

The Wooster Group, Reza Abdoh, and the end of the avant-garde

A history

Performance once more is ephemeral, the work of crazies, bourgeois-maniques, bohemians: "artists." I regard the period, the people, the groups, the work in receding perspective: a parade passed, and still distantly heard piping.

Richard Schechner¹

Arnold Aronson

Just as historian Fredrick Jackson Turner had famously declared the closing of the American frontier in 1893, Richard Schechner, in 1981, declared the end of the American avant-garde.² He argued that the demise of the avant-garde was largely precipitated by the rebellion of actors against the authority of the director and the shift of creative power from the director to the performer. As evidence he offered not only the case of the Performance Group – where the performers had rebelled against his authority – but also the rise of performance art. "Performance art flourishes but it ... ought to be a sideshow," he argued plaintively, "not all the action there is."³ The American avant-garde theatre could not survive, Schechner felt, if the introspective solo performer replaced the collaborative-creation model of theatre. While he rightly recognized a shift occurring in the experimental and alternative wing of theatre, his declaration was perhaps a decade early. Ultimately, there was a slight aura of sour grapes in Schechner's broadside. Recognizing that his position of leadership within the avant-garde was under siege, if not completely routed, he declared the game over.

In fact, there was in the 1980s a growing amount of alternative – though not necessarily avant-garde – theatre activity, especially in New York's East Village. Because this area of the city was filled with architecturally unattractive tenements, and much of the neighborhood was poorly served by public transport, it had resisted gentrification longer than other bohemian neighborhoods; at the same time, its very



tawdriness gave it a certain cachet. Also, as the art market exploded in the 1980s, Soho quickly became unaffordable – either for living space or galleries – and the tenements and storefronts of the East Village provided a home for artists of the baby-boom generation and art dealers hoping to cash in on the lucrative market for new art. Limousines, boutiques, trendy bars, and well-dressed patrons incongruously began to appear in an area previously known for hippies and Polish and Ukrainian shops. Also, the decades of avant-garde and alternative theatre activity had exerted a pull on young people who once might have set their eyes on Broadway. But the rules for entering the world of theatre had changed. The idea of “paying one’s dues” or joining an existing company now gave way to a do-it-yourself ethic. Because postmodern dance and performance art often emphasized simple and pedestrian action, expertise and virtuosity were often deemed unnecessary – even suspect. “Performance art surfed in on the wave of Punk Music in the late seventies,” claimed Mark Russell, director of P.S.122, a converted schoolhouse in the East Village that had become the primary home for performance art. “Everybody can be a band’ held for theatre and dance as well.”⁴ Or, as one young director stated in 1999, “I ... think anyone who wants to be a performer can be.”⁵

The Drama Review, in an attempt to chronicle this new energy, devoted an entire issue to “East Village Performance,” including the documentation of a range of performances on a single evening, November 30, 1984.⁶ The amount of activity was prodigious. Tucked into dozens of clubs and unmarked storefronts amid the urban decay of the neighborhood, solo performances and iconoclastic theatre abounded. The majority of East Village performances were a mixture of performance art and more or less conventional plays, many with gay and lesbian themes and often performed with a strong camp sensibility. At their best, they were bold, provocative, energetic, funny, and poignant, but while perhaps oppositional to the mainstream, rarely were they avant-garde; with few exceptions, they bore little relation to the formalist or neo-expressionist theatre of the previous decades. If anything, they were descendants of the burlesques and travesties of Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company of the 1970s (itself strongly influenced by Jack Smith). They were neither theoretically based nor intended to transform the idea of theatre. As one article in the *TDR* issue noted, “The new performers in the East Village have rejected minimalism and a structural emphasis and have returned to a focus on content. Their work comments on popular culture through

parody; it evolved from the Pop Art movement in the ‘60s.”⁷ Because the main venue for this work was the clubs and bars in which the daily patrons were also the primary audience, the emphasis was on entertainment, not esoteric, consciousness-altering art. In fact, the term “avant-garde” was often rejected. Even Spalding Gray said he preferred the term “backyard theatre” – in other words, a theatre in which, simply, he could play by his own rules for his own satisfaction.⁸

This is not to say that there were no avant-garde performances. Writer and filmmaker John Jesurun, for instance, created a “serial” – a soap-opera-like play with a new episode every week – at the Pyramid Club on Avenue A, called *Chang in a Void Moon* (1984), which not only incorporated video but also created a sense of spatial dislocation by physically mimicking cinematic shots such as overheads, pans, and jump cuts.⁹ (Particularly startling was a scene in which all the furniture was attached perpendicular to the rear wall, with the actors strapped into the chairs to prevent them falling out – to create the sense of a camera looking down from the ceiling.) The melding of cinematic and theatrical form created a fragmented and disorienting performance that forced audiences to confront time, space, and narrative in new ways, while the reference to pop culture still provided an entertaining spectacle.

In one sense, the East Village performance continued an almost Cagayan aesthetic. Just as much performance art reduced the borderline between life and art, these performances, by occurring in clubs, bars, and deep within marginal neighborhoods, created a sense of continuity with daily routine. They became part of the “scene,” part of the social life of this neo-bohemian community. As Kirby stated in his introduction to the East Village issue of *TDR*, “It may be ... that the sociological aspects of this performance phenomenon are more important than the esthetic ones. It is a theatre closely tied to the place in which it is created and the socio-cultural milieu from which it is generated.”¹⁰

The Wooster Group

There was also a sociological aspect to the traditional avant-garde (by the 1980s, such an oxymoronic phrase seemed appropriate) to be found in Soho, an area with trendy restaurants, major art galleries, and designer boutiques. Unlike the rough-and-tumble neighborhood of the East Village a few blocks to the northeast, the neoclassical cast-iron façades of the old industrial district were more imposing, more formal



Plate 26 John Jesurun's *Chang in a Void Moon*, Episode 46, presented at LaMaMa E.T.C. in 1995. The scene depicts a table as if in a vertical shot. The character at the top is "sitting" at the table, and the man is thus lying on the table.

Photo: © Paula Court.

and, as part of a designated historical district, more tied to the past. The same could be said of the theatre to be found there. Certainly, the work of the Wooster Group in Soho seemed to have much more in common with its historical precedents than with the East Village performances. Although the Wooster Group productions, like their East Village counterparts, drew upon popular culture, they did so in a highly selective and intellectual way. The group's productions were not parodying the culture or commenting on it through travesty; rather, they were acknowledging the presence of the past in shaping perceptions of the moment, and they made a clear case for the equality of "high" and "low" culture. In many respects, the Wooster Group was the last major exponent of the postwar American avant-garde movement.

Once Spalding Gray ceased to be an active participant, LeCompte and the Performance Group actors were freed from the limitations of his autobiography and imagination as text. In 1980, following a production of Genet's *The Balcony*, the Performance Group disbanded. LeCompte and the remaining actors made an arrangement with Schechner that in return for taking over the company's accumulated debt they would retain the corporate name – The Wooster Group – and ownership of the Performing Garage. This semi-new group could now proceed unencumbered in its explorations. The first production under the new organization would be *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, which opened in October 1981. Picking up on the element of textual deconstruction already present in *Nayatt School* and *Point Judith*, this and most of the group's subsequent work employed an existing play as a point of departure or as a framework for the creation of a text. In the case of *Route 1 & 9*, the starting point was Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. The term "deconstruction" here means something different from the Derridean concept. The group literally dismantled – deconstructed – existing literary texts, extracting scenes, characters, dialogue, and images in order to reframe and reconfigure them. The results, however, were not entirely dissimilar to philosophical deconstruction. By breaking down the structure ("language") of a particular play, resituating it, and placing it in juxtaposition to other shards and fragments of culture (other "language systems" as it were), the underlying assumptions and social codes of the original texts were exposed, and new meanings and understandings emerged. In this way, classical works could be reintegrated into contemporary popular culture, but always through the prism of the collective vision of the Wooster Group. It was as if the group took a Brechtian sense of alienation from the Performance

Group, chance methodology from Cage, a minimalist emphasis upon the frame over content from the art world, and a non-hierarchical approach to culture from postmodernism, and then mixed it through the solipsistic and self-referential world of performance art.

This approach to canonical plays should not be confused with the twentieth-century directorial approach of resituating a play in a different historical era, or the approach popularized by Peter Brook and Andrei Serban of revitalizing a classic text through a process of stripping away dated and lifeless conventions while contemporizing the tone, energy, and look of the play. The Wooster Group saw the existing text as a part of the theatre's (and society's) cultural consciousness and vocabulary and as such treated it as raw material – no different from Spalding Gray's memories – that would become a building block within a new production. The classic literary text was, on some level, no different from a prop or an actor's gesture – that is, a decontextualized cultural signifier around which to construct a scene or an entire production. "When I choose texts," explained LeCompte, discussing the 1984 production of *L.S.D.* (... *Just the High Points...*), "they're random in a way. I feel I could use any text ... I could pick anything in this room and make a piece that's just as complete as *L.S.D.*"¹¹

The production of *Route 1 & 9* (the title refers to a stretch of highway in New Jersey that traverses deteriorating industrial sites, oil refineries, and urban blight – a negative, as it were, of Wilder's *Grover's Corners*), began in the upstairs space of the Performing Garage. The audience watched an "educational" video that was a reconstruction of a 1950s *Encyclopaedia Britannica* film about *Our Town*. Actor Ron Vawter was the lecturer (Clifton Fadiman in the original). As author David Savran has pointed out, the lecture's friendly yet authoritarian tone implicated the spectator in a universalized response to the play.¹² The video seemed an ironic comment on Wilder's text, and Vawter's deadpan delivery fostered in the audience a sense of superiority – thus lulling them into an attitude of condescension and complacency that would be shattered in the subsequent scenes. Following the video, the audience moved to the downstairs space, where they sat along the length of the garage facing an expansive playing area with video monitors overhead. Two actors (Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter) entered in grotesque blackface makeup and black glasses, rendering them essentially blind, to construct a skeletal house – a version of the structure from *Point Judith*, which in turn made reference to the soundproof room in *Noyatt School*, which itself derived from *Rumstick Road*; it would reappear again in *L.S.D.* behind the

long, narrow table (itself first seen in *Noyatt School*) – as recorded dialogue from *Point Judith* played in the background. The routine had echoes of the radio and television show *Amos 'n' Andy*, and the context rendered it uncomfortable, even offensive. Two women (Kate Valk and Peyton Smith), also wearing blackface makeup and employing broad "ghetto" accents, entered the frame house and began telephoning fried chicken restaurants saying they were having a party and trying to get an order delivered to the theatre (occasionally they succeeded). This section was followed by a raucous reconstruction of a comedy routine by black vaudevillian Pigmeat Markham. This gave way to the elegiac final act of *Our Town* – not acted live but shown on video. The contemplative beauty of Wilder's play was undercut once again by the final part of *Route 1 & 9*, which contrasted two videos: an Andy Warhol-like film of a car riding down Route 1 and 9 (escaping New York) and a graphic home-made porno film.

On a thematic level, the production highlighted the gap between the apparently idyllic world depicted by Wilder and the urban reality of the contemporary United States, and it exploded the myth of a unified American culture. Structurally, the play emphasized the fundamentally postmodern notion that in 1981 *Our Town* could not be seen as it was in 1938 when it was first presented; it is part of a complex web of theatrical, cultural, socio-political, and personal associations. In a world in which media make the past continuously available in the present (and hence break down any hierarchical difference between past and present), any image or cultural artifact (such as a play) is suffused with its own history and associative context. Furthermore, because the web of associations will be different for each spectator, the modernist concept of a single ideal viewer and a unified art work must be abandoned in favor of a fragmented object available to different spectators in different ways. Although LeCompte claimed at the time not to have read any of the postmodern theorists, she was at least instinctively aware of the postmodern strategy of incompleteness and of its historical artistic roots. She compared her methodology when creating a production to that of post-impressionist painter Cézanne: "He doesn't finish a line. He leaves the canvas showing here and there. It gives a space and an air; it doesn't solidify it into a form that's not breakable. I can't stand it when something becomes perfect, enclosed. I like to leave the system open."¹³ For this reason, the Wooster Group productions are never complete but are billed as works in progress. They are developed and performed over months, even years, and are constantly evolving.

The use of blackface in *Route 1 & 9* caused the New York State

Council on the Arts (NYSCA) to rescind part of its grant to the Wooster Group in 1981. While LeCompte insisted, either naively or ingenuously, that she was baffled by the charges of racism – the intention, she insisted, was to explore theatrical concepts and conventions of mask and character as well as the racial divide in America – the use of blackface was so loaded, because of its associations with minstrel shows, and the depictions so caricatured that the production crossed the line from being merely disturbing and provocative to being, for many viewers, offensive and racist.

The group's next major production, *L.S.D.* (...*Just the High Points* ...), used a condensed version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in combination with excerpts of writings from the Beat poets and writers, the debates between Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy,¹⁴ interviews with and biographies of various personalities from the era, live and recorded music, dance, and video. While certain synchronic and thematic threads tied the seemingly disparate elements together – the cultural and political milieu of the 1950s and 1960s, themes of paranoia and government persecution, for instance – much of the content of both *L.S.D.* and *Route 1 & 9* was almost arbitrary. Of particular interest was the way in which they used their own process as text – not unlike their use of Spalding Gray's memories and recorded interviews. LeCompte videotaped a rehearsal of *L.S.D.* (...*Just the High Points*...) in which the cast was under the influence of the hallucinogenic drug LSD. That tape, in turn, became the text for one scene of the production in which the actors recreated the “stoned” rehearsal. This same self-reflexivity became even more pronounced when one of the actors, Michael Kirby, was unable to participate in part of a tour of the production, so his role was put on tape and he was replaced by his image on a video monitor. When he rejoined the production, the video was retained and Kirby interacted with his own image. For LeCompte, there is almost a circularity to the way in which the production creates its own text:

I take that chance occurrence and say, that is the *sine qua non*, that is the beginning, that is the text. I cannot stray from that text. As someone else would use the lines of a playwright, I use that action as the baseline. I can't just erase it ... It's an action-text that may have nothing to do with any thematic thing we're working on. I call it chance work, like throwing a handful of beans up in the air. And when they come down on the floor, I must use that pattern as one pole against which I work my dialectic. I cannot alter it unless,

somehow, another structure, another bunch of beans that I throw up in the air, comes into conflict with the first. Then one bean must move, one way or the other. But only at that point.¹⁵

Blackface reappeared in *L.S.D.* (...*Just the High Points*...). Walk played the black character Tituba from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, but here it raised little outcry; the makeup was clearly functioning as a mask. Miller's play was being quoted within the larger Wooster Group production, and the makeup was an unambiguous reference to a black character written by a white author. There was not the discomfort of a white person caricaturing a black person outside of any apparent context, but of a white actor assuming a black role in a play whose very authority was being questioned to begin with. Walk again used blackface in the production of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, again with no protest.

Setting aside the social and political implications of the group's explorations, its investigation of mask and character was setting the avant-garde on a new direction in terms of acting. The Brechtian actor-character dichotomy had prevailed in the Living Theatre–Open Theatre–Performance Group nexus, while the formalist tradition of the avant-garde had stressed the use of an actor's unique qualities as raw material for the director-artist. But the Wooster Group members participated as co-creators of their works, and while the actors assumed characters, the basis was neither psychological nor emotional; rather, it was a semiotic approach – the creation of character through the accumulation of signs. In *Route 1 & 9*, social and cultural sign systems overwhelmed the aesthetic ones that the group hoped to emphasize, but in *L.S.D.*, LeCompte was able to revel in the possibilities. When the actress playing Tituba reappeared as Mary Warren, for example, she was still in blackface. The precipitating factor was the lack of time for the actresses to remove her makeup, but it left the audience pondering questions of identity, racial politics, social commentary, and the simple mechanics of dramatic impersonation.

L.S.D. (...*Just the High Points*...) resulted in another controversy, however. Arthur Miller threatened to sue the group over its unauthorized use of his text.¹⁶ In an attempt to get around the legal obstacles, the group first substituted gibberish for the Miller text within the production, and later, when that strategy did not appease, substituted a new text called “The Hearing,” written by Michael Kirby, that was structurally identical to the fragment of *The Crucible* the group had appropriated. But ultimately, faced with the threat of legal proceedings

the group shut down the production. "I want to use irony and distancing techniques to cut through to the intellectual and political heart of the *Crucible*, as well as its emotional heart," explained LeCompte in a letter to Miller when attempting to secure the rights. "I want to put the audience in a position as 'witnesses' – witnesses to the play itself, as well as witnesses to the 'story' of the play."¹⁷ But *The Crucible* was not presented as merely an excerpt. It was done in a mixture of theatrical-historical costume and everyday dress, with one adult character played by a boy, and the lines mostly delivered at near incomprehensible speeds or in strangely detached intonations. Was this commentary, irony, parody, reinterpretation, or something else entirely? The Wooster Group has been dubbed a theatre of irony,¹⁸ but irony rests upon an ultimately identifiable point of view. The controversies erupting out of the group's productions stemmed at least in part from an apparent lack of an identifiable framework that would allow a spectator to view the piece from a clearly defined vantage point. One could like or dislike, agree or disagree with earlier works of the avant-garde, but the relationship of the spectator to the performance was ultimately knowable. With the Wooster Group, that connection was not always clear. The work was strangely hermetic and self-referential – a strategy that worked with the monodramas of Richard Foreman, for instance, but that could collapse upon itself when the material depicted was not a personal and interior vision but charged images from the cultural and social landscape. The group's seemingly steadfast refusal to adopt a point of view – the apparent apoliticism in the context of politically volatile material – served, ironically, to provoke political responses and to create inflammatory reactions where none was necessarily sought.

In 1991, the group's work moved in a slightly different direction. *Brace Up!* was based on Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, but now the original was no longer a mere fragment within a larger work – it was the main content of the production, albeit significantly reframed. Stanislavsky, referring to his original production, had said that he wanted the spectators to feel like guests at the Prozorov household. Spectators in 1991, however, with more than a century of naturalism and film behind them, were never going to have that response – and Chekhov's plays were encrusted with ninety years of cultural and social baggage – so the group sought other ways to make the play their own and to make it fresh for the audience. Spectators now became guests at the Wooster Group's "house." There was a "narrator" (played by Kate Valk), invented for this production, who greeted the audience, intro-

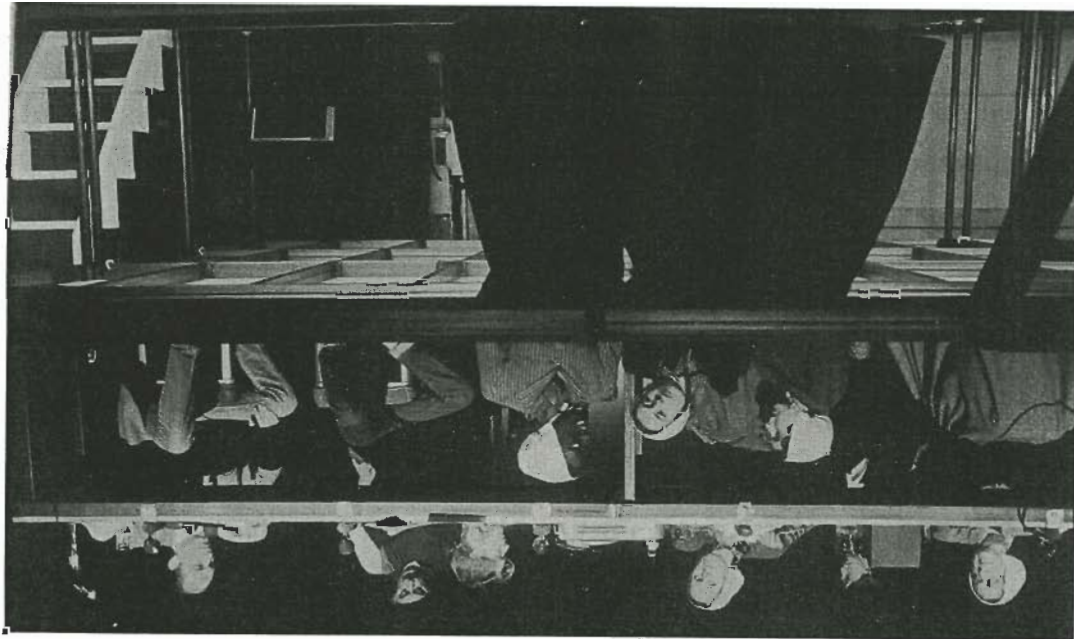


Plate 27 *The Crucible* sequence from the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.* (L to r): Freya Hansell, Matthew Hansell, Kate Valk in blackface makeup, Upper level (L to r): Peyton Smith, Willem Dafee, Elion Sander, Ron Yawer; lower level (L to r): Tina Cohen, Anna Köhler, Kate Valk.

Photo: Nancy Campbell. Courtesy the Wooster Group.

duced the actors and their characters and set the scene.¹⁹ This was no longer a classic play requiring the willing suspension of disbelief but an overtly theatrical production by the Wooster Group in which the actors – familiar to many – would present *The Three Sisters* by Chekhov. This was not an interpretation or adaptation of the play but a radical reframing in which the play was yanked out of its conventional moorings, mixed with (or placed in violent collision with) disparate and seemingly random cultures and traditions, and resituated within the ongoing *oeuvre* of the Wooster Group.

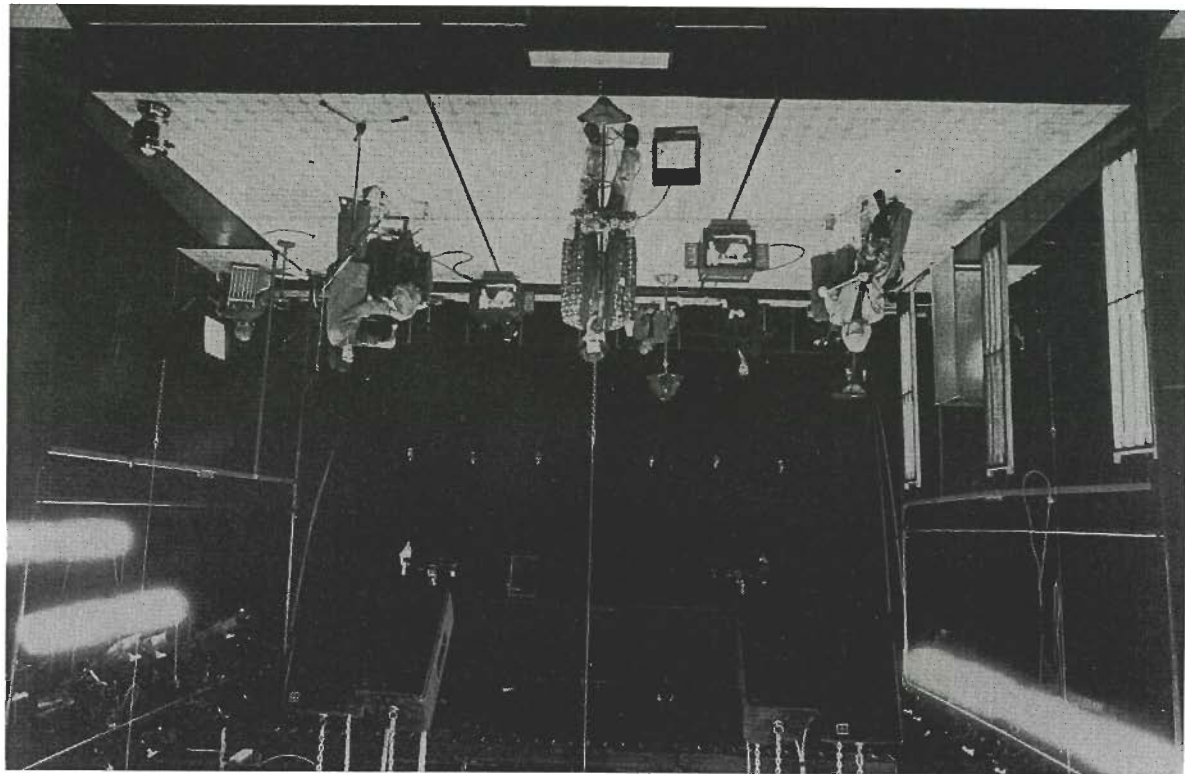
The audience sat on a steep bank of seats, filling about one-third of the theatre, facing an essentially square platform filling much of the remaining space and raised about two feet above the floor. A skeletal framework of metal tubing outlined the stage and served as a grid on which to hang the vertical panels of fluorescent lights stage left and right,²⁰ beyond which the walls and some backstage area of the garage were visible. On the floor at the rear of the stage was a long, narrow table whose top was just visible above the stage platform. Whereas the table had been in the foreground in *Noyatt* and *L.S.D.*, here it gave the impression of being in another room – the audience had to strain to see the action occurring around it – and some actors sat at it with backs to the audience. And in what has become a signature element of the Wooster Group, there were three television monitors, two of which moved on tracks in the stage floor. The overall effect, as in many of their productions, was of a slightly shabby industrial space into which some modern technology has been inserted; it was at once spartan and complex. The result was cool and somewhat distancing, a tone reinforced by line readings that could range from the dispassionate to the ironic to a riveting theatricality sometimes at odds with the expected naturalism of the dialogue. The use of microphones – either free-standing or of the headset variety – created another layer of distance as they not only amplified voices but sometimes also distorted or disembodied them.

In fact, the Wooster Group's use of technology was one of its most significant contributions to the avant-garde. Since at least the time of Erwin Piscator in the 1920s, theatre artists have made varying attempts to incorporate technology, specifically media, into their productions. But the results were generally disappointing. Either the technology was substitutional – projections in place of three-dimensional scenery, for example – or an attempt to incorporate the new gimmick of film or video into the theatrical matrix. But film and video have their own vocabularies, and the process of reading them is significantly different

from reading a stage production. Most experiments had simply tried to subjugate media to the rules of theatre and, it is safe to say, most of the experiments did not succeed – even Laurie Anderson's productions sometimes fail to integrate the three-dimensional figure with the projected image. Robert Wilson is often discussed as a practitioner of “high-tech” avant-garde, but while he has employed elaborate sound systems and sometimes used projections, the “high-tech” look of his productions is precisely that – a “look” or, more accurately, a scenographic style, though certainly abetted by large budgets and sophisticated equipment. The Wooster Group, however, employed technology in the service of its unique theatrical vision. Even the simple platform stage sometimes moved on hydraulic lifts, as in *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1988). (Although the Wooster Group, like all companies, has had its share of financial struggles, its success in grant and fund raising, in combination with the luxury of its own home, has allowed it to purchase technology beyond the means of most Off Broadway organizations.) In its use of technology, especially video and amplified sound, the Wooster Group succeeded, more than any other American theatre company, in simulating the sensory experience of contemporary life.

Chekhov's language and narrative made up the bulk of *Bruce Upp*, yet the text was poured, as it were, into a new vessel. The sisters were intentionally cast with actresses who were older than the roles implied. Two of the sisters, Irina and Masha, were frequently placed in geriatric shower chairs and rolled on, off, and around the stage. The play's translator, Paul Schmidt, also played the role of Chebutykin and was occasionally called upon within the context of the performance to summarize scenes that had been cut or to explain character motivations or thematic elements. (A translator is always “present” in any translated production or work of literature – here it was made explicit.) Noh, Kabuki, and Asian folk dances were interspersed throughout, as were clips from Japanese *Godzilla* movies and a video adaptation of a documentary on Japanese Geimin troupes. Actors were seen as both live and taped images on the monitors. Some characters, such as Chebutykin, were seen almost exclusively on the monitors (Schmidt sat in a chair in the upstage left corner of the stage with his back to the audience and a video camera focused on his face). Others were seen on monitors as they recited their lines from offstage, where they were either invisible or only partially glimpsed. For the love scene between Natasha and Andrei, the audience saw Natasha's face only on the monitor. At other times, prerecorded images of the actors were played on monitors as the

Plate 28 (opposite) *Brace Up!*, based on Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. Note the three video monitors, including two on floor tracks. Note also samovar downstage left. Vertical panels on stage right are lighting fixtures – part of Jennifer Tipton's lighting design. In foreground (l. to r.): Beatrice Roth, Roy Faudree, Joan Jonas, Kate Valk; at rear (l. to r.): Peyton Smith, Ron Vawter, Paul Schmidt (seated with back to audience), who was also the translator of Chekhov's text.



live actors performed a scene. Added to the mix were images from Japanese films and American soap operas. The resultant impression was of actors hovering around the edges of the stage – the center of the stage was frequently empty – or of electronic images filling the space while their corporeal bodies remained offstage. The video had the effect of creating temporal and spatial dislocation; it had the ability to create simultaneous yet conflicting images, and it forced the audience to employ varying forms of concentration to decipher and decode multiple framing devices and differing methods of reading images.

Whereas much of the work in the East Village performances, for example, was based on the form and content of specific pop culture sources such as Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, the Wooster Group worked from the new sensibilities fostered by the structures of contemporary media. "There's no question that my work has been influenced by MTV," declared LeCompte in 1984, "and specifically before MTV by ads on TV – the cutting, editing, distancing, storytelling, the combination of live characters and animation in commercials, the quick pacing. Telling a sometimes disjointed story in a very rapid way is definitely a great influence."²¹ Contemporary audiences have become so accustomed to the disjuncture of a daily barrage of rapidly shifting, discontinuous images that following a straightforward, slow-moving narrative has actually become more difficult, in some cases, than comprehending a pastiche of conflicting representations. The Wooster Group, more than most other companies, has mirrored this particular sensibility of the culture.

Reza Abdoh

The logical heir to the avant-garde tradition of the Wooster Group was director Reza Abdoh, whose biography could almost stand as a paradigm of late twentieth-century multicultural American society. Born

numbers of artists were dying from an epidemic disease that, at least initially, seemed to arouse little official response. But a political theatre, in order to be effective, must ultimately engage and persuade an audience, and to do so requires a degree of identification and enough familiarity that the spectators can focus on theme and content and not be absorbed in the decoding of complex structures. Holly Hughes made ironic reference to the art world's detached approach to political ideology in her monologue *World Without End*. In a segment in which she talks about battered women, she says,

Oh, I know! This is not art! Believe you me, I wish I could be whipping out a haiku, or doing a little macramé demonstration – I wish I could be sharing some art with you right now. I'm just like everybody else. All I want to do is sleep.

Oh I know the difference between politics and art! I went to art school ... and the first thing they said when they saw me coming through the door was: "Holly, don't hit them over the head. Art is not supposed to hit them over the head!"²⁴

The moral distancing and linguistic ambiguity of postmodernism proved insufficient for the concerns of the age of AIDS, feminism, and the irrational violence of contemporary society. The call for a more direct confrontation with ideas and the attempt to rouse the audience to action would ultimately work against the traditional approaches of the avant-garde.

Forces of disintegration

Perhaps the single strongest force at work transforming the avant-garde was the changing economics of living and working in New York. Through the early 1970s, it was possible to live cheaply in the fringe neighborhoods of Manhattan, and at least some theatre could be produced on nothing more than box-office income or donations. But inflation and the gentrification of once inexpensive neighborhoods drove out struggling artists and precluded the rental of rehearsal and performing space. The avant-garde scene had thrived in part on the sense of community among artists, but as they were increasingly scattered all over the metropolitan area there was no sense of community, no core, and, for theatre companies, no artistic home. Theatre artists with no independent means of support had to spend increasing amounts of time working at non-theatre jobs in order to survive.

Theatre companies and creators became increasingly dependent on grants. The foundations, such as Ford and Rockefeller, that had been major benefactors in the 1960s and 1970s provided less and less funding through the 1980s and 1990s. Major private grants came through corporations such as Philip Morris (the tobacco company), American Express, or Seagram (the liquor company), which raised touchy political and ethical questions for those who accepted money from these sources; government funding came primarily from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and, in New York, NYSCA. By taking government subsidies, the artists or groups were then subject to a degree of government control and restriction. By the 1990s, government funding of the arts – never popular among conservative political factions and never abundant to begin with (the NEA's peak budget was \$176 million in 1992) – came under increasing attack. Although the vast majority of NEA funding went to institutions such as museums, orchestras, and established dance and theatre companies, and to community arts organizations, a small percentage went to fund performance artists and various forms of avant-garde theatre. For conservative politicians, the sexually explicit material to be found in some NEA- and NEH-funded projects was excuse enough to attempt to dissolve the agencies. Legislation was introduced in 1989 prohibiting "depictions of homosexual or sadomasochistic activities, child pornography or individual sex acts." Among those singled out for attack were four performance artists, who became known as the "NEA Four": Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller. The latter three included lesbian or gay themes or subject matter in their performances – mostly through language; Finley dealt with AIDS and the debasement of the female body in society, sometimes through performances in which she was nude and covered her body with substances such as chocolate sauce to simulate excrement. In 1990, although the four were awarded grants by a peer panel, the grants were subsequently vetoed by the National Arts Council, apparently for political reasons. Later that year, a federal law was passed that required the NEA to judge not only artistic excellence in awarding grants but also "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American people." Any individual or organization accepting federal grant money had to sign an agreement pledging to abide by these standards.

The four fought their "defunding" in the courts for years. They received an out-of-court cash settlement in 1993, and in 1996 a federal

appeals court ruled that the decency clause was unconstitutional. But in 1998, the Supreme Court overturned that ruling and upheld the decency clause. The laws and the court battles took their toll, if in no other way than by sapping the energies and focus of artists and theatre companies. (The four, and the theatres or museums that sponsored them, also received hate mail, harassing phone calls, and death threats.) Some theatres, out of principle, rejected NEA funding if it meant signing the decency agreement; other companies accepted the money, which in turn led to condemnation by some artists. Whether or not it had been their intended goal, the conservative legislators had succeeded to a degree in getting artists to fight among themselves. The atmosphere for creating politically or socially provocative work had been poisoned.

But even assuming for a moment that grants could come with no strings attached – no need to carry corporate logos on advertising and programs, no restrictions as to content, no community responsibilities – there is an inevitable question about the possibility of an avant-garde with corporate and government support. An oppositional art form funded and therefore implicitly condoned by the establishment becomes, *ipso facto*, an extension of that establishment. Corporations fund the arts because this provides them with a kind of cultural legitimacy, a seal of approval as it were. Theatre that is part of the establishment culture cannot, by definition, be avant-garde no matter how subversive it may try to be.

Another source of damage to the avant-garde may have come, ironically, from a well-intentioned academia. Since the late 1950s, European (mainly French) literary, linguistic, and philosophical theory – first structuralism, then post-structuralism and deconstruction – had come to dominate much of the humanities and some social sciences and inevitably made its way into the critical and analytical study of theatre. While opening fresh lines of inquiry and interpretation, such theoretical approaches also contained potential pitfalls for the theatre. On a superficial level, the esoteric and complex language employed to explicate these critical models could easily devolve into obfuscating jargon and, in fact, there was a proliferation of academic articles written in dense prose that often failed to find an audience among the practitioners and was of little use to non-specialist audiences seeking interpretations of difficult theatre. Apparently gone were the days when serious and rigorous critics could bridge the gap between scholarly exegesis and popular journalism. More problematic, though, was the attempt to apply post-structuralist theory to theatrical production.

Jacques Derrida's deconstructive analysis, for example, could be fruitfully applied to an essentially static work of art such as a novel, but it began to encounter complications when applied to a more complex and constantly modulating form such as theatre, with its multiple layers of "text," interwoven and sometimes conflicting sign systems, multiple "authors" (in the collaborative process), multiple simultaneous "readers," and the fluid and virtually ungraspable object known as performance. In a sense, "reading" theatre had always been a deconstructive exercise. Scholars attempting to apply literary theory to theatre sometimes lacked the necessary understanding of the dynamics of performance. The result was an ever-widening gulf between scholarly critic and practitioner, and theory was increasingly read not by artists but by other theorists. Popular journalism, on the other hand, often lacked the tools and vocabulary to deal with non-traditional forms of theatre in a meaningful way. Meanwhile, the dominant academic disciplines of the 1980s and 1990s – post-colonialism, cultural studies, feminist theory, new historicism, and the like – tended to fragment the field even further by observing the subject through a fairly narrow lens while sometimes attacking alternative points of view. The result was essentially two groups talking past each other – theoreticians having little impact on the creation of theatre, and practitioners, who had little use for scholarship or criticism, at least as it existed in theatre journals, while the public was left on the sidelines, excluded from any meaningful discourse that would allow the development of a committed audience engaged in the creation of new theatre.

Technology versus the avant-garde

While we have not yet achieved the technological utopia of science fiction, the explosive growth of technology – primarily related to computers – since the mid-1980s has had a profound effect upon society and, ironically, has also been a contributing factor in the decline of the avant-garde. Technology and media are simply outstripping the avant-garde – not just in terms of theatre's ability to absorb and incorporate new technical equipment and innovations (theatre can never equal the technical sophistication of rock concerts or create the equivalent of cinematic special effects and digital imagery) but also in the way in which computer technology is altering the way we think and the way we see the world. Hypertext and the World Wide Web have transformed the perceptual process so that we are now accustomed to leaping from idea to idea through associative links. Richard Foreman's

ubiquitous strings, which drew connections between seemingly disparate objects, seem almost as quaint as nineteenth-century expositional monologues or the spotlight that guided a spectator's gaze, when compared with the rapid links and logistical leaps made by a simple click of a computer mouse. Similarly, devices such as the television remote control allow viewers to flip from image to image (and narrative to narrative) – to “surf” – at bewildering speeds, yet somehow keep dozens of anomalous images and texts in discrete mental compartments simultaneously. This rapid navigation through images and narratives is determined as much by coincidence, juxtaposition, and accident as by any coherent pattern or intention. Structures have dissolved; discrete images have evaporated; all images, all ideas, all thoughts, are equal; linearity is archaic, anachronistic.

Thus the century-long project of the avant-garde to undermine structures of linear thought, objective imagery, and psychological associations has been accomplished rapidly and almost effortlessly by technology and has been adopted almost casually by society at large. Within less than a generation, the Aristotelian-Renaissance model of the linear narrative and unified frame has been largely supplanted by an image-driven associative model of structure. This is what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze dubbed a “rhizomatic structure” – a non-hierarchical, ever-expanding network capable of sprouting a complete form at any point, a structure capable of almost infinite replication.²⁵

A new drama is emerging out of this new sensibility, or at least showing its influences. American writers such as David Ives, Suzan-Lori Parks, and especially Mac Wellman construct plays in which linearity, narrative coherence, even the stability of characters from moment to moment, is irrelevant. Historical figures, fantasy, news events, and real life intermingle in works that are no longer bound by narrative structures, standardized acts and scenes, or even a socially agreed-upon duration. Playwright Paula Vogel has stated that in a postmodern play, “character, plot, language, and environment or plasticity as self-contained entities correspond fitfully, if at all, and only until the playworld fragments once again.”²⁶ Much of this theatre has abandoned neoclassicism, romanticism, and naturalism for a flow of images and ideas that replicates the perceptual processes of contemporary audiences, who are shaped by the hypertextual world of electronic media.

In the 1990s, narrative theatre has been replaced by what might be called the “pastiche play,” which creates a juxtapositional world of images and texts ransacked from the cupboard of cultural history and



Plate 30 Scene from *The Medium*, directed by Anne Bogart, with Ellen Lauren and Will Bond.

Photo: Richard Trigg. Courtesy the Saratoga International Theatre Institute.

pieced together into new shapes. One of the best examples may be found in the work of director Anne Bogart. Known for her deconstructions of classic texts and her work with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, she has also created original pieces with her company, the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, such as *The Medium*, based on the writings of Marshall McLuhan; *Small Lives*, *Big Dreams*, based on the writings of Chekhov; and *American Silents*, based on the early silent film industry. These are classic examples of Jamesonian pastiche – dramatic events created out of found texts, modern dance, Suzuki technique, popular culture, and the collaborative input of performers. Beginning with a theme or image, Bogart makes a theatrical collage of textual fragments, movements, and gestures, which are shaped into a performance – part theatre, part dance – which may even tell a story, though it mostly explores an idea. Part of Bogart's creative process consists of making actual collages of relevant images, which become a kind of *ur*-text for the performance. Bogart's production values are generally fairly simple, yet structurally they are as far removed from the realistic dramas of the first half of this century as neoclassicism was from medieval drama. They reflect a societal world view utterly transformed by current technological sensibility. To quote Bogart,

“Physicists now say that nothing touches, nothing in the universe has contact; there is only movement and change.”²⁷ Her plays attempt to incorporate and convey this understanding of the world, which will be instinctively understood by audiences with no understanding of quantum mechanics.

But the fact that it is instinctively understood takes it out of the realm of the avant-garde. It is a theatre that reflects contemporary consciousness; it does not push ahead into uncharted and dangerous territory. Arthur Miller, in the introduction to his collected plays in 1957, stated his belief that theatre cannot introduce entirely new ideas or convince an audience of what it is not prepared to accept. A play, he declared, can only enunciate “not-yet-popular ideas which are already in the air”²⁸ – in other words, ideas for which an avant-garde of some sort has blazed a trail. The productions of Anne Bogart and others of the recent so-called “cutting edge” theatre are closer in spirit to Miller than to John Cage; they reveal to the audience what it already senses in the air, they take the audience where it is already prepared to go.

Conclusion

The avant-garde was a product of the romantic sensibility. It grew in part out of a belief in a utopian future arrived at through a spiritual quest led by those inspired individuals who forged new paths or tore down the old structures of society. The first avant-garde rode the wave of nineteenth-century futurism, but at the end of the twentieth century, Westerners, at least, seem unwilling or unable to look forward. The final decade of the century began with historian Francis Fukuyama’s announcement of the “end of history”,¹ which spawned a host of declarations of other “ends.” Although Fukuyama was providing a debatable Hegelian reading of history – the conclusion of the Cold War, he believed, marked the culmination of the thesis–antithesis structure of human development – his phrase tapped into a popular sense of millennial doom (“the end is nigh,” as the sign-carrying prophet had it in the old cartoons). Thus the impending new millennium sparked not utopian visions but rather retrospection, introspection, and a general loss of forward movement. Whatever the import for society at large, such an attitude undermined the ability of the avant-garde to function.

In the twentieth century, avant-garde performance strove toward a radical restructuring of the way in which spectators viewed and experienced the very act of theatre. Having emerged out of the romantic era, it was based on the Hegelian model: the avant-garde functioned as the antithesis of the status quo. Once the synthesis had been achieved – once the avant-garde had been absorbed into the mainstream – a new avant-garde emerged. But if the function of the avant-garde is to undermine habitual patterns and social norms, and if the avant-garde stands in opposition to the practices and postures of mainstream society, then there is very little in today’s theatre that can be considered avant-garde. The so-called avant-garde no longer exists in opposition to established culture; it is a dynamic subset within the

culture. The *raison d'être* of the avant-garde has fallen away – evaporated – leaving behind a kind of exoskeleton of style and form that has been subsumed within aspects of thriving popular culture.

One need look no further than the arts pages of newspapers and magazines. The cultural scene of *fin de siècle* New York and the United States in general is filled on an annual basis with works by Foreman, Wilson, the Wooster Group, postmodern dancers, and performance artists – in other words, by the avant-garde of the past forty years or so. Much of this performance can be found in arts centers, established theatres, well-equipped downtown venues, and even opera houses. Moreover, these same performers and directors are teaching university courses in writing and performance, thereby transforming an erstwhile avant-garde into a methodology equivalent to that of Aristotle or Stanislavsky. Many of the actors, directors, and writers from the fringe move fluidly between Off Broadway, Broadway, Hollywood, and television, further blurring any distinctions between genres and suggesting that there is no fundamental difference in styles. One can purchase a coffee-table book of photographs of performance art² or collections of performance art texts, while articles on artists and performances show up in newspapers and national magazines. In addition to the nearly two-decade-old “Next Wave Festival” at BAM, New York boasts half a dozen annual fringe-type festivals that have become “events” and tourist attractions, regularly written up in the Sunday “Arts and Leisure” section of the *New York Times* and given the same treatment as articles about Broadway productions, while the artistic directors of these events are heralded as the entrepreneurs of the next century.³

The avant-garde has become a kind of cultural establishment. In a sense, John Cage has triumphed: theatre, music, and dance have become intertwined and, in some cases, indistinguishable; and not only are few distinctions made between high and low art, but there are few barriers between what elements or components may or may not be used in artistic creation. Consequently, there is, in a sense, no establishment versus antiestablishment – only a monolithic culture scene with internal variations. It is not unusual, over the course of a season, for an individual spectator to patronize the opera, modern dance, Broadway, Off Broadway, the Next Wave Festival, a rock concert, a poetry slam, performance in a club, and an evening of performance art, and to attend movies, rent videos, and watch selected television shows regularly – activities and tastes that until recently would have been deemed largely incompatible. Even the term “avant-garde” has

become somewhat passé, subsumed by the “downtown” aesthetic – a subgenre typified by an edgy, glossy, hip style with elements of the grotesque and perhaps a slightly jaded, distanced, ironic attitude or point of view. Perhaps exemplifying this trend is *The Donkey Show*, a popular 1999 adaptation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in which the story is told entirely through 1970s disco music and is performed in a club. A *New York Times* article identifies the production as a harbinger of “downtown” theatre to come and cites such theatre as “the flying wedge of a downtown sensibility expressed most consistently in the previous decade through music and especially the visual arts.”⁴ The production appropriated the environmental staging of the Performance Group and Abdo, but there was no iconoclastic aesthetic or political message – the audience was encouraged to dance with the performers, who gently parodied the disco world while presenting an exuberant, updated, and loving if highly condensed version of Shakespeare’s play. This is avant-garde as a conflation of performance, entertainment, and social life. Of equal significance is the fact that the production reaches potential audiences as much through its website in cyberspace as through traditional media advertising.

With almost no boundaries, it is hard for an art to develop or to exist *outside* the mainstream. And, more important, with no sense of forward motion, there is nothing to be ahead of; one cannot be in the vanguard – the scouting party out ahead of the advancing troops – for a culture that is circling the wagons or looking backwards. Instead of a belief in the perfectibility of humankind, the end of the twentieth century has brought a distrust of science on the one hand (genetic engineering and nuclear energy, for instance), and a blasé attitude toward technological change on the other. The latter is manifested in faster computers, higher-definition televisions, digital sound – all elements of consumer electronics and thus all part of materialist culture. Technology, by creating both a demand for the new and a comfort with constant change, has deadened the landscape for the avant-garde. The new is no longer shocking; it is commonplace and expected. Moreover, the new is no longer associated with an ever-improving future for society, just with an ever-improving product to be purchased.

The publishing and fashion industries – with their constant search for new images, new ways of selling, or new ways of promoting culture – have contributed heavily to the mainstreaming of the avant-garde. Flipping through the pages of ads in the high-fashion magazines or watching music videos, one is seeing the strong influence of Robert

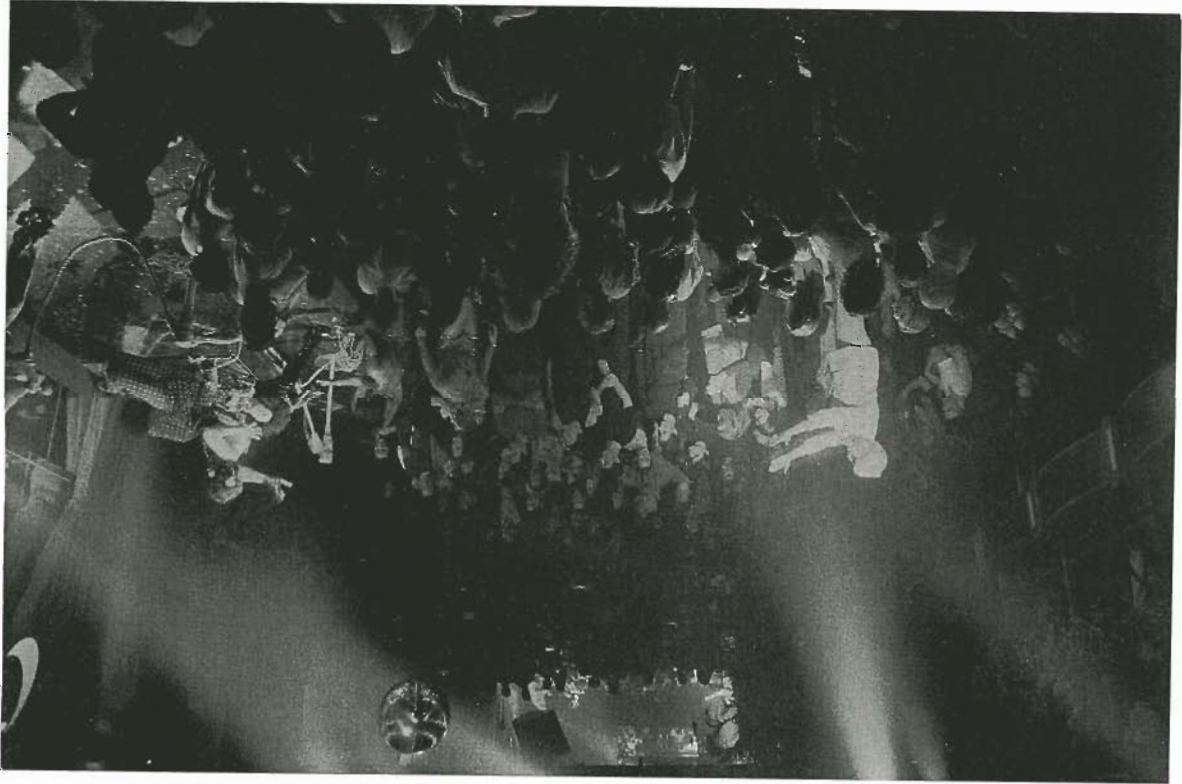
Plate 31 (opposite) The Donkey Show, A Midsummer Night's Disco at the Club El Flamingo, created and directed by Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner. Action occurred on the dance floor, on a raised stage (pictured to right), on galleries above the dance floor, and a mezzanine area (pictured at rear). Pictured: Rachel Benbow Murdy, Dan Cryer, Quinn, Anna Wilson, Emily Hellstrom, Jordín Ruderman.

Photo: Solomon Joseph. Courtesy Project 400 Theater Group.

Wilson, of director Martha Clarke, or of American-trained German choreographer Pina Bausch – a world of mannered performers gliding over intensely theatrical, high-concept stages, confronting the audience through the proscenium arch (equivalent to the fashion model looking either seductively or dispassionately at the camera). Except for ostensibly different objectives – selling clothes versus expressing ideas – there is little visual or structural difference between a Wilson opera and a fashion show.

The search for the new also means that artists do not have the luxury of developing ideas and work (and an audience) away from the pressure of constant surveillance. Whereas both popular and high art could, in the past, gestate and develop over time, now anything that catches the slightest public attention is immediately pounced upon and promoted by those in the media looking for the latest trend (a demand exacerbated by 24-hour news shows and a plethora of weekly style and entertainment magazines) and by producers or collectors hoping to get rich quick. Under such circumstances, most of the art and culture so generated is quickly consigned to oblivion. Well before new companies or artists can establish a reputation, be analyzed and explicated in journals, and evolve their work, newspapers and trendy magazines announce the next “must-see” event of the weekend. In such an environment, audiences begin looking for trendy events, not challenging encounters. Disposable culture has subsumed the arts as well as consumer products.

If anything, “avant-garde” has become a designator for a style or genre. But it is hard to find an overriding aesthetic. Avant-gardeness has come to be equated with the quirky, the shocking, or the merely offbeat and unexpected, but, by and large, there is no theoretical underpinning for most of this work. The impetus to create comes not so much from a dissatisfaction with the intellectual basis of contemporary theatre as from the age-old theatrical impulse to entertain. Only now, not surprisingly, the structure and content for new theatre is



derived from the ubiquitous imagery of popular culture, media, and cyber-technology. For those audiences still attuned to slow-moving linear narratives, psychologically based character, and thematically oriented material, i.e. traditional theatre, the new performance with its disjunctive, dissociative, alogical barrage of sound and image derived from videos, pop music, film, television, and cyber-media may indeed be disconcerting. But such theatre is not avant-garde – it is merely representative of the *fin de siècle* thought process. Insofar as self-consciously “edgy,” trendy, even provocative theatre is labeled “avant-garde,” it might better be thought of as the decadent avant-garde: a theatre of style *sans* substance.

So, in a sense, the goal of the avant-garde has been achieved. Structures of thinking and modes of perception have been – or are in the process of being – fundamentally altered. But it has happened largely through the ineluctable (and singularly untheoretical) combined forces of technology and popular entertainment. No longer locked in opposition to the mainstream, the avant-garde continues now as a form of classicism. The annual productions of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and near-annual works-in-progress of the Wooster Group, and the periodic creations of Robert Wilson (which are guaranteed media events) draw regular audiences – some of whom were not even born when these theatres began to produce – equivalent, in a way, to audiences who attend Shakespeare festivals. Meanwhile, the visual style and rhythmic structures of avant-garde theatre have been absorbed into and permeate fashion, music, graphic art, and a variety of media, which in turn feed back into multimedia performances, performance art, and the hybrid theatre of clubs and discos. It is all of a piece. Until and unless some form of recognizably traditional theatre re-emerges as a significant factor within the larger official culture, there will be no possibility of an avant-garde theatre rising in opposition. The American avant-garde that began in the late 1940s faded away in the 1990s.

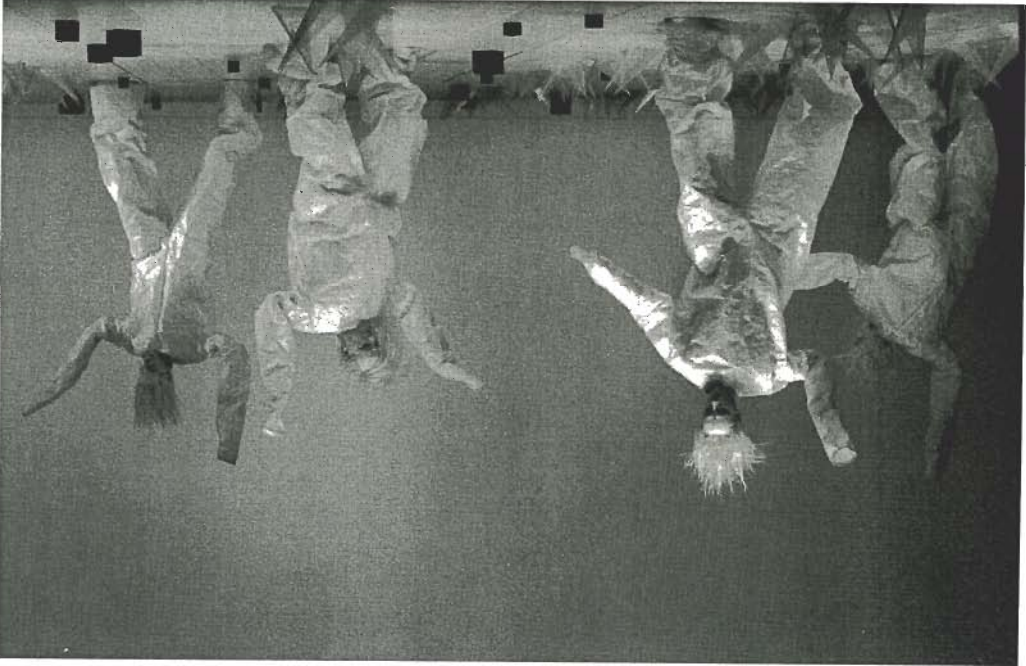


Plate 32 Theatre as fashion show: Robert Wilson's *Time Rocker*, 1997. Music and lyrics by Lou Reed, text by Darryl Pinckney.

Photo: Clorchen Baus-Mattar from the Thalia Theater (Germany) production.