

On seeing Schrödinger for the first time
The Place, London
November 17, 2011
Sara Jane Bailes

In 2011 when I first saw Reckless Sleepers' Schrödinger, the company's Artistic Director, Mole Wetherell, remarked that it's a piece the company had returned to over and over again since it was originally made in 1998 and toured until 2001. Yet despite being over a decade old it felt as fresh and compelling as anything I'd seen for a long time, in the genre of performance within which this kind of experimental work sits.

Schrödinger echoes and recycles images and vernaculars familiar to other performances which map some of this theatre company's influences and lineage. From Impact Theatre's iconic 1984 performance, *The Carrier Frequency*, a stark, post-apocalyptic world depicted through a scaffolding, steel and concrete structure rising out of a pool of water, to early Forced Entertainment shows such as *(Let the Water Run its Course) to the Sea that Made the Promise* (1986), *Club of No Regrets* and *Speak Bitterness* (1993,1994), to the straight limbed, crisp minimalism of Belgian choreographer, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in the late 80s and early 90s (in particular *Rosas danst Rosas*) and even something of the physical risk of DV8's earlier works (*My Sex, Our Dance*, 1986). I had seen both De Keersmaeker and DV8 perform in this same venue (*The Place*), and imagistic memories I witnessed in both of those performances almost three decades earlier were summoned by Schrödinger.

The "re-make" of Schrödinger, to borrow Wetherell's term, felt neither dated nor predictable, yet it wears the time stamp of its original making. It travels towards us from the end of the 20th century carrying with it a nostalgia shaped by the cultural milieu of the century's earlier decades in the musicality and mood the performance so strikingly creates. Schrödinger does what the best kind of visual, physical, hybrid theatre does, which is to invent its own formal structures and the conditions and logic of the rules that determine its making. It then proceeds by examining them creatively but rigorously until those same constraints produce a body of material to work with. The result is the performance we see, a piece hewn out of invention and discovery (much of which is discarded) which eventually settles into a crafted and rehearsed, repeatable piece that is tightly choreographed and precise in its delivery while retaining some of the looser play of improvisation. It felt appropriate to be watching it at *The Place*, still one of

London's largest and most generous black box spaces. It's filled with the histories and ghosts of other artists interested in the visual idioms that performance can gift us, and the imaginative freedom provided when spoken language, a psychologically driven plot, and character as the organizing principles of theatre are relinquished.

For me, *The Place* carries the histories of some of the above-mentioned artists and many others besides whose work explores and investigates territories that traverse several creative disciplines at once - specifically here theatre, dance and visual art, the seams along which the conventions of those forms dissolve into one another. *Schrödinger* is beautifully executed and performed - confident, stylish but also surprisingly humorous. It evokes a more whimsical, remote place and time, ushering in the sense of a mid-century northern European epoch of tailored suits, glistening rain-wet station platforms, brown leather suitcases, arrivals and departures, hand-written letters and dimly lit cafes. It made me think of the prankish antics of Dada in Paris initiated in 1920, the strange dreamworlds of the Surrealists, and disruptive, anarchic, physical comedy as much as it reminded me of Pina Bausch's melancholic dances of the mid-1980s and 1990s. I thought of lovers who can't leave one another nor stay together, while at the same time remembering the brilliant silent film comedy actor, Buster Keaton, and the antics of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. I thought about arguments that repeat again and again, somehow perversely gluing couples together, a loop that binds but that also provides that necessary salve, familiarity. *Schrödinger* is quirky but accessible, even to those who might be unfamiliar with this kind of work (I'll return to this later). The slapstick physical dimension of so many *Reckless Sleepers* shows provide the spectator with different points of access and a variety of ways to engage with what we are seeing. Even if it doesn't make sense. But then sense isn't really the point.

So what does *Schrödinger* communicate to its audience - or rather, how does it communicate? It isn't a work that aims to convey a message, nor is it harnessed to a specific narrative, a set of political questions or a storyline as such, though it gathers around specific interests and concerns, primarily the work of Austrian quantum physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, who won the Nobel Prize in 1933 for his contribution to knowledge. Thought experiments and theories of knowing, what it means to see or recognize, and the illusions that often underpin what we think of as 'reality' anchor the playful and sometimes obsessive activities in front of us. For me the work achieves its aims because,

as a company, Reckless Sleepers sets out to interrogate formal constraints (or what we could also call 'rules'), as well as the pretense of performing, with a wink to the audience with whom they share the endeavor. While attentive to the very way we go about constructing meaning, Reckless uses theatre as an apparatus to push, play with and test out different interests they share and formal propositions in the same way that the Dadaists, language poets and the Surrealists examined the fascinating paradoxes and tensions between reality and representation or the conscious and unconscious world.

Reckless are poets of the stage in all its dimensions, where spoken language and text are used as concrete building blocks alongside a more expansive and abstract physical and sometimes cinematic language. For example, the repeated attempt to crawl through a small door backwards becomes a unit of signification. Through repetition, things we see begin to accrue meaning. It's a piece interested in the structure of experiments and the potentiality of at least two kinds of architecture: the architecture of the house, and the architecture of the physical attempt (to crawl, to catch, to disappear, to reappear, to signify) enacted within and through the house. As spectators we are presented with a large black box built on stage or in front of us, like a house, but not quite a house – a house in a dream where it's only ever night, where the front has been removed, where doors and windows are interchangeable, where it rains both inside and out and where rooms appear to dissolve before our eyes. It reminds me of the space of the monochromatic dreamworld created in the Brothers Quay 1995 film, *Institute Benjamenta*, or *This Dream People Call Human Life*, a grainy black and white film inspired by the 1909 novel, *Jakob von Gunten* by Swiss writer Robert Walser. The film feels as if it were made in the 1920s and takes place in an enclosed, remote house which never references the outside world. Like the Schrödinger house, the house is also filled with hidden doorways, chalkboard, small placards and mysterious signs and rituals. In *Institute Benjamenta*, the character of the original novel's title, Jakob von Gunten, arrives at a house to join seven other protagonists, a group of male trainees all of whom live here at what appears to be a school for servants where they are training (apparently) to live a life of servitude. A mysterious figure, Fraulein Benjamenta, appears to keep them in order. The students always appear to be practicing for something, rehearsing: wandering through rooms sometimes blindfolded, or engaged in repetitious but meaningless tasks - holding a napkin or an imaginary dish, bowing with balletic precision, rehearsing standing on one leg, waiting. Occasionally water flows down the walls as if from a perpetually leaking roof. At one point, Jakob, through whose eyes we perceive the

strange dreamworld of the film, remarks: 'Sometimes more life lies hidden in the opening of a door than in a question.' The world occupied by the inhabitants of Schrödinger, much like those of Institute Benjamenta, feels dislocated from the world as we know it, governed by its own hierarchies, its sense of reason, time and place. Schrödinger proposes an absorbing dream image of a house where exchange and activity lead nowhere but are nevertheless enacted with intention. The many doors and hatchways opening into and out of the central room at times feels like an old-fashioned schoolroom, at others a bunker or an intimate room in a house. For the duration of the performance, the formal and choreographed routines, games and language statements which emerge from playing in, on and around the built structure, expand the possibilities of the ordered, minimalist world we encounter.

The black box itself sits within the larger auditorium in a half-lit world, and we watch the performers, neatly dressed in suits, climb into, out of, over, and through the box. The semiotics of the performance - its content and the way it accumulates meaning - is established through patterns of visual and linguistic repetition that gradually constructs a world that "feels", yet isn't, familiar. It's an upside-down world that communicates through the sequencing of its dream-like images. A performer's head appears at the very top of the tall house, at the bottom a pair of feet, making an impossibly long human being. We believe our eyes even if we know what we see can't be real. Statements on a series of cards are held up by a man seated at a table: 'This is a house on a hill in Belgium; This is the thing I close; This is something that helps me remember.' The walls are like slate or chalkboard: names, numbers and apparent formulas and experiments appear on them and fill the space with the dusty history of the performers' pursuits. A playful, cartoon-like violence keeps our attention — perhaps the threat of danger more than violence — preventing the piece from sliding into solemn pretension. A man with a hammer relentlessly pursues another within the box-like house so that a real sense of menace lingers between these walls. The sheet-covered two figures who are trying to reach each other remind me of Magritte paintings, and it's as if some obsessive but invisible taskmaster is keeping the whole quasi-scientific endeavor on track, orchestrating it from beyond the stage.

Moving between a formal presentational style and poetic delivery, Schrödinger relies on formalism and a sense of predetermined routine which soon dismantles the spectator's

desire to understand the work as one might a story. In this respect it's closer to dance, quickly dispensing with cause and effect. Instead, we see task-led activities which rely on the often playful and surprising physical and linguistic relations between the five performers (three men and two women) who enter and exit the house (let's call it a house). They pass tables, chairs and even each other in and out through the walls, watching, peering, listening, interrupting. The tasks they seem to be set on completing appear to collide seamlessly or end up somehow belonging together. As words are spoken a series of numbers are chalked up on the front side of the house and this seems to create logic or at least give the appearance of a cohesive rather than an arbitrary world. Costumes: smart dark grey suits, tailored jackets and dresses, buckled and lace-up leather shoes depicting a mid-20th century, postwar epoch that existed before jeans, t-shirts and the idea of the casual arrived. The props – mainly functional, including tables and chairs but then apples, bottles and glasses of water, a music box, pencils – become carefully orchestrated actants within the piece and the world on stage is precise even as it teeters between choreographed construction and collapse.

I wrote in my notebook: "In between the gaps of being certain and being confused you will see the same thing at different times, as if we are all suspended here together, both in and out of time." I can't even remember if this records my own thoughts on the piece or if it comes from the performance itself (perhaps an amalgamation of the two?). Certainly, it describes the sensation while watching Schrödinger. At one point, we observe a perfectly set image towards the back of the set in a space which reveals itself unexpectedly from behind a door. A woman and a man are seated at a table. The table is dragged forwards and through a door (window? hatch?) into the foreground. This moment and its composition feels as if we are watching a film – a cinematic theatre. Gradually the performance deteriorates and becomes more chaotic but finds structure within that chaos. The performers are lovers, drinkers, fools; they are competitive, excessive, unable to stop. There's rain and cloud and they seem able to fit in and out of impossibly small windows. Images assemble, are erased and then replaced (a hand with water replaced by an apple), all with physical intelligence and meticulous timing. Particularly impressive is the sophistication of the way in which the company works within the box house while gradually exploding and exhausting the rhetorics of what it can do, as the repeating patterns and experiments within the world of Schrödinger begins to break its own structures down. It moves from being what feels like a tidy small school room to becoming a weathered space covered with scribbled chalk and drenched with pouring

rain (which you nevertheless see being “performed” or manufactured - the rain, that is, and the drowning of the space). Finally, the five performers step outside of the image and stand looking back at it as we look on at them looking back. It’s a kind of magical and absurd feat. What exactly just happened? What did they do? What have we witnessed? Where have we been?

The audience whooped and cheered with pleasure at the end. Some jumped to their feet. I felt moved and couldn’t quite understand why but remember enjoying that feeling very much. There were a lot of students amongst us who seemed familiar with the company though maybe that was my supposition. Possibly they were studying the performance for a class. Next to me several of them scribbled copious notes throughout, and at the end one asked another if she enjoyed it, to which the other responded ‘Yeah, I did. But some of it went over my head.’ I remember smiling to myself, thinking: all of it went over and through my head. In fact, it may have completely bypassed all ability to reason which is why, in the end, for me it is such a brilliant piece of theatre. It’s still there, changing the way I perceive the world as all the best art works do. Schrödinger is accessible even as it baffles. It doesn’t alienate us though it does ask that we leave the world outside behind in order to travel somewhere else entirely. On the way up to Euston I overheard more talk, again the students: ‘It’s about existentialism!’ one said, excitedly, only half-joking. People left talking and smiling, animated. To me, that felt like a real coup - a coup de théâtre in fact.

As a performance work, Schrödinger offers a complex but charming visual essay. It is easy to engage with despite its refusal to land in a familiar or finite world. Experimental, then, in the bold, uncompromising and open sense of that word: committed to discovering something we don’t yet know the answer to.