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Appealing to the 'university-educated lager lou'... the cast of *Street Of Crocodiles* in rehearsal

PHOTOGRAPH: HENRIETTA DULTER

The slick art of sense and serendipity

Claire Armitstead reports on a weird but shrewd company that has infiltrated the National Theatre

Theatre

TIMING, as anyone remotely associated with Théâtre de Complicité will tell you, is the linchpin of comedy — the invisible component of conspicuous success. If that is true on stage, it is equally true off it. Of all the "big names" that emerged from the fringe in the early eighties, Complicité are probably closest to the cutting edge of fashion — a position they owe to serendipity as well as skill.

The company was set up in 1982 by four young performers, just as taste was wheeling against the socialist realist drama of the seventies. Three of the four had trained with mime maestro Jacques Lecoq in Paris. They offered a theatre that was anchored by its slickness and sharpness to the age of film and television, while drawing on an ancient European repertory of physical

skills that went back to Commedia dell'Arte. It was a theatre that placed the heart above the head, and the funny-bone above both; which regarded words in much the same way as it regarded the human body — as instruments to be played.

By 1988, they had acquired a cult following capable of filling Kingston's Almeida Theatre at 87 per cent capacity, over a 15-week retrospective season of 12 shows. They have now become the first company to be singled out whole by the National Theatre for a production — in

implicit acceptance that they are, in a real sense, an ensemble, their parts inextricable from the whole. You can fit Complicité performers into any show (its members have cropped up in everything from the RSC to the English National Opera), but you cannot create a Complicité show with just any performers.

The *Street Of Crocodiles* was conceived and developed as a co-production in which Complicité's creativity was resourced through the National studio. The show is devised from an eccentric collection of short stories by the pre-war Polish writer Bruno Schulz, in which director Simon McBurney recognised "an incredible celebration of the dramatic imagination", even though it

condemned every conventional law of theatricality. It contains very little dialogue and no sustained narrative — "It's the drama of twilight: of shifting colours and the juxtaposition of one movement against another, not of the 'have you got poison in your teacup?' variety", says McBurney, with the blithe afterthought: "I think it was given to me, because it was so weird that it was thought I might have something in common with it."

An abiding characteristic of Complicité is their delight in appearing weird. McBurney himself has a best-selling line in nerve-shot, bespectacled witz, while company co-founder Annette Arden is

branded on the memory as the tanklike Marjorie Box-Coeper of *Anything For A Quiet Life*. This is partly the delight of the accomplished clown, but it is also linked to their redefinition of "reverence" as a triumph of skill over material — whether that material happens to be their own faces, or the walking stick that became a grotesque prober for Kathryn Hunter's magnificent avenging millionaire in their adaptation of Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*.

It is a redefinition which can be irritatingly knowing, appealing to what one director described as a "shifty pooh, university-educated lager lou" (and not coincidentally drawing a six-year sponsorship from the lager firm Beck's). It can also set up frictions when they turn their attention to text. The least successful moments of *The Visit* were those in which they allowed their ebullience to become a self-conscious flexing of mimetic muscle, as in an opening sequence of gormless villagers rattled by passing trains.

Their first venture into Shakespeare, with *The Winter's Tale* earlier this year, provoked familiar complaints that

their physical skills outweighed their vocal ones, which are belatedly parried by Complicité. "I often find that people who are used to dance are more able to talk about our work, because they are used to looking, whereas theatre people are only used to listening," says McBurney, who points out that his own background, as the Cambridge-educated son of an academic, was very firmly rooted in respect for text. "I came out of university knowing how to take apart a text and put it on stage, but I felt atrophied. Most of our life is spent not speaking, but so many people are deaf to the artfulness of action and image."

Laurence Boswell, new supremo of the Gate, Notting Hill, is part of a generation of directors influenced by Complicité's methods, who talk of performers rather than actors and will wax lyrical about the "hulic" theory of play. To Boswell, Complicité's importance has been the sustained challenge they have thrown out to a British theatre still in the shadow of Shaw. "You only need to look at companies of the sixties and seventies like *Imagist* or *The People Show* to realise that it's

not that no one has done this sort of work before. But Complicité have kept a very high profile because they are very together, very hard-nosed and very skilled."

Equally important is their scorn for the actor who simply plays a given part. "They're extraordinarily disciplined, quite obsessive in their search for the right way to express things to a point that some performers can't handle," says Boswell.

If *The Street Of Crocodiles* marks an artistic watershed for Complicité, a welcome into the fold, the recent appointment of McBurney as their first artistic director marks an administrative one, a step away from their past "loose association" of performers: a move that recognises the demands of a company with a £50,000-a-year turnover, two-thirds of which is earned at the box office.

Yes, they will go on exploring text, says McBurney. They will undoubtedly have another bash at Shakespeare, but they are equally interested in exploring a theatre that uses no words at all.

The *Street Of Crocodiles* opens at the Cottesloe tonight

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