

LONDON ART REVIEW: RICHARD CORK

# What a send-up! —the automated lounge lizards

EVER SINCE the Spectator's Consumers' Guide to Critics described me as "posing as an art critic in the London Evening Standard, but really just an enterprising journalist who found himself with the assignment," I have often amused myself by wondering how anyone would go about acquiring such a persona.

Should the archetypal art critic sport a fastidiously waxed goatee beard, a set of flashing, vicious teeth and a limp aesthetic wrist? Or ought he to be hairy and forgetful, a shabby clown forever scribbling incomprehensible notes on the back of cigarette packets and running into doorways when an artist he has slated walks by?

The possibilities are infinite, and not to be taken too seriously. But there is still a very real sense in which everyone, whatever his profession or job of work, tailors himself and his life-style to fit how he feels he

neatly brushed hair. Within seconds, as three doors opposite the mirrors swing open and slam shut in swift, noisy attempts to please the instructor's insistence that entering a room should be stylish above all else, we are catapulted into a frantic obsession with the mechanics of behaviour.

Constantly exhorted by their director to reach out towards sweeter and sharper poses, adopted with increasingly ludicrous amounts of stylish élan, the performers twist, contort and stretch their limbs into caricatures of gestural elegance. Elbows, heels, cuffs, necks, fingers, knees, every facet of the anatomy is ordered to adopt attitudes which cross the clarity of mime with the robust exaggeration of the music-hall.

## Sprinters

Anything less than this total expenditure of energy, often so knockabout and headlong that it ends up splitting clothes and dousing the band in sweat, would look half-hearted and misfire. But as it is, these automated lounge lizards sweep us along towards the grand climax, when the instructor announces that their posing is now good enough

episode appeared to be tacked on, and nothing like as funny as the previous section where the idea of living sculpture cultivating its formal sophistication before it is allowed to go on public view is given great comic force. Art as a production line for the assembling of pointlessly



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is expected to look and behave.

In this context, where careless dress or behaviour is often the biggest pose of all, it would be strange if an activity as self-regarding as art was not covered in the most virulent rash which this form of stylistic contagion can assume.

## Fashion

No other human activity (apart, of course, from the fashion industry, where the whole business of image promotion is shot through with a saving irony) has become so dependent on the ability to construct a readily identifiable surface personality. And it is to the credit of Nice Style, the four men who make up "the world's first pose band," that they have realised how much comic capital can be made out of the acute attention art pays to the cultivation of flawless identities.

In their series of evening performances every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at Garage in Earlham Street, they perform an extraordinary hour-long dramatisation of the rigid, laughable way in which art—and by extension life as well—is dominated by the need to determine its own individual facade.

Their platform is an arena so festooned with ropes, poles, ladders and equipment hanging from the ceiling that it looks more like a gymnasium than an ordinary stage. Only the presence of three full-length mirrors, arranged in a neat rank along one side, suggests that the athletes who use it might be tainted with narcissism and more interested in the aesthetics of physical exercise than in its body-building potential.

And sure enough, when the lights go out and the fourth member of Nice Style starts to issue his director-like instructions from the front row of the audience, the remaining trio appear dressed to kill with dinner-jackets, black ties and

to be exposed "high up on a baroque palazzo" (the title of the performance).

And so, one by one, they limber up like sprinters before a race and then swarm up the ladder leading to an absurdly low eyrie above, where they are obliged to crouch and bend into the most distorted of all their postures.

The implication is that this signifies an exhibition gallery, towards which the manic twitching and leaping down below has always been aimed, and on that level Nice Style is a satire on the way an artist devotes himself to the ultimate goal of a superbly posed one-man show.

Such an allegory would be fully in agreement with the work which Bruce McLean carried out before he became a member of the Pose Band: the one consistent inspiration behind the 1000 pieces he collected together as King for a Day was a subversive desire to poke fun at every art convention he could think of.

But McLean announced his premature retirement as an artist after King for a Day was given a brief retrospective at the Tate Gallery; and however much Nice Style can be seen as a logical development of his earlier ideas, it does want to widen out from this ingrown commentary on art towards a statement about life in general. The band's last performance was held at the Hanover Grand rather than an art gallery for precisely that reason, and so its decision to stage the present offering in Garage may seem inconsistent.

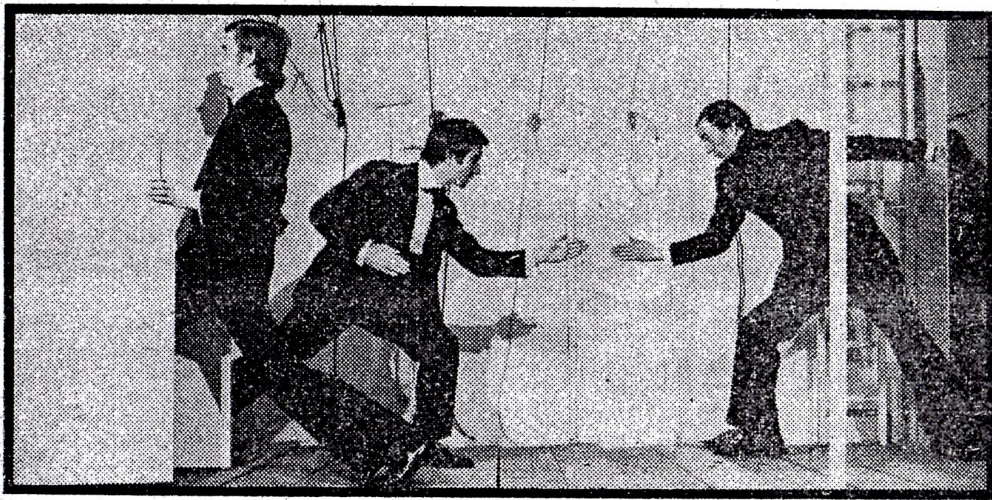
But the finale of High Up On A Baroque Palazzo, which consists of the trio's fatuous, style-bound efforts to hoist themselves up into a sofa-cum-indoor swimming pool with the aid of a fork-lift truck, shifts the show on to the wider social plane of affluent living in general.

I found the evening more satisfying and pertinent as a satire on art alone: the sofa



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EVENING STANDARD, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1974—11



*ALL A POSE: Nice Style satirising art—and challenging a few prejudices.*

polished products destined to be displayed in a cultural ghetto like the palazzo has rarely been more mercilessly mocked.

Remarkably well performed by men without any theatrical training, and probably more effective because they are self-taught, Nice Style's latest show

proves that they are evolving and improving all the time. And if I urge that people interested in the future of theatre must go and see it before the closing date of November 2, I am even more anxious that everyone who imagines that art itself cannot thrive outside the media of

painting and sculpture should test their prejudices at Garage as well. They may not like it, but they cannot fail to be impressed by the band's determination, energy and flair.

● Performances at 52 Earlham Street start at 8.30 p.m., and admission is 80p.

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