

THE WOOSTER GROUP

A Dictionary of Ideas

Bonnie Marranca

ANTHOLOGY

The Wooster Group brings together the intertextual, the intercultural, and intermedia in a new definition of the *liber mundi*. This theatre chooses all species of texts from the cultural heritage, then stages their dissemination in new spaces and environments, generating a multiplicity of narratives and images.

This is the legacy of John Cage's "library of sounds" and of Rauschenberg's mixed-media works. As an aesthetic strategy it takes for granted that in using the archives of art and culture as a database the issue is not one of ownership, but of distribution. Viewed in another light, the deterritorialization process of this kind of theatre, if extended into the world of cyberspace, changes the very nature of the way we think of art and authorship, composition and interpretation, and the notion of boundaries between art forms, art and everyday life, one culture and another, the created and the ready-made. This approach highlights process—the artwork and the *work* of art.

It is more and more apparent that the post-war American avant-garde model, based on the cutting up, quoting, redistribution, and recontextualization of the world archive of accumulated texts, images, and sounds prefigured the digital mode of perceiving space and time and meaning. This is the new design of information.

BOOKS

Inside *House/Lights* is Gertrude Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, inside *Nayatt School* is T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, inside *Point Judith* is Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Jim Strahs's *The Rig*; Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is the center of *Route 1 and 9 (The Last Act)*; *The Crucible* shapes *L.S.D. Brace Up!* stages Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and fragments of *Brace Up* itself appear in *Fish Story*. Then there are the films, the paintings, the songs, the dances, the television shows. All of them fragments—replacing, restructuring, recreating, pushing the frame. The text of *Frank Dell's Temptation of Saint Antony*, includes a long compilation of writings and other media: the Flaubert classic, Lafcadio Hearn's "Argument" which prefaced

his early translation of the French text, material by Lenny Bruce who was sometimes known as Frank Dell, books on magic and spiritualism, original writing by Jim Strahs (the Group's in-house playwright), and scenes based on Ingmar Bergman's film *The Magician*. The frantic voice of Dell at the end of the text explodes, "the the books in the library the the they run they play they see radical things."

Foucault characterized Flaubert's work as "the book of books," a fanciful library of books that can be "taken up, fragmented, displaced, combined, distanced by dreamy thought. . . ." It is this French tradition, and the later English-language examples of Joyce and Pound and Burroughs, that are the antecedents for the Wooster Group's textual and rhetorical styles. Even as it breaks open and reconstitutes literary material, the Wooster Group staging still exudes a modernist belief in the significance of art as a "language" within a work.

Books read, books open, books turned inside out, texts cut apart, turned upside down; books on the floor, words spilling underfoot. The trilogy, the epilogue, parts one and two, parentheses, exclamation point, a work-in-progress. Pull a quote from here, take that paragraph, take out the whole section, cut the play apart, redo it, retranslate, show it on video, record it, perform it live, do it all at once. Collage is the aesthetic strategy at play.

This is *texture* rather than text; theatre "pieces," precisely. The Wooster Group are not beloved readers. They are browsers who skim the pages of books, randomly collected. They like the sound of words rather than their meaning. They are more interested in *passages* than in writing. This is the contemporary style of reading—scattered, naive, non-linear. Texts that can be interrupted. A book that can be opened to any page.

As group autobiographies ("lives of the performers"), the productions reflect a collective intelligence, duplicated on the literary level by the anthology-like scripts that are staged. The most Pirandellian of performers, The Wooster Group is always in search of an author.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN ELIZABETH LECOMPTE AND RICHARD FOREMAN

RF: I want to use language to escape language.

EL: Yeah, but I've already escaped language.

RF: Well, I feel trapped.

EL: It's not that I feel trapped. I find it *is* a trap, that I have to constantly move around. But language to me is like what for a child the color red is. I don't have any association of its power. . . . I don't look to it for anything but entertainment.

RF: I feel ruled by it. I look at language as if it were a kind of Ping-Pong game in which there are a lot of little balls hitting things and going off in strange trajectories and you're dominated, your life is ruled by the fact that these things are accidentally hitting this way, that way, that way. And I want to figure out the scheme of that so I can be clear of it.

EL: And that's what you write about.

RF: You could make the case that this perverse historical period we're in produces serious art only if it's perverse. And I'd like to think that I am forced into what I know is a perverse strategy by the times. I'd like to think that in happier, healthier times maybe I wouldn't even be an artist.

EL: You've said that a lot to me, but I haven't really understood it till recently. I've had this feeling of not being an artist. I don't know what it means to me . . . Maybe it's age. I've had a vision of just doing landscape architecture. It has to do with figuring out how to replant the earth the way it was. Returning it. You know, some obsessive thing like that. Returning it to the way it might have been naturally.

RF: Practically every moment I'm conscious, I have the urge to say, "Wait a minute—This life that is passing through me, I want to be more jewel-like." What I mean is that I don't want things coming in and passing through my head the way they are doing now. I want there to be other surfaces inside me that they bounce off of—like light bounces around inside a jewel. So a new structure is made by that bouncing around. And that's why I have to write, to evoke that, to turn myself over to that imagined "thing."

EL: The closest I come to that is landscape architecture. I want to organize space. I can't think unless I'm organizing space. Now obviously I've thought, "Oh, I'll go outside." I realize now, that's a big change. I'd no longer be an artist. I'd be somebody organizing landscape. . . . But it's the same, yours with words, mine with space.

RF: I don't see the difference between doing that and what I think other contemporary artists do. Just messing around with materials until you find what turns you on, what gives you a thrill.

EL: Yes, but I always have in the back of my mind these people who will be sitting and watching. And I know when I'm messing around and I don't care that they're there—and I know when I'm messing around and I do care.

RF: I've always thought, perversely again, that my moral task in life was to dare to show more and more of the messing around that just turned me on. Without caring what the response is.

EL: Oh, yes. Me, too.

RF: I do care. But that's a failure on my part.

EL: That's right, yes. And I've always felt that way, too.

(*Village Voice*, 1994)

DRAMATURGY

The Wooster Group incorporates different technologies—writing, drawing, audio-tape, video, film, telephone, record player, computer—into theatrical form. Built on the transformation of the fragment into an anthology, this is a new conception of *dramaturgy*, not merely a play or text, and more than drama. If the Wooster Group is a theatre that looks like it only cares about its image, it is just as interested in rhetoric.

The differentiation and inner dialogue of speech styles and performance languages (live and mediatized) is at the heart of its dramaturgical process. Dialogue is shifted from the relationships of the performers to the relations between theatrical elements. Often, a play-within-a play or a game structure acts as interlocutor. In *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, on-stage “characters” in Stein’s play have their speeches punctuated by a computer-generated sound score of “quacks” and “bings” and “blips.” The MacinTalk voice demonstrates its potential as yet another audio track to add to the many forms of production constituting the narrative tracks of a Wooster Group work. (The script as powerbook.) At the same time it situates within the new media the tradition of sound poetry that includes Stein.

ECOLOGIES OF PLACE

Wooster Group pieces are rooted in the articulation of different kinds of performance space. In their evolving ecology of theatre, the kinds of spaces most used are:

Indoors:

House

Tent

Hotel room (usually Miami)

Outdoors:

Sea

Backyard

Highway (the Wooster Group has developed its own version of the “road play”)

Media spaces:

Film

Video

Phonograph

Tape player

Photograph

Computer

LeCompte, a visual artist, starts with the construction of space as a way of conceiving design as structure. Her project is aligned with the American avant-garde tendency to regard space as a field of revelation (social, political, or spiritual). *Three Places in Rhode Island*, and those locations which refer to Maine, outline emotional geographies that are played out in theatre works elaborating abstract versions of the performers' actions.

The tension between nature and culture in the works is paralleled in the relationship between inside and outside (or between three-dimensional design and video). Sometimes, the performers need to get outside the live event and find freedom in filmic space. The contrast between different spaces offers a key to the individual works. Another space of freedom is the hotel room to which a theatre troupe is escaping, at times functioning as a place of sexual license or fantasy. Increasingly, the touring company in the hotel room performs the general condition of Wooster Group life on the road. The frequent shifting of locations mirrors their working process, which pulls texts and images from here and there, traveling through but never inhabiting them. The incessant production of imagery and text is a variation on the idea of construction in their built environments.

A single text or site is too confining and claustrophobic for the Wooster Group. Putting more and more complication into it, by way of other texts and other media, points to a way out of it. They don't want their pieces to end and so they rehearse and rehearse and divide them into parts, then make them into trilogies, and carry along objects and costumes, music and leftover texts, putting them into the same house, turned this way and that. They build and rebuild the house that is not a home in a struggle with the elusive sense of place. And when moving becomes unbearable, they create an afterimage of the landscape they left behind or the echo of voices in it.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

The Wooster Group actors are "figures of speech" more than "characters." Their plenitude of discourses is manifested in modes of direct address, dialogue, monologue, sermon; the interview, the letter, the lecture-demo and talk show; drama,

non-fiction and novelistic writing, computer-generated sound and digitally-altered voices. They are *lazzi* for the contemporary theatre. (The performer's mask/face duplicates the techniques of layering and texturing that characterize other aspects of the staging.) Dramatic classics, religious, scientific, literary, and instructional texts are referred to indiscriminately, even interrogated. The production of affects is more important than representation.

The forms of speech employed by the performers are drawn from many sources: conceptual performance, vaudeville, soap opera, film acting and psychological drama, cabaret, musical comedy, melodrama, television, rehearsal as performance. Varieties of speech style and performance style overwhelm narrative in productions whose tension grows out of the juxtaposition of acting and reading, live performance and mediated presence, and competing forms of media. The Wooster Group takes to heart the idea of theatrical production and reproduction, offering both the performance and its documentation within the same event. A live performer may interact with others in real time, on film or on pre-recorded video, or the voice may be separated from the body. At times the same scene is enacted in two different media, film and live performance or live performance and a radio play of the same text. Some speeches are heard on tape or telephone or records or computer. A live actor and an actor on video converse in real time. In one sense, this is a post-actors' theatre in which the live performance situation forces performers to confront images and recordings of themselves in an ongoing analysis of the nature of "presence."

In *Route 1 and 9* a romantic scene between the young couple in Wilder's *Our Town*, which serves as a point of departure for the piece, is performed on video by the actors. What is notable about the scene, acted in an intense, soap opera style, is its inherent commentary on performance languages. Namely, the distinctions between stage speech and video speech and between acting and performing. The highly-charged expressive language of Wilder challenges the medium of video. It is simply too intimate and full of emotion for the flatness of the video screen. If *Route 1 and 9* recreates and mocks the educational approach of Clifton Fadiman's fifties' lecture on *Our Town*—indeed, the clichés of arts education itself—nevertheless, the Wooster Group, here and elsewhere, substitutes its own kind of "lesson" in the production.

GROUND

LeCompte uses the floor as an active element of performance space, treating surface like a canvas. The stage picture is always framed and the borders of the space defined, but the desire to extend the event outside the frame reveals itself in the shifting ground of the set design. The performer's body is the figure in the ground, moving between portrait and landscape, private and public self.

In *Sakonnet Point*, *Nayatt School*, and *Route 1 and 9*, reality is diagrammatic—marked out on the floor. Electrical cords trailing the TV monitors in *Three Sisters* form tracks along the floor. In *The Hairy Ape* sound travel upwards from the lower

depths, the floor tilts, the performers disperse in rows, only their upper bodies visible. In *North Atlantic* the ship heaves.

The ground is always shifting beneath the feet of the performers which is why dance defines their movement, not walking. Dance is often used to animate the sense of place, or simply to kill time or speed up a scene, whether in the house music of *Route 1 and 9* or the eccentric dance of *Brace Up!* or the mock ballet of *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*. And, not surprisingly, since reading texts or watching fellow performers from the edge of the stage has so prominent a role in the productions, the typical Wooster Group performer is seated, automatically creating a special relationship with performance space.

HOUSE

In the house there is a table: A sculptural element. A site for reading, playing records, sitting chatting, examining the body, writing, telling stories, drinking. From this place setting all narratives begin. But, the Wooster Group will have none of the domestic realism of American drama. Their beloved house remodels the old box set and the ordered cosmos visible through the open houses of Renaissance painting.

The house splits apart and fractures, like the texts performed inside it, spatially duplicating the literary structure through the use of multiple platform levels, corridors, steps, scale, depth. With each new work the design of raw space moves toward architecture. Production to production, there is the tripling of perspective: textual material presented in several media, the same set/house turned to different angles, intermixing of live and mediated performance. Wooster Group staging practices, from their grounding in the environmental theatre of The Performance Group, extended the “rough cuts” concept of Gordon Matta-Clark’s deconstructed houses into performance space, bringing theatre design closer to installation art and away from Schechnerian ritual.

Jim Clayburgh: “The ground plan for *Rumstick Road* became the ground plan for *Nayatt School*, only reversed in the space and lowered. Then the house finally fell apart to a skeletal structure on legs at the end of *Point Judith* and moved from wood to tin. The *Route 1 and 9* house—built of tin studs and tin 2x4s—was the same one built at the end of *Point Judith*. It’s a constant evolution of the same ground plan, with just a transfer to another space or the change of an angle. Even when I designed *L.S.D.*, the ground plans of all the other shows were on the stage as my reference for working it out.”

(*Theatre Crafts*, 1984)

The house no longer appears in *Dr. Faustus* and *To You, the Birdie!* (*Phèdre*). Ron Vawter and Paul Schmidt have died and Spalding Gray has left home. Third generation performers from different countries and continents now make up the theatrical family, open to “adoption,” as it were.

IMAGE

1. Body, text, image, sound, environment are denied the feeling of wholeness—it's the fragment, the angle of perception, that matters. The tension in a performance is manifested in the anxiety of the audience searching for an image of the whole (text; house).
2. The image of the stigmata in *Flaubert Dreams of Travel But His Mother's Illness Prevents It* (the film in *Frank Dell's Temptation of St. Antony*), refers to a wound (martyrdom), aestheticizing the inner life of the Wooster Group.
3. Re: *Brace Up!* "In Chekhov's time a samovar was as ordinary an item of domestic life as a television is today." (Paul Schmidt, introduction to his translation of *Three Sisters*.)

JUST THE HIGH POINTS: WILLEM DAFOE SAYS A FEW WORDS ABOUT *L.S.D.*

"The more I perform, the more my relationship to the audience becomes totally abstract. Different performers, actors, need different things. For example, Spalding [Gray] loves an audience. He really feels them out there. I don't. It's a totally internal thing. Even when I have a character, I'm always curious to see how I *read*, what people think I am, who I am, and then you lay the action on top of that so you're confronting yourself in these circumstances. It's open-ended. I'm not presenting anything: I'm feeling my way through. If you were acting something, if you were very conscious of acting a character, somewhere you would close it down, you'd present it. You'd finish it. In this stuff, you never know.

"The way I get off in the performances is when I hit those moments of real pleasure and real clarity and an understanding about myself in relationship to the structure. It is work, it is an exercise of me behaving a certain way for two hours, and it can become meditative."

("Task and Vision: Willem Dafoe in *L.S.D.*,"
Philip Auslander, *The Drama Review*, 1985)

KATE (VALK) ON THE FOUND OBJECT

"First Liz asked me to make a copy of a satin dress that had been worn in *Three Places in Rhode Island*. When it was finished, she tried the dress on Willem but liked it better on Matthew, who wore it as 'the family dog' in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. A lot of the costumes worn in *Long Day's Journey* were taken from earlier parts of the trilogy and used in a different way. Willem wore a purple dress around his neck that Libby had worn in *Nayatt School*. Ron wears the same striped shirt as Jamie did in *The Cocktail Party* section of *Nayatt*. Liz had me sew gold furniture trim

on a lot of the costumes. She had me make a black silk lampshade for the standing lamp in the *Long Day's Journey* house. It had the same shape and was constructed like the Red Tent from the Trilogy.”

(Published text of *Point Judith*)

LECOMPTE AND VIDEO/PERFORMANCE

The visual artist Joan Jonas appears as a performer in the role of Celia Coplestone in *The Cocktail Party* scenes of *Nayatt School* and as Masha in *Brace Up!*. More significantly, she has another performance history underlining her presence with the Wooster Group: Jonas's early performances featured many of the techniques that would become media strategies of this theatre. In her video performance, entitled *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy/Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972), audience members could watch various versions of it on tape on multiple monitors. The process of image-making was a part of the performance, duplicating and altering the information of the performance as it was being performed.

Another contemporary antecedent to this way of working is Carolee Schneemann's performance/installation *Upto and Including Her Limits* (1973). During the performance one of her own films was shown on a double screen projection; audiotapes documenting real life situations were played; 3–6 monitors showed moments of the performance in a replay or as they occurred. There was a continuous projection of slides relating to the work and to Schneemann's early paintings and collages. A reading area in another space away from the performance included Schneemann's notes, posters from past works, business and artistic correspondence. She was seen live, on tape, on film, and heard on audiotape.

The so-called “deconstruction” mode of LeCompte's style derives from film and video editing and collage which is a spatial rather than a literary impulse. It is not so easily domesticated in poststructuralist theory, where some theatre critics have tried to contain it. In the genealogies of performance, the existence of two different and often exclusive histories of performance—one in the theatre and the other in the visual arts—shortchanges the influence and achievement of cross-media artists. What is needed is a view of American performance that brings together the two traditions for a more comprehensive history of performance ideas.

MEDICINE/MANIA

Doctor, priest, teacher, author—they are variations on the dreaded authority figure at the center of the productions. The fear of death and of loss of control is played out in the refusal of closure, of meaning, and, ultimately, of accountability for the work.

The characters in the productions exhibit a fear of succumbing to irrational forces that masquerades as chaos. Extremities of their behavior show up in an hysterical,

manic speed of delivery weirdly at odds with the “cool” surface look of the world they inhabit. The works are full of paranoia, anxiety, rage, and a notable absence of decorum that co-exists with the acknowledgment of sin and a functioning moral order. Pleasure is not so much an expression of joy as an act of transgression, bordering on the pornographic.

Dance is an essential activity for the company, not only to relieve the dramatic tension but also to cover over the lack of resolution of cultural problems. The “social dances” performed create a sphere of freedom, bracketed off from the world, carnivalesque in spirit.

NON-ACTING AND ACTING: GRAY ANALYZES HIMSELF AS A PERFORMER

“Could I stop acting, and what was it I actually did when I acted?” Spalding Gray asks. “Was I, in fact, acting all the time, and was my acting in the theatre the surface showing of that? Was my theatre acting a confession of the constant state of feeling my life as an act? What was the reality of myself on the other side of that ‘act’? . . . I began to use all these questions as a sort of creative energy source from which to work. These identity questions became a foundation for more personal work.

“The perception of acting as being a ‘lie’ became, in itself, a kind of dramatic conflict, a tension, the old protagonist-antagonist theatre construct. The conflict between acting (active interpretation) and non-acting (just doing the actions) created a new thesis, a new ‘act.’ The separation I had experienced in theatre previous to this was transformed into a kind of Gestalt. It was closer to the bone. It was a dialectic between my life and theatre rather than between role and text. The ‘figure’ became myself in the theatre and the ‘ground’ was the contingency of everyday time out of which this timeless, and therefore ‘saved,’ figure grew.

“This is not to say a new ‘gap’ was not emerging. Now there was the new space between the timeless, poetic me (the me in quotes, the self as poem) and the real-time self in the world (the time-bound, mortal self; the self as prose). The ongoing ‘play’ became a play about theatrical transcendence.

“It was, for me, a grand play between love and death. Love became the act of giving myself away to the work and to our audience. This act was always played off the great wall of prosaic time, the massive flatness of it all, the indistinguishable ‘thing-in-itself.’ This was the not-self or the place of death in life. The figure became the individual creation and the ground was the allness-of-it-all from which this figure grew. The play was the movement in and out of those two realities.

“This was the new ‘play’ which I found more interesting, and certainly more immediate, because it was going on all the time. I only had to stop it, and look at it, and any number of theatre situations would present themselves. It was learning how

to make frames, to frame the mass of reality. I saw this act as composition. I thought of myself as performer/composer because this interplay from which this set of actions grew did not necessarily take the form of text but more often took the form of a conglomerate of images, sounds, colors, and movement. I did not choose to work this way. I found it to be the only way I could work.”

(“About *Three Places in Rhode Island*,” *The Drama Review*, 1981)

Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines once said that Spalding Gray had the third great acting idea of the century. He went beyond Stanislavkian psychology that joined the actor and character, and Brechtian technique that separated the actor from the role, to use his own life as material for conceptual performance.

ON WORKING AS A DRAMATURG

Norman Frisch: Although one may pretend that one is attempting to stage some fragment of a text—or even an entire play by O’Neill or Chekhov—what is actually being staged in a Wooster production is the life of the rehearsal room. So the material—that life—that one is staging is being manifested in the very moment one is staging it. It is never static. It is never really knowable. The nature of it is rarely, if ever, agreed upon by the players involved. So the dramaturg, in projecting some order or pattern onto all these fluid, disparate, multidimensional elements, takes on a difficult role in interpreting the very private impulses and gestures of one’s colleagues. You may think you’re making an observation about Masha, or Jones, or Tituba, but if the lines between performer and performance have been intentionally blurred, your observations may be taken quite personally.

Marianne Weems: I think, too, that as a dramaturg with The Wooster Group, you quickly discover that there’s no “outside” vantage point from which to view the piece. It’s like a physics experiment where your mere presence affects the atoms as they interact—you’re part of the process, and so you’re implicated in the dramaturgy. There’s no point in stolidly maintaining a scholarly approach.

(*Dramaturgy in America*, eds., Jonas, Proehl, Lupu, 1996)

PEDAGOGY (SUBVERSIVE)

The Wooster Group reveals a gnostic project: to foment doubt and confusion through the performance, quotation, and collision of images, texts, and styles, thwarting habitual responses to complex ideas. The goal is not the acquisition of knowledge as a civilizing activity or foundation of cultural and social values, but exactly its opposite: the decentering of the human being and the destabilizing of knowledge and beliefs. In its own way, *Route 1 and 9*, through the lessons of *Our Town* recreated from an *Encyclopedia Britannica* educational film analyzing Wilder’s play, undermines the conventional notion of the “humanities.”

The teaching play—or anti-teaching play—has a long history in modern theatre, especially in the varied pedagogical scenes of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century drama by the likes of Lenz and Büchner. Closer to our own time, Peter Handke reinvented this form in his “speak-in” plays and Heiner Müller mocked the pedagogical authority of German drama by reconceiving Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* in his own re-education plays which articulate post-Stalinist views of Marxism.

In contemporary American drama, Richard Foreman has most directly taken up traditions of the teaching play as a formal device. Besides the Brechtian model, one of his influences was the artist Jack Smith, who pioneered a mode of performance in the sixties—and prevalent in the performance art of the next decade—in which he used autobiographical fragments, slides, and collections of texts, in a lecture-demonstration format. But, a fascinating aspect of Smith’s work was the way he incorporated an aesthetics of “failure” as part of the performance. His equipment was constantly breaking down; he would stop and reset or redo a part of his performance (albeit in unrehearsed asides), or give technical instructions. His bizarre staging of *Ghosts* in the late seventies is one of the earliest examples of “deconstruction” in the American avant-garde theatre.

The Wooster Group retains this way of working that confounds real time and theatrical time, stylizing it in the frequent onstage interplay between technicians and performers that highlights changes, glitches, revisions, and restagings of the kind occurring in *Frank Dell’s Temptation of Saint Antony*. LeCompte, in fact, likes to make aspects of a performance seem unvirtuosic and beset by mistakes. This is a visual arts attitude toward performance, anathema to most theatre. Paul Schmidt, who translated *Three Sisters*, which forms the basis of *Brace Up!*, and acted the part of Dr. Chebutykin—another Wooster Group medical man dispensing advice—made several interventions in that production. He would correct a line reading or pronunciation of a word, summarize a scene that is unstaged, describe the mental state of characters, or discuss the meaning of a speech. The translator then became a “character” in the production, offering an ongoing critical perspective.

LeCompte descends from a tradition of subversive or anti-pedagogy that began with a critique of the Enlightenment. In her theatre, she undermines the role of art as the articulation of moral values or as a statement of “truths” about the human condition. Refusing the role of director as critic because she is more interested in amplifying modes of perception than in any singular meaning, she plays with the very notion of “interpretation.” In their own way, however, in the pedagogical forms of the “lesson,” “examination of text,” and “rules” that wind their way through the productions, the Wooster Group has been educating audiences in a new understanding of theatrical experience joined to mediated experience that is closer to reality than the realistic theatrical style inherently criticized. Exposing multiple forms of cultural production to embrace the canons of high art and the sentimental kitsch of popular culture, the works extend the legacy of the dark side of the Theatre of the Ridiculous by pointing to the impact of imagery on the American psyche.

What energizes this pedagogical mode is not the wisdom of books. Rather, it is the manner in which texts and tropes are catalogued in the Wooster Group's own library and treated in its satirical dictionary of received ideas. Their works are satyr plays to be set alongside the classics of the dramatic repertoire. This ethos is well-suited to the classics because of their sense of order and control: the productions are, in effect, the bringing to order of disruptive realities—a profoundly classicist project. (LeCompte's formalism is a variety of classicism.)

QUESTIONS I'VE ASKED MYSELF OVER THE YEARS

- How much of the work is sheer problem-solving and willful complication of the narrative and how much a serious deliberation on the material?
- Why does this theatre company still need to rebel against authority, whether in the form of the text, or through the themes of education, medicine, and religion, at this stage of life?
- What is the sincere nature of spiritual inquiry in the works?
- Is the incorporation of an afterimage an aesthetic strategy or a form of narcissism?
- Is the work of the theatre overpoliticized by critics in order to legitimize it as theoretical subject matter?
- Do I want to do the detective work it takes to figure out their references? Can they be known?
- Where does the difference between critique and reference situate itself in the productions?

RELIGION

One of the great themes of the Wooster Group is spiritual crisis. *Rumstick Road*, the first major company production, explored the agon of matter and spirit that was dramatized in the Christian Science beliefs of Spalding Gray's mother, whose suicide was the work's emotional heart. In *Nayatt School*, the use of *The Cocktail Party* as intertext highlighted the anguished Protestantism of Celia Coplestone. And *Point Judith*, the epilogue to *Three Places in Rhode Island*, revisited the Catholicism of *Long Day's Journey*, featuring Ken Kobland's film with nuns. *To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)*, ends with a search for redemption. As a matter of course, the complex maneuvers of the Wooster Group raise religious and moral issues, just as they challenge legal, scientific, intellectual, and medical authority and values.

When Frank Dell asks, “Can matter be part of God?” one has to wonder if this is Ron Vawter’s own voice crying out in the wilderness. If the Wooster Group pieces can be understood at the level of autobiography, this work is a particularly soulful commentary by Vawter, who, having once studied for the priesthood, acted the role of Frank Dell until he died of AIDS, in 1994. In one sense, *Frank Dell’s The Temptation of Saint Antony* stages spiritual crisis at the hour of his impending death. The character Sue reads to him: “There are also certain others who linger in Hades, but not unhappily as a rule. I refer to certain young men of a careless, animal, and occasionally, vicious life who die violent deaths . . . These poor fellows are suddenly wrenched from their bodies while still they are in the prime of manhood. They are not, in any sense, capable of grasping, for a while, the difference between earth life and the Afterlife.”

Subsequently, in *Brace Up!*, as the character Vershinin, Vawter gives one of Chekhov’s bittersweet speeches about the “future” in the style of a sermon, directly addressing the audience. “In two or three hundred years, well in a thousand, maybe . . . a new and happier life will begin. Of course, we’ll never see it, but we are working towards it right now. We work for it, we suffer for it, we create it, in fact. And that’s the whole point of our existence. That’s what happiness is, I think.” The translator/doctor, Paul Schmidt, who was also dying of AIDS, discusses its meaning in what can only be described as a scene of tragic irony.

The waywardness of appearance and reality that energizes the work of the Wooster Group is not merely a theatrical conceit but a staging ground for the genuine interest in the performance of the self. It was elaborated initially by Spalding Gray and Ron Vawter, both traditionally-trained theatre actors with a propensity for self-reflection. The nature of acting on the stage would evolve as fundamental questions about human actions—the crisis of identity and belief—in the world. They brought a quality of emotion to the productions that is no longer there. Both actors, from the alternating prism of Christian Science’s refusal of materiality and Catholicism’s word made flesh, inserted the issues of moral struggle and shattered belief systems into the collective Wooster Group mind. Dance, then, could be understood as a form of ecstatic performance.

SPEAKING VOICES

Speech acts, though not in the dialogues of conventional drama, have a substantial impact in the Wooster Group conception of theatre: speech and gesture brought together, but as autonomous acts, often separating gesture and meaning, and parts of the body. In *To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)*, one actor speaks in an electronically-modified voice on behalf of another actor, the director communicates from her seat in the audience to the actors through their wireless microphones, the actor’s body interacts with a video camera to create an image on stage that is part digital, part live. The strictures of neo-classical drama are parodied by the reading of badminton rules during the production, exactly the sort of in-your-face rebellion this theatre is

drawn to. As if to further confound performance styles, videos of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham dances are being played for the performers while the stage events transpire.

The Wooster Group revels in the rhetorical play of text and image and hearing and sight, as they demonstrate the very process of “articulation.” Meaning is less important than the contrapuntal and polyphonic “voices” each aspect of the staging expresses. What matters is the intensity of presence.

On one level, the theatre experience plays out the competition between the spoken and the visible, the aural and pictorial, the live and digital. The issue of perception was addressed by Gertrude Stein in her 1934 essay, “Plays,” as an aspect of emotion. In other words, how do we receive information in the theatre: through seeing or hearing? How do these senses work together? In a Wooster Group production, how does one experience the various performance styles and modes of production, live and mediated?

In *House/Lights*, which brings together Stein’s own *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* and the grade-B porno film *Olga’s House of Shame*, performers wear earpieces in which they hear a recording of the text from the play and the soundtrack from the film that cues their speech. Several video monitors are placed above the audience, in and around the space, and off-stage, guiding the performers who are watching them and synchronizing their actions with film or video.

“Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.” Stein’s words read like a Wooster Group manifesto.

TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTONY, FRANK DELL’S

The ecology of place is relocated from Flaubert’s desert to a hotel room, and the illuminated manuscript is no longer a text but a chrestomathy. Its mystical structure of seven scenes erupts in simultaneous discourses: literary, filmic, video, and audio vocabularies that employ the media technology rhythms of rewind, fast-forward, cut, and freeze frame. The actors in this narrative within narratives, which never comes to an end, are making a film, replaying audio tapes, reading and being read to, performing, and rehearsing a text which is divided into sections, parts, and episodes. It is alternately narrated and dramatized in monologic and dialogic form. The activity is one of cutting and pasting, rewriting, and recontextualizing.

From the start the Wooster Group developed its experimental attitude through the manipulation of textual materials, autobiography/fiction, mediated experience, and the contraventions of writing and speech. What propels the works are competing

forms of narrative, allegory and the critical impulse. In the world of Frank Dell “appearance is the only reality.” The intention is not to make anything meaningful, but to empty everything—the body, the word, the object—of meaning. It is not unseemly that its members should take as a point of departure the writing of Flaubert, who had searched for the text that would exalt form over matter, a text emptied of meaning: subjectless.

Fundamentally, the theatre’s own aesthetic strategy is constituted by the struggle between form and subject matter, presence and absence, and, on the visual level between light and darkness, black and white. For sure, subject *matter* is always problematic in the Wooster Group whose theatrical style moves towards dematerialization, aligning it with the aims of conceptual art. On the level of performance, this tendency is manifested as depersonalization. What Baudelaire said of the Flaubert text—that it represented “his spirit’s secret chamber”—might equally describe their relation to the work and to their own interiority. In its extreme aestheticism The Wooster Group enters the realm of the spiritual.

Remarkably, the Wooster Group has improvised around and retained many of Flaubert’s essential themes, which, as it happens, have been central to their own work over the years. Not the least of them is the obsession with style. A brief account of such concerns includes the ambiguities of appearance, magical reality, multiple identities, the conflict of science and faith, sexual frenzy, and the interplay of religious crisis, hallucination, and ecstatic experience. There are also the scenes bearing on temptation and depravity, the use of language as obscenity, and the symbology of monsters and witches. Flaubert’s great classic, a compendium of different kinds of texts and voices, literary canon and church canon, the profane, sacred, and the heretical, is the ideal work for the Wooster Group’s own glossolalia.

URBAN: NEW YORK SCHOOL, SEVENTIES AND AFTER

Color: downtown black

Temperament: ironic, self-involved

Mood: subjunctive

Style: conceptual

Legacy: post-Cagean

Mode: documentary, interrogatory

Performer: authenticity (expressive) vs. artificial (impersonal)

Politics: high/low

Ideal: Nietzschean redemption through art

VAWTER'S SPIRIT

"I'm not a practitioner of any organized religion but I have a great many spiritual ambitions although they remain mysterious and invisible to me. I'm searching for the invisible . . . I feel that yearning in the audience. That's where I get my fuel. It's unfashionable to speak of these things and also very difficult. And it's taken a few thousand years to pull religion and theatre apart anyway. So now they're separate let's not confuse it with people going to church, because we're not going to church . . . I've always felt that the great influences of my life have reinvented, or created, their own sense of spiritualism . . . I think audiences have great desires towards the spiritual and all they need is the slightest excuse from the stage to open them up. So, I try to find a place between character and in front of the audience which would trigger spiritual or meditative experiences."

(*Certain Fragments*, Tim Etchells, 1999)

WILSON AND LECOMPTE

Both visual artists, they create two different approaches to a theatre based on the idea of the archive. Robert Wilson is a symbolist, a seeker of truth and archetypes. His dramaturgy of the dispersed texts of different cultures and continents dwells in the realm of allegory. LeCompte is a materialist, an iconoclast, spreading confusion and skepticism. Her theatre elaborates the critique of the text. His subject is civilization, hers is society.

If Wilson studies the cosmos, LeCompte is interested in hell. Wilson's theatre is one of decorum, the Wooster Group lacks social grace. He loves the dream world, she can't get enough of real time. Myth, his guide; hers, popular culture. Minimalism is their sculptural inheritance, bands of black and white light.

How they regard media is the dividing line between these two kinds of theatre-making. Its usage creates the distance between the attainment of knowledge and enlightenment (the aim of Wilson) and the multiplication of information and doubt (the desire of LeCompte).

X

The Wooster Group works in a form—theatre—that is rooted in the process of discovery. There, everything is supposed to move in the direction of becoming visible. But, this theatre refuses the option of revelation and instead performs the tension between being known and not being known. The Wooster Group invites you into their house but you are always a stranger, a witness to the inbred eccentricity and suspicion. There is no sense of intimacy, no comfort, no hint of what may occur from one moment to the next. Something reclusive and self-

contained, something very private, even secretive about this theatre/family encourages a theatricality of narcissism, reflected, curiously, in recurring images of water and the echo.

“YOU MUST HAVE A SHOE FETISH . . .”

I said to Elizabeth LeCompte one evening. She readily owned up to it. I had just seen Phèdre try on several pairs of shoes. “So do I—that’s why I recognize it,” I said to her. We didn’t speak of it anymore. Sometimes girls just want to have fun.

ZERO DEGREE OF PERFORMANCE

The Wooster Group began its life with the blank sheets of *Sakonnet Point* that flutter all the way through *Point Judith*, like book covers enfolding *Three Places in Rhode Island*. On these bedsheets Spalding Gray writes the narrative of his life; LeCompte stages it. This is the story of a family. The Wooster Group starts on the road to immortality.

Now the blank pages have been refunctioned as the virtual web/badminton net of *To You, the Birdie!* (*Phèdre*). Play-within-a play.

Is *Phèdre*’s web a new formal device masquerading as sport or does it signal a coming transparency in the life of the players and in the rules of their game?

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