

# A Dream of an event

Gill Horitz

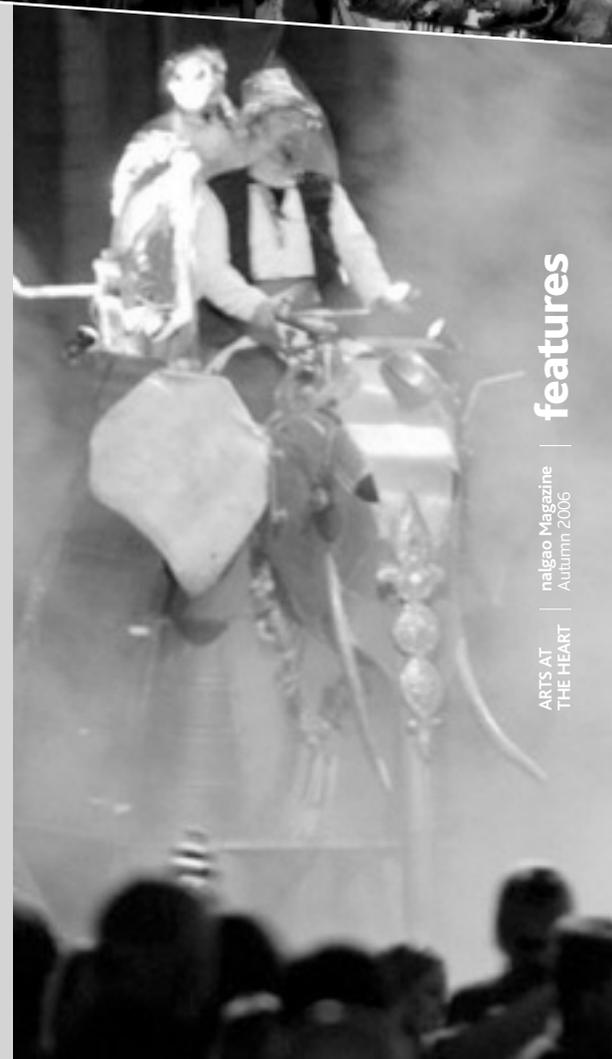
Bournemouth town centre, late one September Saturday evening, and a man's got caught up in a procession crossing the main square, nearly one hundred local people and professional performers pulling illuminated sculptures and vehicles carrying animated screens and dancers ejecting ribbons and fire streams across the pavements, and all of it throbbing to Bhangra rhythms. The man doesn't know where he is, he's being carried along until, after ten minutes, he finds himself in a dark park with the promise of fire and light over by the perimeter trees. He phones his mates, waiting for him in the town centre. 'Sorry I'm late, I'm surrounded by light and fire, there's a steel elephant, dancers and fireworks. It's amazing; I can't believe it. I'll see you later.' Nearby, another man: it's the end of a hard day spent on a building site, and he's been relaxing for a while in the pub. Now, he's also caught in the stream of

light and music and sculptures, and he's worrying that his wife won't believe him when he tells her he's late home because he followed a life size steel elephant and some crazy horsemen to a park lit with flares and...

Almost four thousand other people watched the processional performance of Emergency Exit Arts' Runga Runga show, as it passed through the town centre and up into Meyrick Park for the dynamic finale of fire and light. People came out of bars and pubs, stood on the pavement with their drinks, on their front door steps, as the parade went by.

## **Bournemouth Belle**

The event was programmed by Bournemouth Borough Council's Arts Development Unit with three clear aims: to raise the profile of good quality participatory arts work in Bournemouth; to highlight how suitable the town centre



is for this kind of event ('Better than anywhere in Europe', according to Les Sharpe, EEA's Artistic Director) and, most importantly, to persuade decision makers, sponsors, and the public that this could become an annual event with economic impacts to benefit the local economy.

Emergency Exit Arts spent two weeks in the town (funded by Arts Council of England's Grants for the Arts and Bournemouth Borough Council, Soundstorm at Dorset Music Service and Wave), leading free open workshops in the Lower Gardens and the town square. They also worked with groups already involved in arts participation through existing arts development projects: TOPS, a theatre group of actors with learning disabilities, and a group of women attending Sure Start Bournemouth, who made a 15 foot Bournemouth belle in a blue and white striped bikini. New groups also took part: parents and children from Boscombe Neighbourhood Nursery, and students

from Portchester School. And new artists were offered paid placement opportunities to work with experienced workshop artists. Nothing special about that; good quality arts development practice has a duty to work in this way, without making a song and dance about issues such as inclusion, mentoring, new audiences and cultural diversity.

### ***Touched by an experience of communitas***

So what was the trigger for peoples' special reaction, their raised spirits, and their engagement? What provoked superlatives, caused a 'buzz', a 'thrill', an experience like 'an extraordinary and magical dream', where people were 'entranced by the sheer brilliance of it all', and the 'beauty' of the finale, the visual feast of it all?

Firstly, the quality of artistic design, direction and vision of EEA's imaginative fusion of British urban life with

contemporary British Asian culture and Indian legends; plus the exuberance of being connected en masse, as participant or viewer, to the movement, noise and spectacle.

And something less tangible occurred, something inside touched by an experience of communitas? Of provocation? Of ritual and festival? A sense of the arts keeping faith with the enjoyment of creative action for its own sake, for the intrinsic quality which gives people a sense of being alive and spirited. That's what the arts are good for, which we know, having been ourselves participants and audience; but also, as arts professionals, having listened to the views of participants and audience. Based on this, the imperative is to build a case, gather sponsors and committed partners, and embed the event into the town's cultural calendar. Watch Bournemouth's space! ●  
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