audiences and practitioners to performance and live art events around London, with subversive political messages, humour, social events and much more.

Performance and its common bedfellows, live art and experimental theatre, have for many an impenetrable exterior and undeniably avant-garde implications. With a myriad of preconceptions, it is refreshing to learn that attendance at the 2007 Spill Festival averaged 91% capacity. The Pacitti Company's inaugural love song to performance highlights what many in publicly funded arts institutions had made assumptions against — that there are significant numbers with an interest in performance, ready to either spectate or participate once the afore-mentioned barriers have been demolished.

On 2 April, Spill Festival will return for its second year, with a programme of events encompassing venues throughout London, from the Barbican, the Southbank and the National Theatre, to the Soho Theatre, Toynbee Studios and Shoreditch Town Hall. Showcasing an eclectic collection of performance, live art and experimental theatre, Spill Festival will comprise of nearly 100 live performances, as well as established names Romeo Castellucci, Forced Entertainment and Kim Noble, alongside a carefully selected cluster of new artists who meet a prerequisite of less than three years performance experience in the *National Platform* initiative.

Spill's Artistic Director, Robert Pacitti, is determined to eradicate the usual preconceptions of performance art and to assume a sense of social responsibility, and community spirit which has become increasingly unfashionable in artistic circles. An important part of this inclusivity is Spill's inter-disciplinary approach to performance to also embrace music, dance and live and visual arts. "It takes from different forms and appeals to people who might be informed in different kinds of formal histories or viewing starting points, so there's a broader audience for work then perhaps if it's just an audience for dance or visual art." Pacitti originally trained as a painter before realising, "it wasn't going to enable me the immediacy of voice, which I required if I were able to call my work activist. By default, I began a lot of performance work that fuses a lot of street-based activity, visual arts, and theatre;" and so

Spill is the first of its kind to enable sideways programming and to be truly artist-led.

When asked how he undertook the programming, Pacitti expands on his own interests as an artist: "I'm interested in work that historically has come from the politics of the body, and loosely the work that I programme is socially engaged, has some sense of itself and its responsibility to its audience. It's very much content-led and there's a lot of work which has adopted historic visual surfaces of work that was radical in the 1960s and 1970s and now is a kind of short-cut aesthetic choice, and I'm interested in the people who are doing that with ideas first." In terms of content-led structures, today's media sphere is increasingly apt for artists practicing outside of the narrative approach, such as Forced Entertainment's *That Night Follows Day*, which, by virtue of its performance at the Soho Theatre, bastion of new writing, neatly encompasses what Pacitti is trying to achieve. "We are now much more savvy about navigating non-narrative work and environments and finding our own way. Work that perhaps doesn't come at you in straight lines really has an increasing audience which is literate with those possibilities."

These non-narrative opportunities interlope with the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of performance to incorporate over 2000 pieces of bespoke pottery, hand crafted by Lot Lemm, for Needcompany's *A Porcelain Project*. Choreographer, Grace Ellen Barkey explores porcelain's exotic associations and the tension involved with this beautifully delicate material as performers both wear and intermingle among the props, creating a surreal atmosphere located somewhere between dream and nightmare. "It's a wild one, I love it, and there are moments of high energy when it really cuts loose." With music from Tom Addis and an overwhelming display of craftsmanship, *The Porcelain Project* really explores "whether you see a classical performance, or whether you're seeing something that could fall apart at any moment" and plays on audience tension through an entrance hall lined by vibrating tables piled high with Lemm's specially created works.



Orgy of Tolerance is another highlight of the Festival where world-renowned Jan Fabre, one of few living artists to exhibit at the Louvre, explores untouched levels of the absurd in protest to today's credit culture and the current climate of acceptability. Pacitti explains: "He is cross about the world that we live in, he's cross about the way our sexualities, our belief patterns, our exchanges, our conversations can be so patrolled by social norms." Pacitti ambiguously emphasises Fabre's duality between humour and activism, "that's the piece of work you should be scared of, he's really got teeth and he really pushes it, he's amazing and completely committed to what he's doing." By placing his audiences in front of a series of improbable and sometimes uncomfortable performances, Fabre critiques a society that has become attuned to tolerating increasing levels of incongruity for the sake of political correctness, or just for politeness' sake. On paper Fabre's work seems to encroach on the hilarious but despite taking inspiration from Python sketches and the "ludicrousness of what humour can be and where it can come from," the serious motives of Fabre's work are clear. He is using humour to get his manifesto across, "doing whatever it takes to share his agenda and ask a series of questions or provocations in order for us as an audience to do the work. Comedy and humour are definitely a part of that."

Pacitti's own work, *A Forest*, explores heightened intimacy by gathering the audience in a circle, while the narrator and performers layer a series of images and tales around the morality of money, all taking inspiration from democratic childhood memories of fairy tales and fables. "I wanted to talk about money as if I was talking about magic in fairy stories because it's transformative, everybody wants a bit of it. It's this thing that you're not quite sure what it is but it holds some sort of promise." Enveloping the audience in a specially commissioned soundscape reinforces these magical elements, "we've placed speakers in a way so that if you could see the shape of the sound, you would be sitting within a sphere, you get a really peculiar sense through the sound track, it's really beautiful."

Spill 2009 promises to be epic, not least in the Romeo Castellucci trilogy of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, taken from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and transposed across all scales from the 60 plus performers of *Inferno*, to the four-person performance of *Purgatorio* and the almost isolated atmosphere of a ten-person audience in *Paradiso*. For Pacitti, the highlight of the festival will be the combination of "hugely aspirational names" such as Fabre and Castellucci, performing in a programme of events alongside the up and coming names in the *National Platform*. Pacitti enthuses: "It's important that *Spill* is built on 50% international work, 50% UK work; 50% very established practice and 50% much younger more emerging practice. They are more mixed up but I take an audit or responsibility for the breadth of stuff that's out there now."

The *National Platform* holds a special place in Pacitti's heart because the interest that it incited highlights how *Spill* has in turn become aspirational for young artists, and it exemplifies the growing audience and practitioners in this area of performance, "even though we're doing all this fantastic huge work I'm really excited about that because it's about what's coming next." Further social programming sees the return of the immensely popular *Spill Feasts*, a social opportunity for artists and audiences alike to break down the barriers between the two parties over a simple good time. Pacitti describes it as a "no brainer. Nice food, good wine, there genuinely wasn't an agenda other than to create a space for a conversation to possibly emerge with no expectations around that." This is what truly sets *Spill* apart — its accessibility. "This territory of work is often seen as difficult, perhaps niche or only for those people in the know. The tricky bit is to set up a situation where people feel warmly invited in the first place, but a huge number of people feel completely franchised and comfortable with the work and programming this work isn't as high risk as people in more traditional venues might think it is."

Spill Festival is running from 2 to 26 April 2009 at venues across London and will tour the UK. Visit www.spillfestival.com.