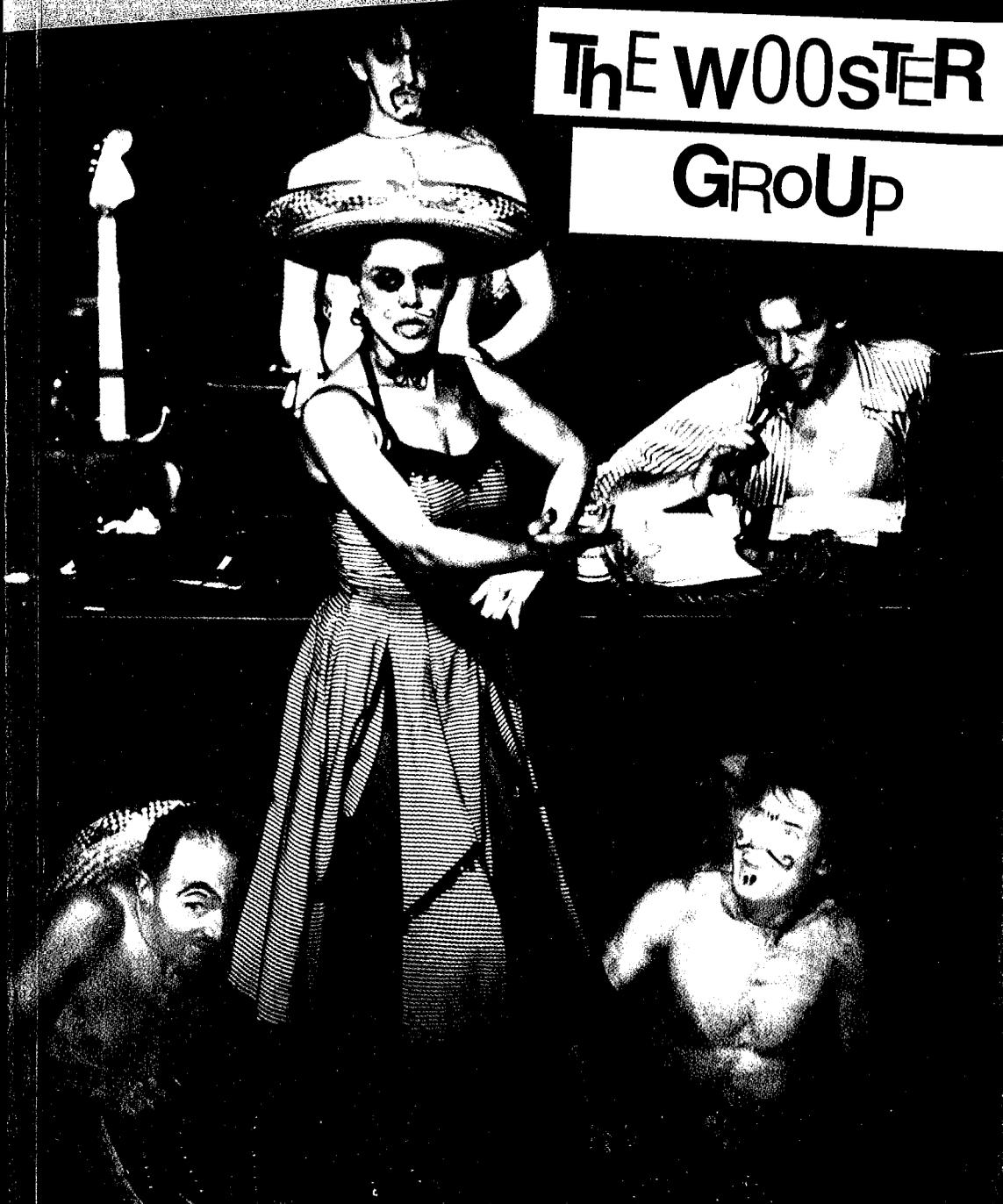


BREAKING THE RULES

THE WOOSTER

GROUP



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Introduction: Writing History

Among producers of experimental theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, the Wooster Group is unique for its combination of aesthetic and political radicalism with intellectual rigor. From the beginning, its work has been tough—difficult, vigorous and controversial. It has consistently addressed pressing social issues, including the victimization of women, racism and the multifarious processes of dehumanization. It has shocked and outraged a public inured to the unconventional and the daring. It has brought into the theatre material usually considered inappropriate, tasteless or illicit (including pornography, blackface comedy and pirated texts) not for sensational ends, but to explore and challenge middle-class culture, to question its assumptions and mode of operation and to reveal that which it has systematically suppressed. It has once again made the New York theatre a vital arena in which social, political and cultural issues are debated.

The Wooster Group's radicalism is not the result of an anarchic or haphazardly destructive impulse. On the contrary, the Group has examined attentively the culture of which it is a part, and read closely and intently its theatrical landmarks, deconstructing a series of texts, including *The Cocktail Party*, *Our Town* and *The Crucible*. It has juxtaposed these plays against wildly contrasting material (ranging from deafening disco music to a Pigeon Markham comedy routine) to perform incisive critiques that expose the contradictions lurking in each text. Coincidentally, it has pioneered a documentary performance mode, a kind of *théâtre vérité*, that mixes simple, non-mimetic presentation with a reckless and flamboyant theatricality.

The Wooster Group's theatre did not, of course, develop *ex nihilo*. It is, rather, an outgrowth of the off-Off-Broadway movement. In the early 1960s a number of artists attempted to create alternatives to mainstream commercial theatre. The first wave of experimentation included collectives, like the Living Theatre (under the direction of Julian Beck and Judith Malina) and the Open Theatre (under Joseph Chaikin's direction),

as well as individual playwrights such as Sam Shepard, Ronald Tavel and Maria Irene Fornes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, off-Off-Broadway was further invigorated by the anti-Vietnam War movement and the development of a powerful counterculture. This resulted in a second wave of experimentation which brought to the fore director/playwrights Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson and two collectives, Mabou Mines and The Performance Group. The latter was founded by Richard Schechner in 1967 and served as home base for the artists who began to produce their own work in 1975 under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte and who would, in 1980, re-form as the Wooster Group.

All of the aforementioned artists rejected the commercial theatre and its mode of production, choosing instead to create their own producing organizations. All worked with performers who had not received formal theatre training and thus had not been assimilated to the ubiquitous Stanislavskian "method." All redefined the performer's responsibilities and altered the traditional relationship between actor and role. All produced a kind of anti-theatre, more closely allied to developments in dance, music or the visual arts than those on the commercial stage. All rejected, to some extent, the traditional division of labor and created a theatre in which the director is the central creative force—a conjoint playwright/designer/director. All questioned the notion that the *mise en scène* must be subordinate to a previously written script and gave more or less equal importance to movement, text, design and music.

Of all the companies, the Wooster Group is the only one to retain its original organization and collaborative working process. Chaikin, Schechner, Foreman and Wilson no longer have their own companies. The members of Mabou Mines do much of their directing, writing or performing independently of the collective. Foreman and Wilson have begun to do a major portion of their work in a traditional theatre situation. Both have developed techniques and styles to use on more conventional material—both have been hired to direct trained actors or singers in a number of classic works, including *Don Juan*, *Parsifal* and *Medea*. In contrast, the Wooster Group has remained squarely within the experimental arena. It has produced six major pieces, each the result of a lengthy collaborative working process that brings together a variegated body of material from many different sources and filters it through a single consciousness, that of Elizabeth LeCompte.

LeCompte started directing in 1974 while a member of The Performance Group. She had been working as an assistant to Schechner who was then seeking to develop a theatre that would break down barriers: between art and life, between performance space and audience

space, and between production elements. This ritualistic theatre was aimed at laying bare and transforming the psyche of all who participated in the theatrical event, both performers and spectators. For most of his pieces, Schechner created a fluid, environmental space and used the raw visceral power of the performer to attenuate the literary and mimetic dimensions of the theatre. He based his rehearsal process on a daily schedule of intensive physical and emotional training, exercises and group psychotherapy.

In 1968 The Performance Group bought the Performing Garage at 33 Wooster Street in SoHo and produced one of their most important pieces, *Dionysus in 69*, a blood ritual of sorts based on Euripides' *The Bacchae*. After seeing and admiring the piece, Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte joined the company in 1970, Gray as performer and LeCompte as assistant director. They first collaborated with Schechner on *Commune* (1970), an examination of American mythology that juxtaposed a wide range of materials: *Moby Dick*, folk songs, spirituals, Thoreau's *Walden*, the murder of Sharon Tate by the Manson "family," the My Lai massacre and autobiographical texts by the performers.

In working and reworking a succession of pieces with Schechner, Gray and LeCompte developed their own idea of theatre. Gray credits Schechner with bringing him to maturity as a performer; LeCompte describes the five or six years working with Schechner as her apprenticeship, during which she was certainly influenced by his use of disparate texts and acting styles and his development of work through improvisation. In her own theatre pieces she would continue, as he had done, to work in a group situation and to use material furnished by the performers. She would mix cultural analysis with autobiography, combining plays with chronicles of the personalities and preoccupations of the performers.

During her years with Schechner, however, LeCompte became increasingly critical of his methods. She found his *mise en scène* too highly symbolic and ritualistic and his approach to performance dangerously psychoanalytical, urging the performer really to feel—at least in rehearsal—what he was experiencing on stage. She felt that Schechner never filtered the raw material rigorously enough, that he never fully mediated it through himself. She believed that the group situation (in which he enjoyed the role of guru) took precedence for him over the art and that the latter suffered as a result. LeCompte wanted to explore a different kind of theatre and in 1974 she and Gray joined with two members of The Performance Group and other friends to develop their own work through improvisation. The resultant piece, *Sakonnet Point*, broke sharply with Schechner's work. During LeCompte's years of

apprenticeship, she had developed her own methods not only from her observation of Schechner—and then often doing the opposite—but from seeing other experimental work being performed in New York.

LeCompte has explained that she was particularly impressed by the work of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. She vividly recalls Foreman's *Pain(t)* (1974) which included a fight between two sisters, Rhoda and Eleanor, played by Kate Manheim and her own real sister, Nora. LeCompte remembers it not as a literal representation but as an "abstraction of a fight," featuring recorded voices and postures that suggested a fight more powerfully than anything she had experienced in the realistic theatre. Here she saw violence performed "with no relation to natural gesture and yet so real that it made you believe it was actually happening." Similarly inspirational was Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* (1970) which expanded the possibilities she envisioned in using a non-linear structure and "a visual language that was not necessarily psychologically real." In watching Wilson's work, she became attuned to its "musical" rather than logical form and to its "geometric structure": its way, for example, of building an entire sequence upon a single movement drawn by the performers on the stage floor. And she was fascinated by his use of highly suggestive and wistful material, his "almost Wagnerian relationship to the world" and the "deep sadness" that she sensed in the work.

LeCompte was also interested in Stuart Sherman's manipulation of objects on a TV tray, his "super-naturalism," as she calls it, his use of pedestrian, sub-theatrical activity to suggest the arbitrariness and strangeness of the commonplace. She also responded positively to Meredith Monk's *Education of a Girl Child* (1973) which, as a woman's work, was "closer to home" and provided a "tremendous boost."

In the first four pieces that LeCompte directed (co-composed with Spalding Gray and the other performers), the main roles were taken by Gray, Ron Vawter and Libby Howes. Vawter came to the Wooster Group via the U.S. Army. He recalls working downtown in the winter of 1972 as a recruiting officer and passing the Performing Garage on his way home every evening. After hearing, night after night, strange "experimental sounds" coming out of the place, he stopped in to see Schechner's production of Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* which he was "very taken with." He gradually got to know the Group members and quit the Army in the summer of 1973 to become the Performance Group's administrator. In 1976 he started working with LeCompte and Gray and has since appeared in all the Wooster Group's pieces. Libby Howes, the fourth "core" member of the Group, met Gray in 1974 when he was directing a workshop at the University of Michigan where she was a student. Shortly thereafter she came to New York and in 1975 became

involved in the making of *Sakonnet Point*. She continued working with LeCompte and Gray, appearing in the next three pieces and becoming a Group member in 1978. In 1980 she began working on her own and decided in 1981 to leave the Group.

By the late 1970s, that part of The Performance Group working with LeCompte had become more vital than that working with Schechner and it attracted several people who have since become members of the Wooster Group. Designer and technical director Jim Clayburgh first worked with The Performance Group in 1972 after graduating from New York University. He designed the lighting for *Sakonnet Point* and co-designed the setting for *Rumstick Road*. After a two-year hiatus, he continued his collaboration with LeCompte, co-designing *Point Judith* and all following pieces. Performer Willem Dafoe came to New York from Milwaukee, where he had worked as an actor with Theatre X, and joined The Performance Group in 1977. He became increasingly interested in the pieces LeCompte was directing and in 1979 became one of the co-creators of *Point Judith*. He has collaborated on all subsequent pieces and, at the same time, pursued an independent film career. In 1979 Kate Valk, then an N.Y.U. student, started working with the Group (initially to help with costumes for *Point Judith*). The following year she began working on a new piece LeCompte was developing, *Route 1 & 9*, and later filled in for Libby Howes in *Nayatt School* and *Point Judith* after Howes left the Group. Peyton Smith, the most recent full member, came to New York in 1975 from the Provincetown Theatre Company and worked with Richard Foreman in two productions before appearing in The Performance Group's production of *The Balcony* (1979). The next year she became involved in the composition of *Route 1 & 9* and has continued as a member of the Wooster Group. Richard Schechner, meanwhile, left The Performance Group in 1980 and it disbanded, although LeCompte and those working with her retained the Group's corporate status. LeCompte became artistic director of the enterprise and the Group held on to what had always been, in fact, its corporate name: the Wooster Group.

Cognizant of the limitations of a systematic written chronicle, *Breaking the Rules* is a fractured history of the Wooster Group. The present tense runs against the past, juxtaposing documentation and analysis of the collaborative pieces against the Group members' own observations and memories. In the constant interplay, the analysis that proceeds in the present tense provides the text with a basic line of action, interrupted from time to time by voices remembering the past. I have set these voices and tenses against each other; I have interwoven description, analysis, biography and memory in imitation of the Wooster Group's work. I

present my own interpretations in counterpoint with the members' stated intentions and interpretations (with which I do not always agree) to expand a series of connotations or to enrich the theatrical with personal associations. Through this polyphony I hope to provide a sense of the complexity of the Wooster Group's work, constituted as it is by a kaleidoscopic interplay of forms, perspectives and voices.

The words of Wooster Group members that interrupt the text, and are not footnoted, are taken from interviews, both formal and informal, that I conducted and edited, most between August and October 1984. Elsewhere, selections from what I call the *Nayatt School Notebook* were extracted from two notebooks containing Libby Howes's records of rehearsals for *Nayatt School*. Because four of the Group's pieces are based on widely performed modern plays, I have included detailed critiques of these plays prompted by the Group's performance of excerpts of each of the "parent" texts. In assembling these disparate materials and interweaving them with my own analysis, I have attempted to create a structure modelled upon *L.S.D.*, the most recent and certainly the most historiographic of the Wooster Group's pieces (also, the piece that was being finished as I was writing this book).

In chronicling the Wooster Group's activity, *Breaking the Rules* focuses on the collaborative pieces directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. This work, however, is not the Group's sole product. Since 1979 Spalding Gray has largely dropped out of the collaborative pieces to develop a series of autobiographical monologues. Although these monologues are closely connected in many and various ways to the collaborative pieces, they fall outside the scope of the book because they are not directed by LeCompte. The only exception is *India and After (America)* which I analyze as an introduction to the Rhode Island Trilogy and to the use therein of autobiographical material.

Since every starting point is arbitrary, since every beginning is both a continuation of and break with the past, I choose not to begin with *Sakonnet Point*, the Group's first piece. Wishing to avoid a strictly evolutionary framework, I disrupt chronological sequence. Thus Part I, instead of offering a measured introduction, provides an analysis of what is arguably the Group's most concentrated and self-contained piece, *Route 1 & 9* (1981). Part II retraces the steps and returns to the earliest work, *Three Places in Rhode Island* (composed of *Sakonnet Point* [1975], *Rumstick Road* [1977] and *Nayatt School* [1978]) and its epilogue, *Point Judith* (1979). It ends with a look at *Hula* (1981), a dance piece composed during a vacation from *Route 1 & 9* rehearsals. Part III is devoted to an analysis of the Group's most recent work, *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)* (1985).

In writing this book, I have assumed an ambiguous relationship to the Wooster Group and its audience. As an "authorized" chronicler, I have been made privy to the desires and motivations of many in the Group. I have thus become an insider while remaining a spectator, always outside the Group's activities. My text no doubt reflects my own equivocal position, sitting alongside both spectator and performer, being both the spectator's ally and an intermediary between him and the Group's work. As a result, my text alternates between first and third person pronouns, never feeling comfortable with either authoritarianism, neither the editorial "we" nor the more impersonal epithet, "the spectator. . . ."

For the sake of clarity I have chosen to use the male pronoun to describe the hypothetical spectator or reader. Although its use reflects my gender (and is, thus, an accurate vehicle for my projections) there is a sense in which the convention of privileging the male is grossly out of place here. From the beginning, the Wooster Group has investigated that which is taken for granted and passes unnoticed in our culture. In its work it has questioned the disposition of theatrical forces and the status of the spectator. Writing about this work, I feel almost a sense of embarrassment that rhetorical convention has dictated the use of the male pronoun. In recognizing the relationship between the spectator's stare and the masculine ogle, I am forced to consider the voyeuristic implications of my analytical gaze.

Finally, I would like to record my personal motivation in writing this book. When, in May 1982, I entered the Performing Garage to see the Wooster Group for the first time (the piece was *Nayatt School*), I had no idea what to expect. I knew only that the piece was part of their Rhode Island Trilogy (*Nayatt School* is, in fact, located some ten miles from where I grew up in Providence). I suspected the work would be contentious because the friend who accompanied me told me of the controversy surrounding the Group's use of blackface in *Route 1 & 9*. I took my place in the front row and listened intently to Spalding Gray's opening monologue, delighting in his irreverent presentation of *The Cocktail Party*. When the curtains opened to begin Part III and the performers descended into madness and chaos, I was enraptured, and I remained so until the end of the piece, carried away by a whirlwind the like of which I had never seen before in the theatre. When the performance ended I walked—or floated—out onto Wooster Street and, in a state of exultation, started running up the street. For me, the act of writing this book has been an attempt to recapture the thrill and the breathlessness of that run.

Part I

Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act): The Disintegration of Our Town

Our Town:

(no inflection) "Your mother'll be coming down-stairs to make believe, uh, make breakfast."

"Chew that bacon good and slow. It'll help keep you warm on a cold day."

"... his appendix burst on a hunting trip in North Conway."

"There are the stars making the crisscross..."

"This is the worst piece of shit." "Shut up, I like it, it reminds me of Carousel."

(Lizzie: incredible innocence & the hokey philosopher profound dimensions in downhome and he's an asshole)

Nayatt School Notebook October 11, 1977

Elizabeth LeCompte: We began doing Our Town as a reading, fitting people into parts, rehearsing it during the day and performing it at night. Just as a reading, but excluding the part of the Stage Manager, that voice that connects, so that it would stand as a number of scenes, placed next to each other.

Kate Valk: When we started working on Route 1 & 9, it was just Our Town, reading Our Town, and I was still stage managing. Then I transcribed the Pigmeat Markham records, trying to figure out what they were saying. By the time I finished I could imitate... I could do all the voices. And that's how I got started performing in Route 1 & 9, with the blackface routines.

Peyton Smith: The beginning of rehearsals was wonderful because the live performance part was dancing. And many of the early rehearsals, before we got into any depth, were spent making this wonderful musical

piece that was a lot of fun to do. Of course, then it became more problematic, when we started realizing the intent, and how far it went.

* * *

When *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)* opened at the Performing Garage in October 1981, it polarized its audience more radically than any piece performed in New York in at least a decade. By January 1982 it had become the subject of a widely reported controversy. The dispute centered around the piece's juxtaposition of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* against a reconstruction of a Pigmeat Markham comedy routine, performed by four actors in blackface. The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), which has been a major source of funding for the Group, judged that "Route 1 & 9 contained in its blackface sequences harsh and caricatured portrayals of a racial minority"¹ and, as a consequence, cut funding for the Group by forty percent, the fraction of the grant they believed subsidized the piece. The Wooster Group convened a number of public forums to discuss the piece's alleged racism and in March submitted an appeal to NYSCA, drawn up by Jeffrey M. Jones, aimed at restoring the funding. The appeal contained a thirty-one-page defense of *Route 1 & 9* as well as twenty-three letters of support by a formidable collection of artists, critics and producers. On June 10, 1982, NYSCA rejected the appeal and upheld the reduced level of funding.

* * *

Schema of Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)

- Part IA *THE LESSON (Upstairs): In Which A Man Delivers a Lecture on the Structure and Meaning of Our Town*
Video reconstruction of "teaching film"
- Part IB *THE LESSON (Downstairs): In Which the Stage Hands Arrange the Stage for the Last Act of Our Town*
"The Lesson" continues
Blind building sequence begins
Black out
- Part II *THE PARTY: In Which the Stage Hands Call It a Day and a Telegram Is Sent*
Blind building continues
The "girls" make telephone calls

The Party begins (reconstruction of Pigmeat Markham routine)
Video excerpts from *Our Town*, Act II, overlap

- Part III *THE LAST ACT (The Cemetery Scene): In Which Four Chairs are Placed on the Stage Facing the Audience to Represent Graves*

Video excerpts from *Our Town*, Act III, begin
The Party continues "sotto voce"
Ghoul Dance

- Part IV *ROUTE 1 & 9: In Which a Van Picks Up Two Hitchhikers and Heads South*

Video: "Route 1 & 9" (Driving sequence)
Porn

* * *

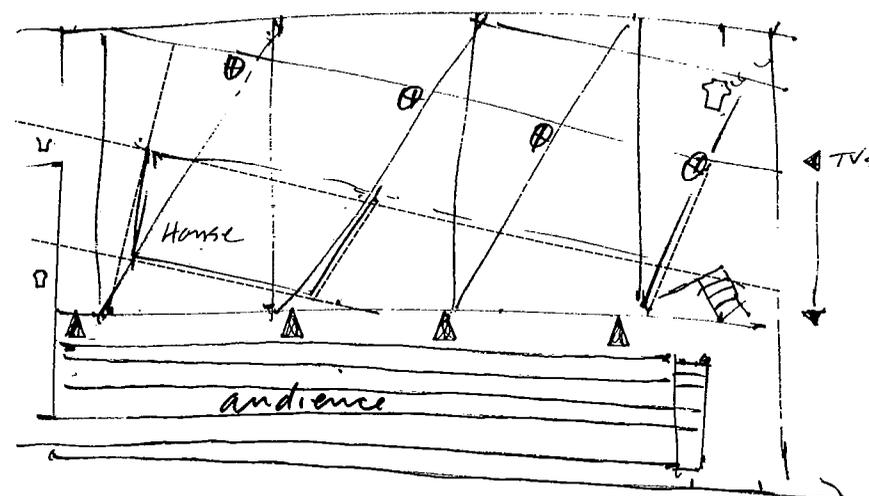


Figure 1. Performance Space for *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*
(Elizabeth LeCompte)

Elizabeth LeCompte: In the beginning I had an image of the performers in blackface. Wonderful visual thing. I thought of the blackface on them, and the lighting. And I could see, almost immediately, a kind of dance structure, going up and back, along an expanded floor grid from Point Judith. Usually, that's one of the very first things that comes: a spatial element from the preceding piece, something I couldn't do there, that pushed it too far, or that didn't work, in some way. It's as if each space is an interpolation of the last. Or a rearrangement of the last, or the space

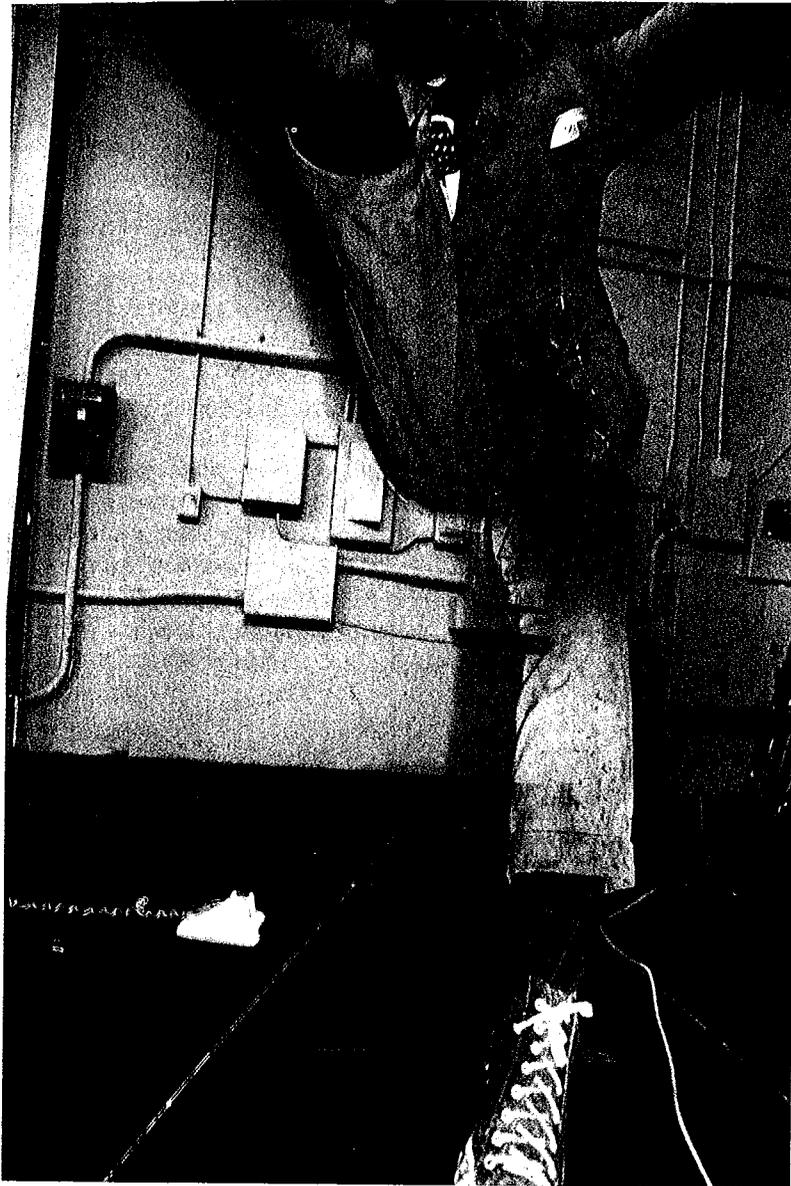
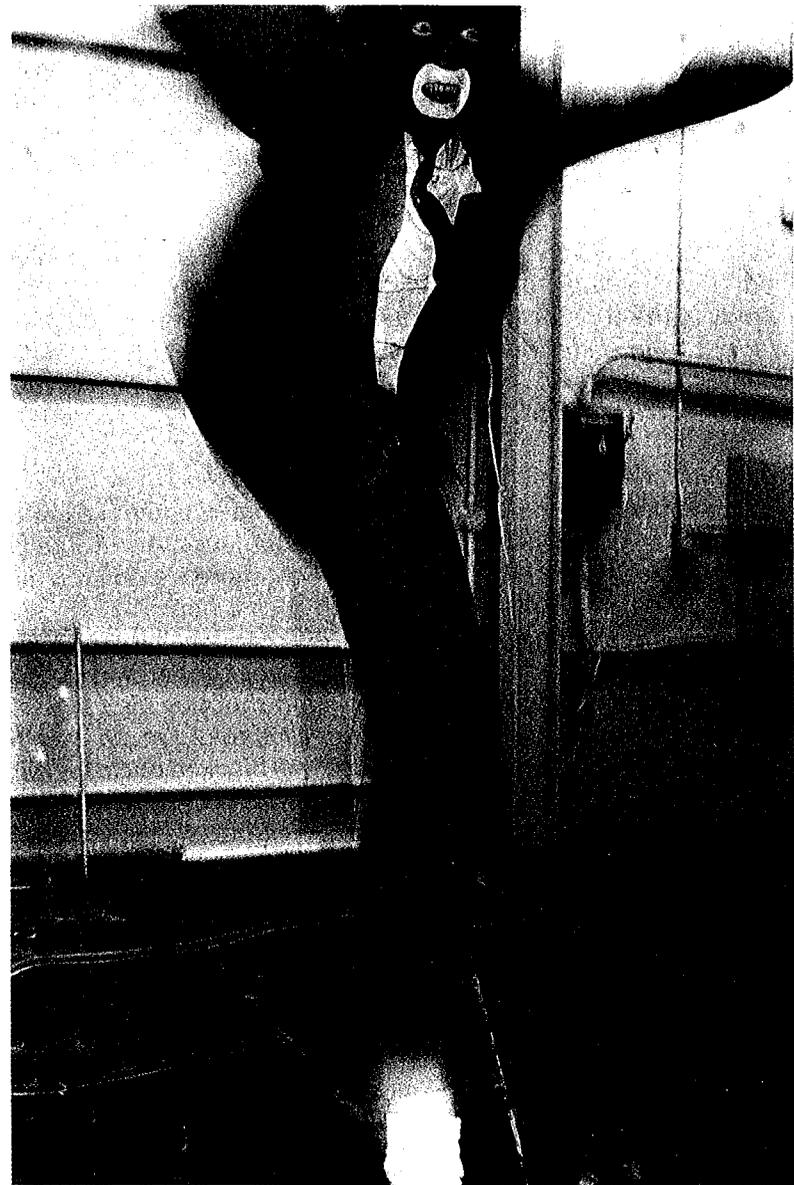


Figure 2. *Route 1 & 9, The Party*
Willem Dafoe, Ron Vawter.
(Nancy Campbell)



before that. The performance space had been falling more and more into a kind of parallelogram grid. I took the pattern of the house drawn on the floor from the earlier pieces, the parallelogram that it had become, and extended it over the whole space. The tin house would stand on top of the grid. And we constructed dances around that. Like on a chalk board. I knew that the audience would look down from above, onto a blackboard, that I was going to be sketching on a blackboard, so to speak. And the characters would be dancing and sketching in white on a black board.

Ron Vawter: I knew very well that we were unsettling people's feelings, and our own feelings, about racism: racism in ourselves, racism in everybody in the audience, black and white. And it was all about pulling the rug out from under people's secure, liberal and righteous feelings about racism, their own and society's. We were agents provocateurs, saboteurs, working against people's strong feelings of righteousness.

Peyton Smith: Well, sometimes, we got really scared when things got bad. I remember this one night... in the beginning when we got bad reviews, we'd have maybe seven people in the audience. And Route 1 & 9 is a hard show to do for seven people. Anyway, there weren't too many people this one night. And I went through such a horror. There was a black man in the audience. And he had his coat over his lap. And he would put his hand under his coat. We were doing the part way up front, about the punch and I thought, "He's going to shoot us. He's closest to Ronnie. Well, I love Ronnie but that's the way it goes. I'm going to dive under the seating arrangement." And I had it all blocked out in my mind. And then, of course, nothing happened. So when we went off stage, I said, "Oh my God, I had such a fear." And everyone else saw him. So it wasn't that I was paranoid. It was so odd that we all picked up on it, because he never did anything. He just sat there, but he had this weird look. With Route 1 & 9, all the performances were exciting. And I liked that. I liked the controversy. But sometimes it was frightening.

* * *

Beyond Parody (Part I)

Elizabeth LeCompte: We reconstructed a 1965 Encyclopedia Britannica teaching film starring Clifton Fadiman. For a long time, I didn't know where it would be played, we tried many different places. Finally, I separated it out and put it at the beginning, dovetailing it into the rest of the piece. Clifton Fadiman was the "Stage Manager" of Route 1 & 9, echoing Wilder's construction in *Our Town*. Then you'd see Ron come

back as the Stage Manager, as Clifton Fadiman had played him in the tape. Those kinds of connectors came in late.

The first part of Route 1 & 9, "The Lesson: In Which a Man Delivers a Lecture," is a videotaped lecture on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, delivered by Ron Vawter and screened in the upstairs space at the Performing Garage. In the Wooster Group's version, "The Lesson" appears to be a gentle mockery of the banalities of humanistic criticism. For the duration of the tape, the camera holds long static shots of the lecturer and pans portentously as he moves back and forth between a tiny model stage and the ladder to be used in *Our Town* (and *Route 1 & 9*). It zooms in for important "truths" and underscores them by spelling out the catch phrases across the bottom of the television screen. These production devices, combined with jump cuts in the editing (most of which were present in the print from which the Wooster Group worked), suggest that a subtly critical point of view is being taken toward both the speaker and his analysis of *Our Town*. In Ron Vawter's deadpan characterization, the lecturer mouths the formulas of humanistic criticism with a forced informality and playfulness that mask his authoritarian pose. He explicates the play by setting himself up as a

Ron Vawter: Fadiman makes these very unwieldy and awkward illustrative gestures. Willem and I studied them very carefully, second by second. When I look at my eyes in the tape, I'm amazed at how glazed over they look. I had done unconscious listening, putting on the audio tape when I was asleep. It's as if performing it reinduced the sleep state I was in while I was digesting it.

privileged interpreter who speaks for the audience: "He [Dr. Gibbs] uses the word unconsciously, he doesn't notice it, but we do."² By so articulating the spectators' emotions ("We've all had that feeling"³) he establishes his community with the audience in much the same way that Wilder implicates the spectator as a citizen of *Our Town*.

The apparently ironic stance of "The Lesson" suggests a critique of the universalizing tendencies and the staunchly philosophical (rather than political) pose of liberal humanism. The lecturer, in what LeCompte calls his "extremely white analysis"⁴ of the play, would like the spectators to believe that *Our Town* is first and foremost a shared spiritual experience. Adopting the first person plural pronoun, he explains that the play assures the recognition that "all our lives are part of something vast and eternal." He asserts that it "reconciles us to life" and "helps us to understand and so accept our existence on earth." For him, *Our Town*, like "the humanities in general," propounds an unchanging set of



Figure 3. *Route 1 & 9*, (A) *The Lesson*; (B) *Our Town* Video, Emily Webb; (C) *Our Town* Video, Mrs. Webb Ron Vawter; Marissa Hansell; Peyton Smith. (Nancy Campbell)

universal characteristics and all those things that “never go out of style”—birth, growing up, marriage and death.⁵ Between 8:40 and 11:00, the time the lecturer allots for a performance of *Our Town*, the Wooster Group reverses these axioms by historicizing the theatrical experience. It lifts the veil of aestheticism that certain artists and critics use to try to shield art from the realities of history and remove it from its political context. In *Route 1 & 9*, the Wooster Group recovers racial and cultural difference. Rather than reconciling the spectator to (social) life, it leads him to become aware of what *Our Town* has repressed and ignored. It suggests that Grover’s Corners is but a sweet fantasy and that Wilder’s American pastoral promulgates less a universal truth than the ideology of a particular class and culture.

If “The Lesson” were simply a satire, its ridicule of a humanistic interpretation of dramatic literature (and the social values it champions) would unite the spectators “against” these formations. It would thereby repeat the very process upon which the lecturer relies. It would instill a sense of community and superiority among those who can share in the apparent condemnation, a condescension analogous to that enjoyed by Mr. Fadiman, poised confidently between the text he has “mastered” and the audience he “commands.” This stratification of points of view is

Elizabeth LeCompte: I liked the Clifton Fadiman film, but was bothered about liking it. It touched nostalgic chords of comfort for me that made me angry. It pressed two buttons simultaneously. And I found myself unable to accept either in comfort. I couldn’t destroy it, and I couldn’t go with it and be satisfied. I wanted to dig more deeply into it.

subtly undermined, however, by the fact that the analysis proffered in “The Lesson” offers strategic access to the projects of both Wilder and the Wooster Group.

In “The Lesson” the lecturer speaks of the importance of three devices in *Our Town*: music, theme and variations as a formal principle, and the condensed line or word.⁶ Wilder used these devices (along with many others) to break with the dominant theatrical style of his time—realism. In the preface to *Three Plays*, he upbraids the realistic theatre for being “evasive,” for practicing a “social criticism” that fails “to indict us with responsibility.”⁷ He notes that a major cause of the theatre’s impotence was the box set which, when taken “‘seriously’ . . . removed, cut off, and boxed the action,” turning the theatre into a “museum showcase.”⁸ To oppose this convention he delocalized the stage, refusing “childish attempts to be ‘real,’”⁹ and created performance space.

In a project analogous to Wilder's, the Wooster Group has reacted against the dominant style of its time—realism again. LeCompte notes her own attempts to move the work "ALWAYS AWAY FROM NATURALISM."¹⁰ To accomplish this, the work relies on loud music, not only to create mood, as Wilder does, but to shatter a cohesive dramatic texture and evoke a historical and cultural setting. The Group's attack on linear structure radicalizes Wilder's lyrically episodic technique (theme and variations) to create a violently disjunctive form that breaks sharply with a plot-driven structure. ("I am looking for some substitute for plot. Non-linear," writes LeCompte.¹¹) Finally, the art of condensation, or "putting a lot into one small package,"¹² suggests for the Wooster Group the development of complex symbols and actions which resist translation into discursive language.

To renovate Wilder's break with realism, Parts II and III of the piece feature scenes from *Our Town* on video monitors, in what is as much an act of homage as it is a critique. LeCompte acknowledges Wilder as her "predecessor"¹³ in American experimental theatre and maintains that she loves "that kind of *Our Town* sentimentality. . . ." ¹⁴ For she too has rejected the box set (as exemplified by the miniature stage, the "museum showcase" in "The Lesson") and uses the theatre as performance space. In *Route 1 & 9* she submits *Our Town* to a violent examination but she does so knowing that it has its roots in Wilder's own intentions. Indeed, the closing paragraph of Wilder's preface acquires a particular poignancy in this context, when he writes, "I hope I have played a part in preparing the way" for "the new dramatists we are looking for."¹⁵ Ironically, during a period of retrenchment in the 1980s, in the midst of a revival of realistic playwrighting, Wilder's hope has been fulfilled less conspicuously by new dramaturgy than new performance, and most powerfully perhaps, by a work that uses his own script as a starting point.

By inducing the spectator to read "The Lesson" as satire, *Route 1 & 9* snares the audience in its own smug condescension: it lures the spectator to fall into the very trap that the lecturer himself has fallen into. By the conclusion of "The Lesson," however, *Route 1 & 9* has begun to move beyond parody and call into question the unanimity it has provoked. As the piece proceeds, it cuts through the hierarchy of points of view and makes it increasingly difficult for the viewer to retain a critical objectivity. It works in harmony with Wilder's intent, to ensure that "the social criticism" will "indict" the spectator "with responsibility." It restores the accountability of the individual by leading him to confront his complicity in the maintenance of what is revealed to be a deeply stratified and inequitable culture.

* * *

Kate Valk: I swear, I didn't think the Pigmear Markham was going to be a problem. I really didn't. All the time we spent working on it, I thought it would be so evident because of the context. My feelings are hurt easily. . . I'm not interested in offending the audience. Really. I got upset that some people reacted so strongly against the piece. But it was also a very exciting time. Because of the controversy, houses were packed. Also, in this kind of theatre, there is sometimes a lot of distance between you and the audience, not physical distance but. . . I mean, I'm pretty isolated, working down here. And it was interesting to have so much feedback from everyone. Although I still don't feel that it's been resolved. Because the blackface gives me a lot of pleasure. It's the most fun I've ever had. On the other hand, I hate to do something that I know hurts people or offends them. But I believe in it so strongly. . . it makes so much sense to me. But nothing tops the time we had in Zurich. Having a few liberals offended at you and getting your funding cut was nothing compared to having 650 people screaming at you. They hated the video. And the blackface, they didn't care about that. They just didn't want video. They were throwing eggs and tomatoes and shaking the booth where the guys were running the equipment. We were all. . . UUGGHH!!! It was really scary.

* * *

Stagehands (Part II)

*Elizabeth LeCompte: We worked with the guys building the tin house blindfolded. That came out of Point Judith, a whole section of Point Judith that I excised, because I couldn't fit it in. I took that section and expanded it for the beginning of *Route 1 & 9*—the comic structure of building the house. I took the idea, really, from vaudeville and comedic films about housebuilding. I remember, particularly, a Laurel and Hardy short in which they play incompetent workmen building a house which, at the end, totally collapses. The idea was to construct some kind of routine with the guys really blindfolded. So we did improvisations around them working, building the house blindfolded, and Spalding sitting above, watching them, talking to them as the foreman. That's where we got the "skeletal house" text that's played in the blackout. We combined the tapes of the improvisations from Point Judith with these new tapes and used them as one of the soundtracks for Part II.*

Figure 4. *Route 1 & 9*, Blind Building
 Ron Vawter.
 (Nancy Campbell)

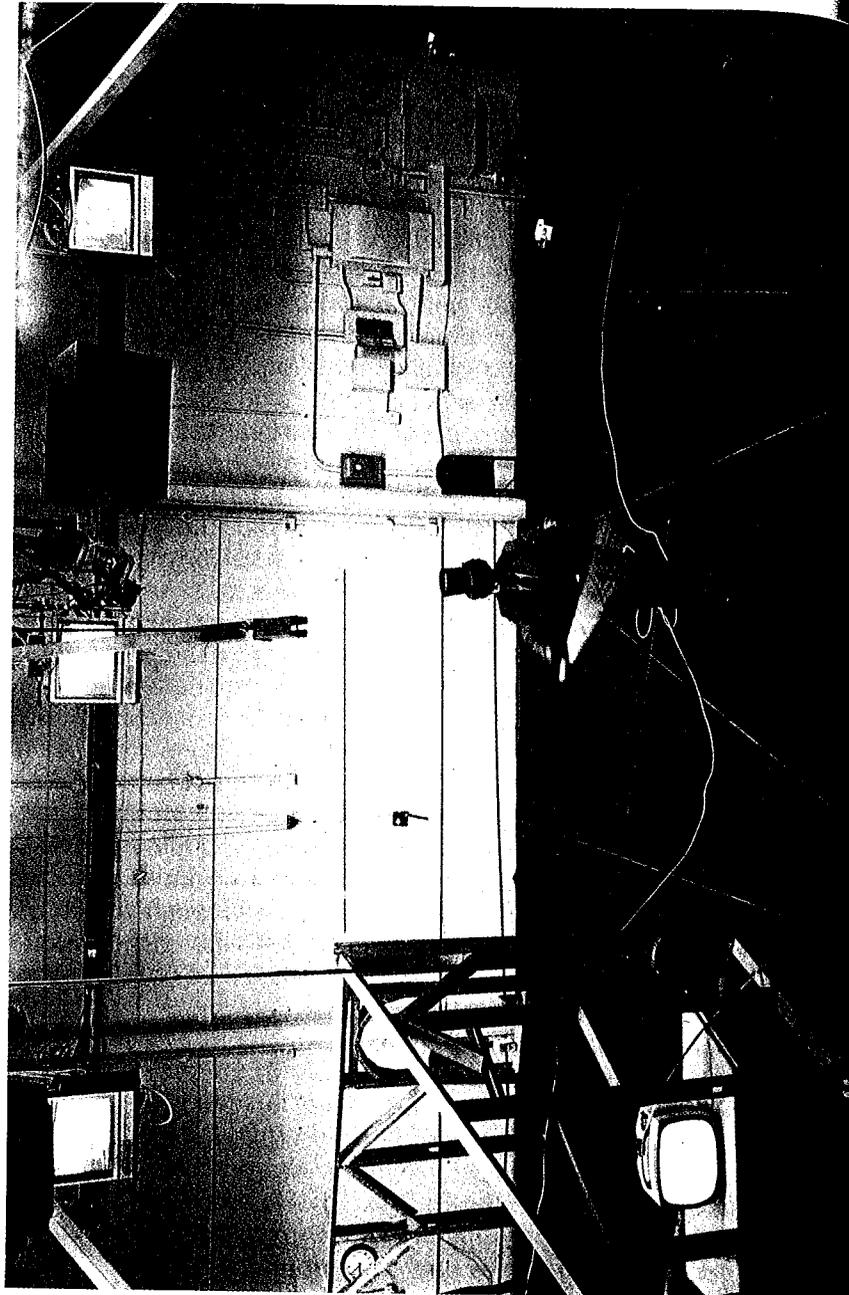


Figure 5. *Route 1 & 9*, Blind Building
 Willem Dafoe, Ron Vawter.
 (Nancy Campbell)

Part I of *Route 1 & 9* concludes as the audience moves downstairs for the last section of "The Lesson" and the start of a very different kind of performance. The spectators now sit across the length of the Performing Garage, the playing area stretched out immediately before them, four video monitors poised 14 feet above the stage floor. The house lights go to black and in the darkness we hear a conversation between two men (Ron Vawter and Spalding Gray) in which they discuss plans for constructing a skeletal house. In a dialogue which will resonate with one of the final videotapes, Dan (Vawter) explains that there's "quite a call" for these skeletal houses "out in Jersey."

STEW: What advantage are those skeletal houses?

DAN: Dan, they're very airy and there's good visibility.

STEW: How are they heating them these days?

DAN: Dan. It's organic heating.

STEW: Organic, meaning what? Over.

DAN: None.

STEW: No heat at all. What kind of families could live in a house with no heat?

DAN: Cold people, Dan.

STEW: What's that? Come again?

DAN: Dan. Indifferent people.

STEW: Do you get those out there, then, in Jersey?

DAN: They got 'em all over.¹⁶

U.S. Routes 1 and 9 begin at the Canadian border and meander south, Route 1 along the Atlantic coast and Route 9 along the east bank of the Hudson. They merge in northern New Jersey and proceed south for 30 miles before separating again. A corridor of gas stations, shopping centers and fast-food restaurants, Route 1 & 9 wends its way through one of the most heavily industrial areas in the nation. Like major roads on the edge of every American city, it owes its diversity of offerings to the industrial growth of the past fifty years and the flight of the middle class to the suburbs. For the Wooster Group, this stretch of highway is America's dream landscape of the eighties, the modern counterpart of the Grover's Corners of fifty years before (fictionally located in New Hampshire, somewhere between Routes 1 and 9). It is the thoroughfare for the "Cold people," the "Indifferent people" who inhabit this landscape, the emotional reserve of Wilder's New England Puritans having become a pervasive coldness, sterility, insularity and fear.

Into this evocation of contemporary America, two men in blackface (Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter) enter, two stagehands who prepare to assemble the reverse forced-perspective skeletal house that will dominate the stage right half of the playing area. After surveying the blueprints in silence they begin to work. As they do, pre-recorded

Willem Dafoe: There was a lot of pleasure in Route 1 & 9, particularly the blackface building. It's very curious. Because here is a grossly public action, and externally, you have a grossly obvious task doing grossly obvious sight-gags. But you're blind. And it's like you're dreaming. You're out there . . . and it's wonderful, it's the most literal mask you can ever think of.

dialogue between Stew and Dan from *Point Judith*, instructions for the building of the house, continues over the loudspeakers. The unseen Stew directs the action from afar, a representative of the director and the invisible theatrical apparatus supporting the performers, themselves stagehands of a sort, "the unseen people behind the scenes, the black workers and the maids who scrub at night."¹⁷ Here, the process that makes visible what in the theatre is customarily invisible will reach as far as Grover's Corners and reveal all that lies buried there. Besides forming a link with the earlier piece (LeCompte sees her activity as "creating a body of work, a continuum"¹⁸) the construction of the skeletal house sets forth a provocative "what if . . ." What if the laborers from *Point Judith* were to be taken out of context and placed in entirely new surroundings? What if, instead of being inserted into *Long Day's Journey into Night*, they were made to collide with and become part of a critique of the quintessential paean to white, middle-class American life and death, *Our Town*? What

if, to accentuate their contrast with the Webbs and the Gibbsses, they were presented as black?

The transformation wrought upon these two characters places them, within the confines of American culture, at the opposite pole from the characters in *Our Town*. Like the latter, presented in soap opera close-ups, the two stagehands emerge not from the "real" social world but from a theatrical tradition, here vaudeville, blackface minstrel shows and silent films. Like virtually all of *Route 1 & 9*, they are quoted, wrenched out of context to collide with Wilder's lyric ghosts.

At this point in the piece, the spectators' attention is turned toward the "antics" of the two stagehands—none of *Our Town* has as yet been screened—and the grotesque and unsettling figures that they cut. They install a wall upside down, spilling a can of beer fastened to one of the supports, and fumblingly light a cigarette in the middle. Working several feet from the front row, they are close enough for the audience to scrutinize their deep black make-up and exaggerated white lips. Their appearance is monstrous, as distorted as the face of a performer in *Rumstick Road* when a color slide of another woman is projected on her. These characters are also projections: now a white man's image of black men. Their routine is a transformation of burlesque in which, as LeCompte notes, the "humor comes from out-of-control destructiveness."¹⁹ Here, however, as Laurel 'n' Hardy become Amos 'n' Andy become Stew 'n' Dan, the humor has evaporated, in part because of the black blinding glasses that force the men to perform their routine at half-speed, drawing the comedy out so far "you can see the holes in the joke."²⁰

The gulf between white and black culture is widened as the women, also in blackface, begin a series of live phone calls, broadcast over speakers in the theatre. Willie (Kate Valk) invites Ann (Peyton Smith) to her birthday party—a celebration which will contrast violently and poignantly with Emily's twelfth birthday. She then phones a number of fried chicken outlets in an attempt to get food delivered for her party. The calls are live and, of course, change from night to night. They are, in part, "about the distance between uptown and downtown," as LeCompte explains.²¹ Most of the outlets Willie calls are in Harlem and most won't deliver. When she does find one that will and gives Wooster Street as the address, the answer invariably comes back, "Oh, we don't go down there." (The elaboration of cultural schism is again based on a division within Grover's Corners, where a "Polish Town" lies just "across the tracks."²²) The breach between black and white culture is underscored by the audio/visual paradox the phone calls induce. The audience sees Willie, a white woman in blackface, call a fried chicken

Kate Valk: The public forums were fascinating. It's interesting to go back and listen to the tapes, because of what you can tell about people from their voices. I spoke once and my voice is... it sounds like I'm crying. More emotional than articulate. And Liz was kind of clenched, angry but very articulate. And Richard Foreman, very articulate about the whole thing. And listening to one of the critics, you can hear the hatred in her voice when she attacks Liz.

outlet and, adopting a black dialect, "jive" with a man at the other end of the line. Rather than forging a link, the ruse only accentuates the schism.

Willie continues her calls while the men continue their work and scenes from Act II of *Our Town* play on the monitors. After telephoning two bars, she finally reaches the men—now Kenny and Pigmeat (in the process of constructing the house they have constructed new identities for themselves). She asks them to come to her party and bring some liquor: "We don't have no liquid entertainment. That's right. We need some liquor for the punch. So listen honey, bring anything—whiskey, gin—anything you can get your hands on..."²³ Now transformed, the men pick up the liquor bottles and join the women for the birthday party. "ALL RIGHT. LET'S GO,"²⁴ Willie yells as the song "Hole in the Wall" explodes over the speakers. There follows the reenactment of the Pigmeat Markham routine and another radical change in the tonality of the performance. The loose, improvisational style is suddenly replaced by a wildly theatrical revel, a vaudeville of comedy and dance. But the abruptness of the change will only account for a small part of the inevitable shock.

* * *

Willem Dafoe: One night, of course, Kate did the telephone thing. And early, she was having a lot of success at getting stuff delivered.

David Savran: From uptown?

Kate Valk: There used to be a place on Grand Street.

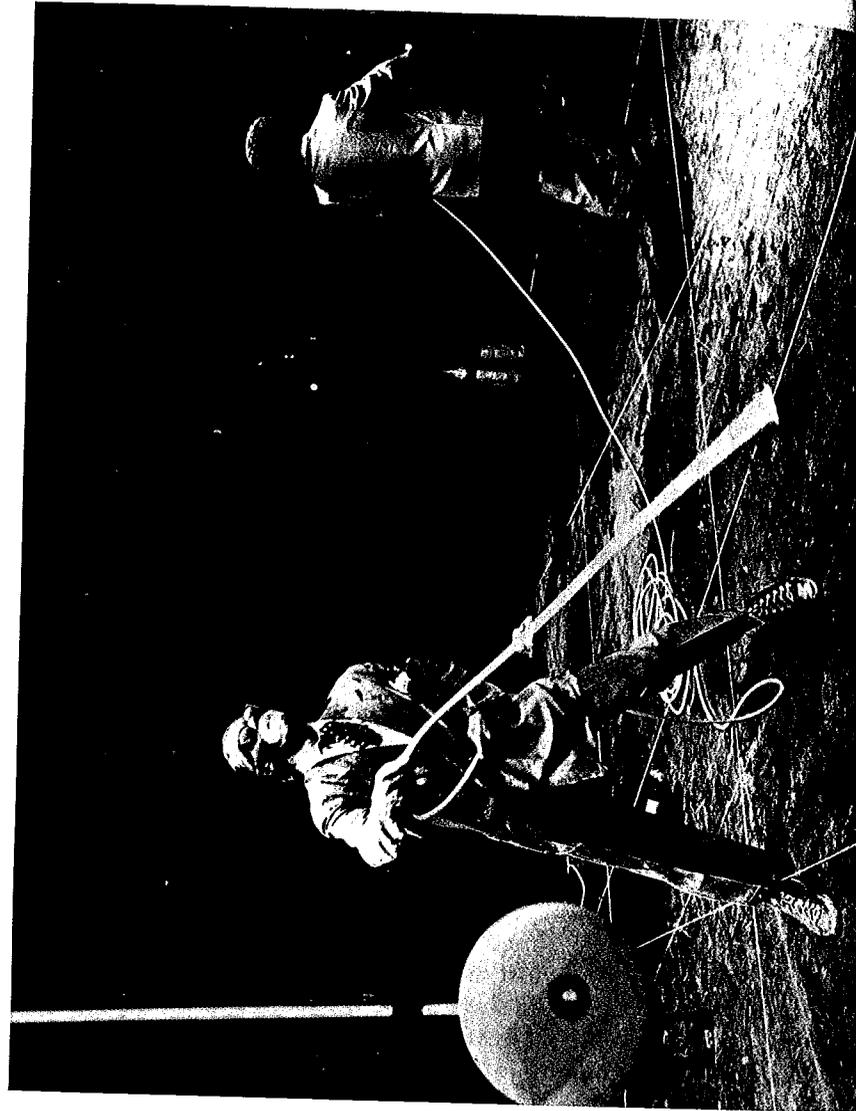
Willem Dafoe: Well, various places. But on this particular night, in the heat of performance, we probably got about twenty people in the audience. And it's very early in open rehearsals. And the order of the show is scrambled. We got mostly the blackface stuff, and maybe we show the porn film at the end uncut, or something like that. But it's a mess, as far as how it's structured. Well, Kate gets on the phone and she calls up Cattleman.

Kate Valk: Under Dial-a-Steak.

[Laughter.]

Willem Dafoe: And she does the whole thing about, "Oh, yeah, four of

Figure 6. Route 1 & 9, Blind Building
Willem Dafoe, Ron Vawter.
(Bob Van Dantzig)



those, and get me some of them." And she really started stacking it up.
 Kate Valk: I ordered barbecued chicken and ribs and potatoes and salad.

Willem Dafoe: Dial-a-Steak, like any convenience...

Kate Valk: I never asked the price.

Willem Dafoe: Well, I'm standing near the door, getting ready to go out to dance or something. And I hear a knock on the door. And there I am in blackface. And I open up the door and there's the biggest fucking black guy you've ever seen in your life with, dig this, one of those accident collars on. [Laughter.] This guy was mammoth, I'm not kidding. And it was winter, I remember he had one of those big sheepskin coats on. And he had two enormous shopping bags full of food. And he said something like, "Cattleman, sixty-eight dollars."

Peyton Smith: It was eighty. It wasn't sixty-four dollars.

Willem Dafoe: So he said, "That'll be sixty-four dollars." And I kind of, "Um, sir..."

Peyton Smith: In blackface.

[Laughter.]

Willem Dafoe: In blackface. And we had about twenty bucks.

Kate Valk: And there was nobody in the audience. We didn't have any money.

Willem Dafoe: And it was all done like, "Wait, wait..." until I realized there was nobody to go to.

Kate Valk: And the show's still going on.

Willem Dafoe: So I grabbed the NYU volunteer who ran the box that night and said, get the box office!! I had no choice. And I had him run upstairs and rifle through the drawers to get the money. And we're, like, practically shaking. We hardly had enough money for a tip, or anything.

Michael Stumm: Well, did you eat the food?

Elizabeth LeCompte: Yes.

Kate Valk: It was delicious!

* * *

The Blackface

Elizabeth LeCompte: I'd been interested in early recordings and films of comedians, mainly Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello. Then I came upon some Pigmear Markham records, a year or so before I started working on the piece. I had been working with stand-up comedy in Point Judith and I wanted to take it one step further, with Pigmear Markham. The routines interested me because of their performance tone and because of the idea of blackface. On a conscious level, it was a visual idea, an exercise in performance, a device to give the performance distance.

Blackface offered a physical mask, as well as the throwaway vaudeville style and the "non-acting" we had explored in porn films for Nayatt School. The structure of set-up and delivery offered a verbal mask that was interesting to me. The jokes offered a cultural mask and seemed extremely simple but were like parables. They seemed so elemental, so basic. There's no ironic play or psychologizing. They're very simple situations, the kind that I've always been attracted to.

The remainder of Part II consists of a reconstruction of a Pigmear Markham comedy routine originally performed at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. around 1965. Kenny arrives first, spilling the contents of a huge liquor bottle into the "punch," that is, onto the floor immediately in front of the spectators. Pig then arrives with his bottle and explains: "I went to the back of the drugstore, heh, heh, I know that the back of the drugstore was dark in there. I don't know what I got, but whatever it is I'm gonna pour it in..." He pours the contents onto the floor and, taking a look at the label, exclaims "CASTOR OIL?! Well, I'm a son of a gun, I done put the castor oil into the gals' punch."²⁵ They dance and scream toasts over the punch:

PIG: The woodpecker pecked on the school house door.

KENNY: Yeah.

PIG: He pecked and he pecked till he couldn't peck no more.

KENNY: Yeah.

PIG: He come back the next day to peck some more.

KENNY: Uh huh.

PIG: He couldn't peck no more.

GIRLS: Why?

PIG: Cause his pecker was sore.²⁶

They continue dancing until, one by one, they stop because each has to go "send a telegram." At the end of the sequence the meaning of the phrase becomes clear when Pig defecates in his pants and provides the skit with its punchline:

PIG: Oh, me.

WILLIE: Pigmear.

PIG: Oh, ho, ho, oh ho.

.....

WILLIE: Whatsa matter Pigmear?

PIG: Whadya mean?

WILLIE: Don't tell me you gotta go send a telegram too?

PIG: No, no, I done sent mine.²⁷

Figure 7. *Route 1 & 9, The Party*
Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe.
(Bob Van Dantzig)

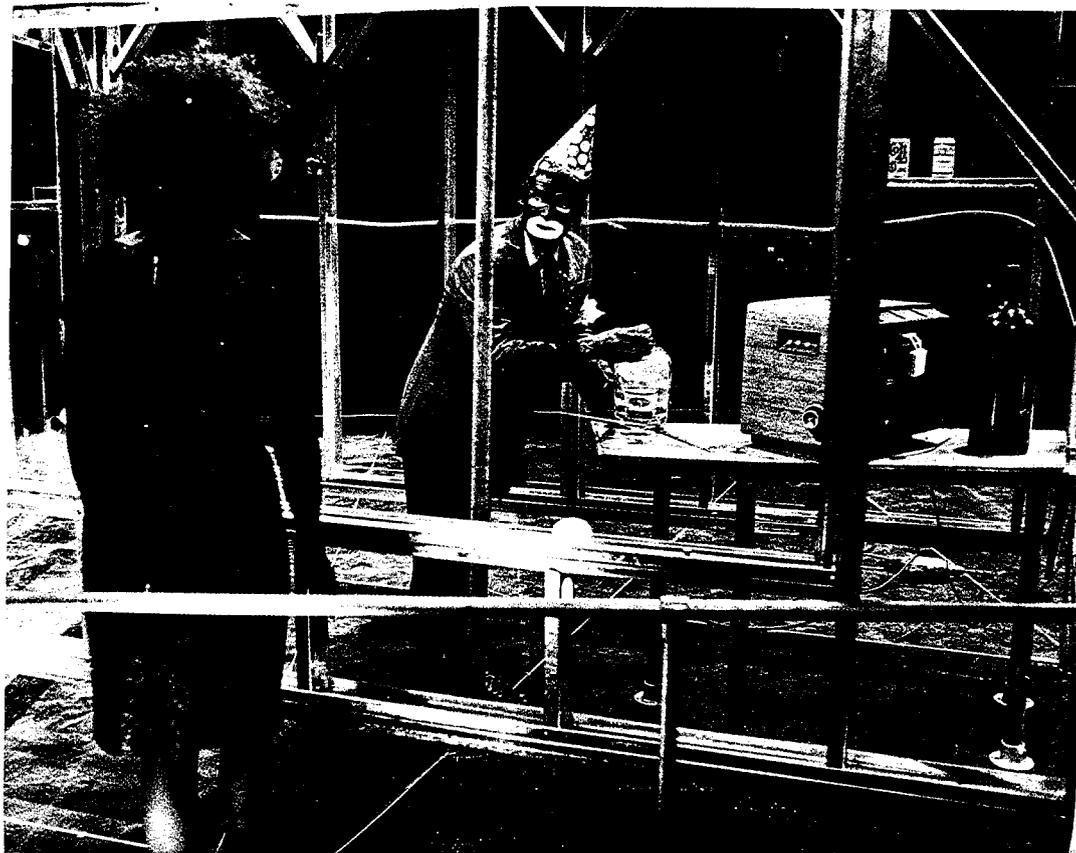


Figure 8. *Route 1 & 9, The Party*
Peyton Smith, Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe, Ron Vawter.
(Nancy Campbell)

Dewey "Sweet Papa Pigeat" Markham (1904–1981) was a well-known black entertainer who began working in 1918 and performed almost exclusively for black audiences (late in his career, in 1968, he did have a "crossover" success with the song "Here Comes the Judge"). From the thirties to the fifties he played the vaudeville houses in blackface, mingling comic routines and songs. As in the minstrel show, his black characters were depicted as dim-witted, fun-loving and benignly criminal. By the late sixties his sexually explicit and scatological comedy was being supplanted by the more sophisticated and politically militant comedy of Godfrey Cambridge, Dick Gregory and others. These latter, having emerged in a period of racial turmoil and rising political consciousness, worked to replace the old stereotypes with more positive images.

Blackface was first used in mid-nineteenth-century minstrel show entertainments by performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork. Originally devised for the white man playing the servile black, it became an emblem of servitude, incompetence and submission. Ironically, however, in black vaudeville from the thirties to the fifties, written and performed by blacks for a black audience, Pigeat Markham, like many of his contemporaries, chose to blacken their faces further and to whiten their lips. They appropriated the convention but reversed its meaning by using it in a different context, transforming the once-oppressive images into a source of irony and amusement.

In contrast with sophisticated black comedy, Pigeat Markham's is politically ambiguous. To a white audience, it will appear to reinforce racist stereotypes. By portraying blacks as inept and carefree, it will seem to justify blacks' subordinate roles in society and allow oppression to remain hidden under the guise of paternalistic compassion. By alleging an innate servility, it will suggest that blacks will never rise to challenge the hegemony of an oppressive society. A black audience, however, will read these same stereotypes differently. Rather than accept the racist mythology, it will, to some extent, turn it against the ideology that created it. It will see the stereotypes as fictive rather than real. It will use laughter to ridicule and undermine the images of oppression.

As a political phenomenon, blackface remains deeply equivocal, either racist comedy or critique of racism, depending on one's perspective. In *Route 1 & 9* it works much as it does in Markham's comedy except that it turns its critical sights against both white and black stereotypes. Next to *Our Town*, the blackface comedy is an act of liberation. In contrast with the Puritan restraint of the Webbs and the Gibbises, the revels of Pig and his friends show a tremendous vitality. Their unbridled enthusiasm brings the coldness of *Grover's Corners* into sharp relief and holds Markham's comedy up as a life-affirming

Ron Vawter: One of the wonderful techniques that Liz chose to use, to shake you up, was uproarious comedy, that would really make you double over and laugh hard. And then when you were getting ready to take the next suck of wind in, you realized what you were laughing at.

alternative to Wilder's graveyard meditation. The problem with the piece's reception arises because the images themselves, taken out of context, are undeniably racist. This fact is responsible, in large part, for the work's censure by NYSCA and others (including critics for the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*). The allegation that the piece is racist, however, ignores the function of blackface in the piece as a whole and overlooks the possibility that its use might extend Pigeat Markham's own implicit critique of its racist content. For both Markham and the Wooster Group, the blackface does not designate a real black persona but indicates that a theatrical convention is being deployed, a performance style which frees the performer to revel not in social reality, but in its unreality. As LeCompte explains, "The blackface is not sociological. It's a theatrical metaphor."²⁸ It sets the performer at liberty and unleashes a Dionysian revel which celebrates what is repressed in *Grover's Corners*: sexuality and organic process.

As Elizabeth LeCompte admits, the performance of the Pigeat Markham routine remains deeply ambivalent: "The blackface is both a . . . painful representation of blacks and also wild, joyous, and nihilistic and, therefore, freeing."²⁹ This ambiguity is not limited to the blackface sequence but is ubiquitous in *Route 1 & 9*. Throughout the piece ethical, political and aesthetic phenomena resist any single interpretation which would derive from a polarization into two opposite formations, the one "good" and the other "bad." The piece may, at first glance, appear to be structured around an antithesis (Wilder vs. Markham), and yet the more closely one examines the interplay between the terms, the more useless and deceptive the antithesis becomes. Any interpretation of the work which places Wilder, white culture and Puritan restraint on one side, and Markham, black culture and raw vitality on the other, does so by erecting a sharp line between oppressor and oppressed. The performance undermines this duality to reveal the blackface, for example, as being simultaneously the sign of victimization and liberation, blindness and recognition. The deconstruction cuts through the dualist metaphysics that has produced these categories and implicates the spectator in the performance as both black and white, free and enslaved. It offers no ideological haven from which the action may be watched with impunity.

This strategy contrasts sharply with our pathway through the dialectical structure of *Our Town* (with Wilder as chaperon), in which

each act transcends the previous one and defines an ever-wider point of view. Act I presents the community, the collection of individuals which comprises the social, religious and economic fabric of Grover's Corners. Act II lifts George and Emily out of that fabric through their courtship and marriage and, at the wedding, brings the community together to accept a new dyad into the ever-revolving temporal cycle. The last act, in turn, leaves the temporal behind and reveals each individual to be part of something eternal and universal, the community of man. Like humanistic drama generally, *Our Town* moves from surface difference to inner identity; it strips away the mask to reveal the face of undifferentiated Man beneath. It will discover a common humanity *in spite of* (rather than *because of*) superficial differences. In *Route 1 & 9*, this metaphysics of face and mask is subsumed by a politics of non-hierarchical variance which corresponds, on the social level, to a vision of radical egalitarianism.

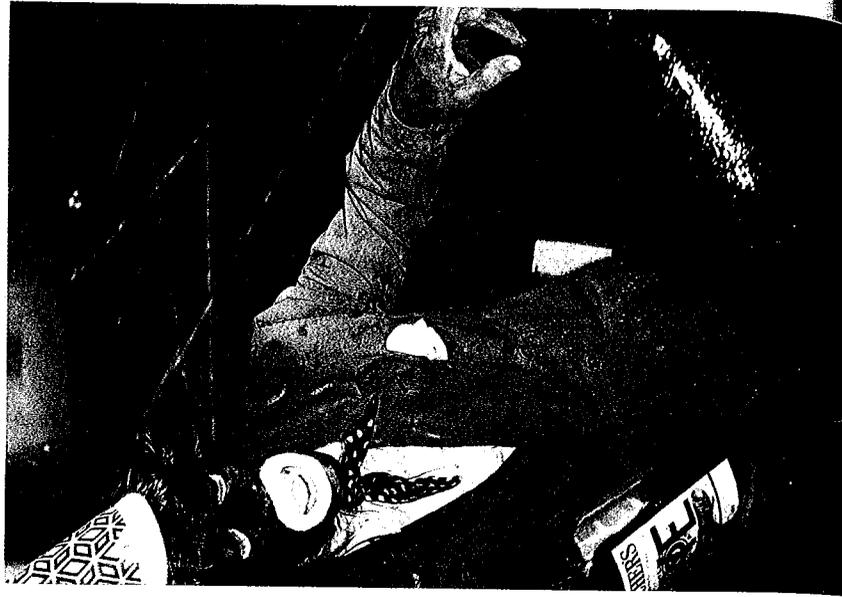
The transformation of *Our Town* into *Route 1 & 9* demands the development of an alternative way of perceiving personal and social dissimilarities. The perspective of liberal humanism constructs a vertical metaphor of depth—one penetrates through surface difference to discover inner identity. In the Wooster Group's work this is replaced by a metaphor of diffusion through a horizontal space—one sees individuals spread out through a social field. The former erects a sharp line of demarcation between outer and inner man, while the latter erases boundaries imposed by categorization along racial, religious or cultural lines. The former, in echo of the lecturer, perceives humanity as theme and variations, the latter sees only variations. The former constructs a stratified geological cross-section of human relations, the latter a surface map. Now, the very desire of humanism to penetrate the blackface is revealed to be an indignity, because it assumes that the humanity beneath is white.

* * *

The Death of the Dead (Part III)

Elizabeth LeCompte: I'd come to the public readings of Our Town and listen to the performers read and sing hymns. The play stood alone for a long time, probably for three or four months without my touching it. I knew we were going to work with televisions—I wanted to work with televisions. And, in fact, we bought four monitors and a deck before we had any idea of what was going on. I just knew how they would look in the space, that they would start far away from the audience and come very close. And they would mirror the physical actions of the dances

Figure 9. *Route 1 & 9, The Party*
Kate Valk; Willem Dafoe.
(Nancy Campbell)



down below. Or the dances would mirror the physical action of the monitors descending from above. And sometime, in the middle of the process, I realized that when you took the Stage Manager out of Our Town, it became a soap opera. So I took the last act and worked with Willem on separating it into scenes, close-up scenes with a soap opera feel. We did improv around soap opera style, using TVs. And we watched soap opera. I would time the segments in between the ads. And from that, we got a kind of rhythm. The actors' pacing is soap opera but the visual image is more "portraiture," the actors speaking directly to the camera which serves as point of view.

Part III is "The Cemetery Scene: In Which Four Chairs are Placed on the Stage Facing the Audience to Represent Graves." Jim Clayburgh lowers the four monitors into their foreground position, about seven feet above the stage floor, and the focus shifts from the live performers to the television screens. The alarm bell rings for 30 seconds and Wilder's

Jim Clayburgh: There was one great cameo role in Route 1 & 9 which everyone forgets: the WASP preppy cranking while the black people danced.

elegiac last act rises above the plaintive dissonance of Ives's "The Housatonic at Stockbridge." On the monitors the excerpts unfold gently, in powerful contrast to the Pigmeat Markham routine just completed. The quietly understated performances, replicated four times through the space, combine with the sweetness of the language and the emotions expressed to acquire an almost hypnotic power. The juxtaposition against the blackface, however, suggests another interpretation of Wilder's last act: musing on life and death, the characters, now in their graves, articulate less the specificity of temporal existence than the end of the culture they represent. Now the subtitle of the piece (*The Last Act*) comes into focus as the sweet dream of an American community, the humanist idyll of transcendence, of life after death, passes before the audience's eyes, as though for the last time. Like the newly dead of Grover's Corners, the spectators have been rudely and unexpectedly awakened, watching the four live performers who are trying not to disturb the television ghosts (whose number includes their own whitefaced selves), while the Stage Manager's warning words echo through the space, "You not only live it; but you watch yourself living it."³⁰

* * *

Reading Our Town

Kate Valk: Route 1 & 9 was really Liz's meditation on death. Her father had just died that summer. The death of the dead in Our Town. And then, sure enough, right after we opened the piece, Pigmeat Markham dies. It just seemed like a wild coincidence. Liz and I went to his funeral. It was really neat, in a way. It was so weird because I'd never seen him. I'd only listened to his records. And then, to see him in person when he was dead... It was weird. But the people there were wonderful. All these old, old black entertainers from the Apollo, when it was in its heyday. It was really very interesting to see all these people. Like this real tall, skinny woman, black woman, with a big blond wig on.

Because of the new context in which Wilder's last act is placed, its ostensible subject—death, also a last act—is necessarily presented quite differently from the way it would be in a live production of the complete play. The dead are now placed, not in ordinary chairs, but on television screens in extreme close-up. Quietly philosophical, they have bid farewell to the world and are now detached from the passions of life. Emily arrives among them, her already ironic comment acquiring both a new irony and a new veracity: "Live people don't understand, do they?... They're sort of shut up in little boxes..."³¹ Both dramatically and ideologically, Emily has found her final resting place. Newly confined, she comments on the confinement of the living, failing to recognize that she is now literally shut up in a little box, the 21-inch repository of white middle-class culture, reaching into every home. The four characters below, meanwhile, now threefold alive in contrast with the "dead" characters, culture and medium, do not understand Emily (the old black-and-white television on the table in their house is turned off). Lost in their own world, they neither listen to her nor mourn for the dead who hold power above them.

In *Route 1 & 9* the relationship between life and death, black and white, man and woman, live and recorded media is defined less as a static polarity than as an insistent crossing over. Just as Emily "crosses over" in the last act, so the live performers cross over racially when, at the end of Part III, they wipe off most of their make-up, and sexually, when the men put on women's clothing. At the same time, they cross over into the earlier work by donning costumes from the preceding pieces. And all four cross over into *Our Town* since they are each given a role to play in

the videotape. In the early minstrel shows (where white male performers enacted all the roles) racial and sexual boundaries were transgressed in order to reaffirm their fixity. With the Wooster Group, on the contrary, the act of crossing over recovers its disruptive potential, threatening both the highly stratified society living along Route 1 & 9 and the television-style realism that it cherishes.

At the end of Part III the performers momentarily take on the most powerful and suggestive mask in *Route 1 & 9*—the vampire. Just before their transformation, George's face is shown on the monitors, sobbing, while the women, off-screen, comment laconically on his pain and castigate him for his show of emotion: "Goodness! That ain't no way to behave!"³² Suddenly "Jump on the Line" sounds and the four, in what remains of their blackface, begin to dance furiously, shaking their skirts wildly, a horrible grimace on their faces. They approach the audience, blood streaming down their faces, their mouths gaping open to reveal vampire fangs. The restrained emotionality of *Our Town* and the constraints placed on the live performers to remain quiet during the video now explode into a frenzy of blood lust and rage. Finally, all that has been contained bursts forth in the passion of these vampires. They are the shells of Markham's characters, after the life has been sucked out of them by the roles they assume, unleashing their rage in what remains of their blackface. Simultaneously, they are the occupants of Wilder's cemetery, now revealed as the bloodless undead, shaking their skirts obscenely and releasing their repressed desires in a fury of murderous passion. The emblems of an impossible union between life and death, Pigmeat and Emily, they enfold oppressor and victim into a grotesque unity. They have returned to native soil, to dance wildly on the graves of the dead. They have come home, the true gods of that stretch of highway, Route 1 & 9, the quintessential humanists who, in their lust for blood, would make the world over in their own image.

In *Route 1 & 9* the vampire sets loose all those desires and fears, most notably sexual ones, which, to some degree, are repressed in white middle-class society. Act II of *Our Town* may be concerned explicitly with courtship and marriage but the treatment of these rituals is radically de-sexualized. Just before the wedding Mrs. Webb (in a speech shown on the monitors in Part II) confesses that she has never told Emily anything about sex: "I hope some of her girl friends have told her a thing or two. It's cruel, I know, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I went into it blind as a bat myself." The failure to recognize the role of sexuality does not, of course, reduce its impact on human relationships. On the contrary, its repression effects a displacement which, by making desire unmentionable, transforms it into fear, and not only fear of physical contact. In *Our Town* the impossibility of acknowledging desire

produces a sickness, a *Weltschmerz* (as the lecturer might say), to which the women, as sexual beings, especially fall victim. To the end of her speech quoted above Mrs. Webb suddenly adds, "The whole world's wrong, that's what's the matter."³³ Shortly thereafter as Emily, "frightened," is brought to the altar she says, "I never felt so alone in my whole life. And George over there, looking so . . . !" She prefers to leave the sentence incomplete rather than choose between "desirable" and "terrifying." In this context of sexuality repressed, the two words have come to mean the same thing, just as "love" is now transformed to its opposite: "I hate him. I wish he were dead."³⁴ The synonymy of desire

Peyton Smith: It was amazing, the number of people who didn't see the pornography. Because it was down on the stage floor and they'd just look up at the color monitors. "It doesn't exist," they'd think. "I'm just going to stare up there. I don't want to be a voyeur."

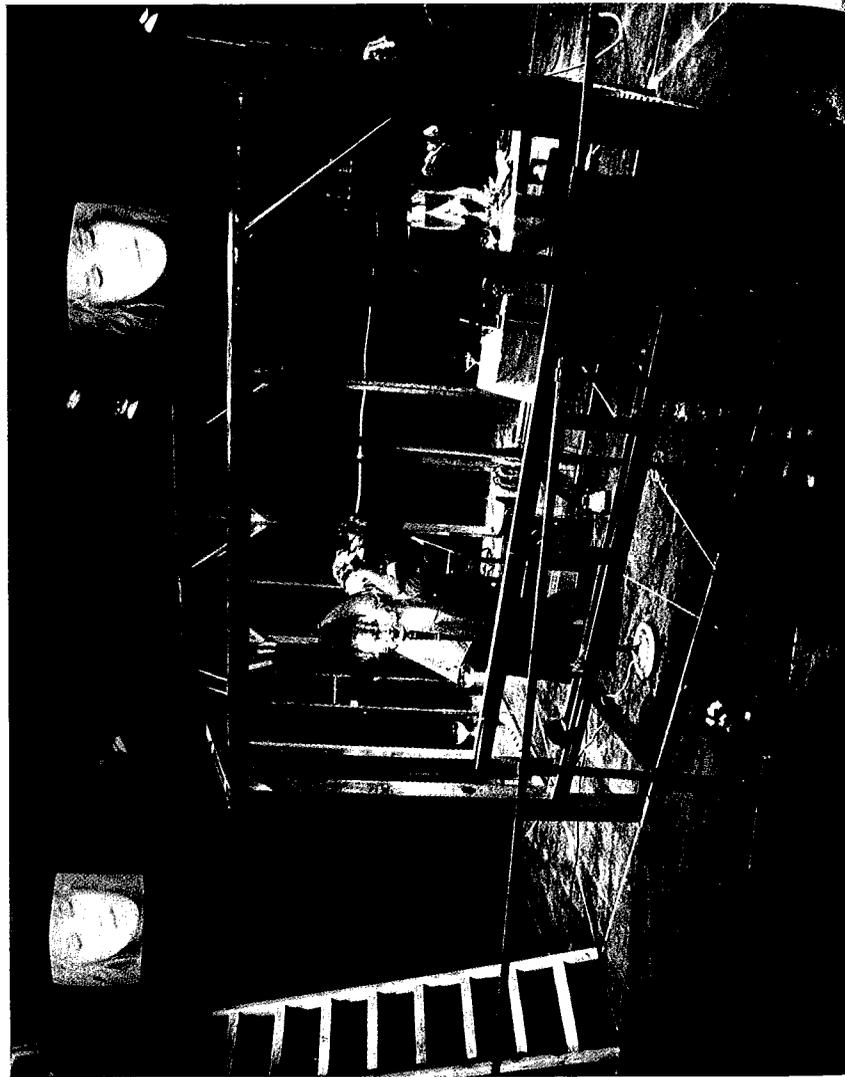
and terror has become the mark of a guilt and self-loathing that is never purged. In the last act, it may be for more than the sake of pathos that Wilder has Emily die in childbirth.

In *Our Town* death denotes less the end of being than the end of passion. The dead sit forever serenely and coldly in their straight-backed chairs suffering the termination of and punishment for desire. In relationship to this "heaven" of renunciation and sterility, the revels of the four live performers (which take place before the transformation into vampires), as muffled as they are in Part III, appear as the deepest desecration. ("We are trying to be quiet. We are ostensibly trying not to interfere with the last act of *Our Town* playing on the upper monitor system."³⁵) Below they dance, drink and kiss, crack jokes and laugh, Pig/Ron blows his nose, while above Mrs. Webb is directed to embrace

Elizabeth LeCompte: Gradually it evolved that the scene would be the continuation of Willie's party. We constructed it slowly, running improv next to the video, until they got more and more set, and the scene had a tempo. We used the video as the "music."

and kiss her daughter "in her characteristic matter-of-fact manner."³⁶ All the bodily functions that have been repressed at Emily's twelfth birthday are celebrated at Annie's party. The floor is slippery with spilt booze while the four carouse, snot in their noses and shit in their pants. In *Route 1 & 9* this intense physicality betokens a life far more material than Emily's and, by implication, the necessity of a death far more conclusive and blank than that dramatized in *Our Town*. In fact, Wilder's last act is not really about death at all. It offers, rather, the repressive and ultimately

Figure 10. *Route 1 & 9, The Last Act*
 Willem Dafoe, Peyton Smith, Marissa Hansell on
 monitors.
 (Bob Van Dantzig)



romantic mythology of a life free from passion which disallows a confrontation with death. Against this, the Markham routine is a terrible affront because it everywhere assaults us with the inevitability of death. Pig's failure to control his bowels is a scatological profanation in the rarified world of Wilder's dead because it evokes a fear of a death now seen as the conclusive loss of control over one's own body. As LeCompte explains: "The defecation joke is funny and disgusting. There's a wonderful ambivalence because it's a horrific social no-no and at the same time an elemental thing that's part of us. It's not just obscene. The joke is a way of laughing at death."³⁷

What is most disturbing about the blackface sequence is less the quotation of racist stereotypes than their use to reveal what has been repressed in the culture that created them. For a society that imposes a schism between intellect and emotion, soul and body, man and woman, white and black, and prioritizes the first of the pair, *Route 1 & 9* comes as a horrifying violation of decorum. Not only does the piece reject these priorities, it rejects the very act of prioritization. The blackface, the "imperfect superposition of one identity over another," like the cross dressing, deliberately dissolves the frontiers, subverting the polarities. As Jeffrey Jones explains in the *Appeal*, "Images which express the furtive desire to dissolve these boundaries evoke the greatest cultural anxiety, and are either suppressed altogether or tolerated briefly. . . ." ³⁸ Blackface and drag threaten the separation between races and sexes and create a hybrid (like the vampire) that blurs the distinctions that have been so carefully erected. The possibility of successfully crossing over, of a white person being taken for a black, is unnerving to those who cherish these cultural boundaries. And note here that the specific example of alleged racial ridicule singled out by NYSCA, Willie's series of telephone conversations, is the one time in the piece when a white person did indeed "pass" as black.³⁹

In the end, *Route 1 & 9* does not exonerate its audience. The exposure of so much that lies concealed in American culture also brings

Kate Valk: After doing Route 1 & 9, everybody's heads were spinning. Because Liz couldn't say, "No, it's not racist." Yes, it is racist. Yes, I'm racist. You're a liar if you say you're not. That's what it was about. And then, to be censored. It just seemed that suddenly the issues were burning.

to light assumptions and emotions that we harbor regarding racial difference. (Here, the first person pronoun becomes crucially operative.) As members of a "liberal" or, at times, a professedly "radical" community (either the theatre or the university), we devotees of experimental

theatre take a certain pride in what we believe to be our non-racist attitudes and practices. It is precisely this pride that the piece attacks. For despite the great racial diversity of this country, the vast majority who read this book will be, like the Wooster Group's audience, white. "Maybe once every two or three performances we have a black person in the audience," LeCompte notes.⁴⁰ The theatrical and educational communities are, for the most part, as polarized along racial lines as the society to which they belong. In an America only three or four generations removed from the emancipation of black slaves, it is virtually impossible not to hold racist attitudes. Perhaps the most powerful effect of *Route 1 & 9* is that it leads admirers and deprecators alike to re-examine racial attitudes, not simply on a gross cultural level, but in one's minute personal interactions, not with a view toward an impossible escape from racism but toward an understanding of how it functions and how it corrupts us.

In an article in the *Village Voice* in November 1981, Elizabeth LeCompte is asked about the racial politics of *Route 1 & 9*. She explains that she realizes that there are

white people in America who would consider themselves not racist. . . . You may consider yourself not subjectively racist, but objectively if you exist and make money in a culture that is obviously living off a third world people, you [are participating in racism]. In that sense, I'd say yes, this piece is racist. Right down the line.⁴¹

As LeCompte understands, racism is deeply inscribed in American culture—not simply on the level of attitude, individual and collective, but in the workings of the economic infrastructure. The more we look about us and examine all that we take for granted, the more conscious we must become of a racism to which we may be an innocent and unwitting party but which, regardless, plays itself out through us. As members of a culture that trades in signs, we hope to abolish racism by erasing its symbols—like blackface—in the belief that this action will erase the underlying fact. In the end, however, the refusal to recognize racial difference, less than erasing the fact, suppresses the awareness of the results of racism. As we blind ourselves to difference, with the best intentions, we fail to notice the institution of disparity in the social sphere, in opportunities, education and pay. If *Route 1 & 9* is to leave its mark, we will, at some point, look around us and echo Emily's line from the last act: "So all this was going on and we never noticed."⁴²

* * *

Elizabeth LeCompte: In the controversy over *Route 1 & 9*, one of the things that was said was, "There is no distance on it." In other words, it was racist, because there wasn't a character or voice of authority saying, "Look, this is a horrible thing. This is racist." I suspect that if Spalding had been off to the side saying, in one way or another, "I deplore this," it would have been alright. Everyone would have said, "Oh, this guy is dealing with his racism on the stage," instead of the audience having to deal with the racism unmediated.

Peyton Smith: It seemed to me quite obvious what we were doing. I was shocked. But I've been shocked by the response to everything we've done. Because we are self-contained, and we aren't very aware of what the outside. . . . I mean, how do you know? I thought when we started that blackface was. . . . illegal. We all laughed at that. But I was quite shocked that the piece was ever perceived that way. And then you sense the distance, even more strongly, from the whole community.

* * *

Alternate Routes (Part IV)

Elizabeth LeCompte: The first part of the piece we made was the porn film. We did that before I'd even known we were going to make *Route 1 & 9*. I took that material, after the fact, and attached it to the end of Part III, without dovetailing it or cutting it in. We made the film as a story: a drive out of the City to a house where the porn was shot. What I did with the footage was cut it in half and run the parts simultaneously, rather than sequentially. So the elements that went into the piece were: Clifton Fadiman, the building, Pigeon Markham, Our Town, and the porn film. They gradually grew into each other. I took the part where the guys were building, added the girls' phone calls in over that, and then spliced it together with the girls suddenly calling the guys. Connection. But the lives started out separately, both artistically and literally. Gradually, I just overlapped and scissored. But that wasn't until just before we opened. With *Route 1 & 9* I decided not to judge what material was relevant and what was not. Anything that we were working with would enter into the dialogue. So the porn film came in as a dialogue with the piece itself, in a way. Whatever we work on, that is the piece that's happening, because that's what we're thinking about.

Part IV, "Route 1 & 9: In Which a Van Picks Up Two Hitchhikers and Heads South," consists of two videotapes, transferred from super-8 film, played simultaneously. Above, the four monitors feature the tape described in the subtitle, an escape from New York along the New Jersey Turnpike to the exit for Route 1 & 9. Below, the old black-and-white television is rolled out of the frame house and on it is shown a tape of a man and woman having sexual intercourse. The videotapes provide a pseudo-documentary epilogue that breaks with the highly theatrical style of Part III and directs the spectator's attention, like Willie's phone calls, to the world outside the theatre. The cool, unassertive presentation offers a meditative counterpoint to the wildness of "The Cemetery Scene." It initiates a leave-taking but in no way offers a resolution. The distance that *Route 1 & 9* charts, between Markham and Wilder, black and white, uptown and downtown is extenuated by the unsettling juxtaposition of a drive on the New Jersey Turnpike against a "porn film," of the fine color monitors against a television that looks like it was salvaged from a junk yard (it is, in fact, a 1964 English television). Eschewing the final synthesis provided by Wilder (in transcendence) and Markham (in a punchline), Part IV oscillates between points which, like the distance between the integers 1 and 9, are as far apart as they can be.

The distances in Part IV are not simply physical and ideological but interpretive as well, since both videotapes defy a straightforward or unequivocal reading. Seven feet above the floor we watch the driver (Elizabeth LeCompte) as she leaves the darkness of the Holland Tunnel (whose entrance is but a few blocks from the Performing Garage) and emerge into the bright morning sunshine. The van moves along quickly and silently (there is no soundtrack) as a man inside (Ron Vawter) smokes a cigarette and sips a cup of coffee (the camera is mounted alternately in and on the van). There is a sense of liberation here, of taking control of the future and the space into which one is headed. For LeCompte, driving provides a sense of comfort: "I have no anxiety, because my purpose is to drive, and you don't drive unless you're going somewhere."⁴³ Certainly, after the horror of the vampires the trip may indeed be a liberation which (literally) dispells the darkness. The sun, low on the horizon, glistens on the Manhattan skyline and beams into the van. As the spectator studies the gas stations and the Holiday Inn, however, he may be reminded that the horror stretches far beyond New York and that the suburban sprawl through which the van passes is as much home to these spirits, both Wilder's and Markham's, as the City itself. He may also recall that New Jersey was designated, at the beginning of Part II, as the home of the "cold" and "indifferent" people who populate Route 1 & 9. As the drive proceeds, the one "event" in the tape, the stop to pick up the hitchhikers (Willem Dafoe and Libby Howes), produces the same sense of uncertainty as the drive itself. The offer of a

ride may be an act of kindness to two strangers but it also may evoke anxiety: What if, to articulate this fear, the hitchhikers are dangerous? What if the driver has plans of his own for them?

* * *

Peyton Smith: And then, the pornography upset audiences terribly here, too.

David Savran: Really?

Peyton Smith: You didn't know that?

David Savran: I guess I heard about it, but it seemed so overshadowed by ...

Peyton Smith: By the rest.

David Savran: Liz did tell me she thought initially that that would be the problem.

Peyton Smith: Right. In terms of the debate, the pornography wasn't a big issue. Although it was brought up in the discussions. But in performance, we'd do the whole party scene and the wild dance and then we'd go sit down and the pornography would come up. So we would be on stage, but passive. And people would start talking. And they didn't talk during the blackface. But they'd start, "Oh, come on!" And, "Is this it? Is the play over? Do we have to sit and watch this? I'm not gonna watch this!" And we were supposed to be sitting there passively. We weren't supposed to look at the audience, we had to keep our eyes down, because Liz didn't want it confrontational. And I wanted to look up so badly, to see who's angry and wants to walk out. [Laughs.] I wanted to know so badly.

* * *

The silent videotape shown below features the performers who played the hitchhikers going through a series of sexual turns. The lighting is angular (much like the sun over New York City in the tape shown above) and the camera rarely allows a glimpse of the faces. The stark black-and-white footage captures the play of light over the soft curves of the bodies and the darkness of the crevices on which the attention of the performers is focused. The sex sequences are graphic, the couple trying various positions. They are less concerned with performing for the camera than allowing it to oversee them, much like a voyeur. The "director" (Ron Vawter) is occasionally visible, holding up a microphone, and there are several brief shots interspersed showing a few people seated at a dinner table in another part of the room.

As screened on the old black-and-white television, the "porn film" (like late night cable TV) provides yet another release after the repressive atmosphere of Grover's Corners. Following the last act of *Our Town*, it is

a cemetery desecration, a dance on the graves which, like the high kicks of the vampires, further defiles Wilder's Puritan romanticism. (It also, like the blackface, raises questions of exploitation and censorship.) Its mixture of eroticism and death, liberation and defilement may be heightened by the spectator's realization that the man in the tape, Willem Dafoe, plays the part of George Gibbs in the video of *Our Town* (LeCompte, however, did not intend the identification). Regardless, the "porn film" visualizes the fantasy that George and Emily finally "rut," dispelling the sterility of Grover's Corners, as the rest of the family waits dinner for them. It is both a flashback and epilogue to *Our Town*

Ron Vawter: We wanted to create this very private and possibly obscene image that's very lively, but small, on the TV, against the end of the graveyard, the meditation on death. Literally, a little procreative act.

("Goodness! That ain't no way to behave!"), both end and beginning, the consummation of the courtship in Act II and the action which will assure Emily's death in childbirth. Here, the triumph of the body, shut up in a little box, restores the ambiguity of that seventeenth-century euphemism—death—fusing in the shudder of orgasm, the climax of passion with the rattle of death.

Finally, the force of *Route 1 & 9* stems not from its conclusive analysis of an "object" (be it racism or humanism or pornography) but from its examination of our role in the creation of these "objects" and our complicity with forces of dehumanization. In this sense, the transformation of *Our Town* into *Route 1 & 9* by no means dismisses the impact of the first person plural pronoun in Wilder's title. What in *Our Town* designates a universal community of which we are all a part, becomes, in its deconstruction by the Wooster Group, the mark of our immersion in a network of relations that renders each of us simultaneously victim and victimizer.

The screening of the two videotapes in the final part of *Route 1 & 9* signals the intersection of past and future, the juxtaposition of a flashback (the "porn film") against a flash forward (the exit from the Performing Garage, SoHo and Manhattan). It thereby imitates the process of contemplation that is about to begin when the spectator leaves the theatre and, immersed in new activity, remembers what has passed before him. Watching the two tapes, he may feel disoriented, faced with the impossibility of taking in the monitors and the old television at the same time, looking up and down, catching only fragments of each and losing the continuity. But this feeling will be dwarfed when he walks out into a night which holds far more potential disorientation and

Elizabeth LeCompte: I used the driving away to show that New York exists here. And New Jersey's over here. It's like some kind of placement in the world that I need. And in the most literal sense, it gives a perspective, quote unquote, capital P.

uncertainty than anything the darkness of the theatre may shelter. No longer will he be able to sit back unseen and watch the performance in silence. For now, as *Route 1 & 9* ends just as the van prepares to climb the exit ramp to *Route 1 & 9*, the action is about to begin, as he leaves the theatre and enters a cold and indifferent world.

* * *

Ron Vawter: It was very difficult for a couple of years because we thought we'd really gone too far. We were told that you can't confront, not only the audience, with such volatile possibilities, but you can't confront yourself with it publicly either, as artists. That was even more damaging than the problems we had with the audience: that we were being punished for exploring our own attitudes. Now that is censorship in the worst sense. We are artists working in a public forum, so the only place we can show our work is in public presentation. I think, also, it was a bad time. A lot of people were just in the wrong... in different spaces. I think when we bring it back people are going to say, "Oh my God, this was such a wonderful thing. Why four or five years ago...?" I think it will be so clear what our intentions were that there won't be any offense. But at that time nobody was taking any risks. That we should examine racism in ourselves, and in the audience... well, it just frightened everybody.

Elizabeth LeCompte: The material is the important thing. I always go back to that as a way of interesting myself in a process, so that I have something objective, something outside myself that I'm dealing with.

David Savran: And all the material that you use is marked by an internal contradiction, a conflicting response on your part.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Yes, it gives me great pleasure. But, of course, it always evokes a conflicting response in the audience. To very few people does it give the same... I'm saying that I get great pleasure from that contradiction. I get great pleasure in facing it off, almost as an enemy. Conquering it by facing it.

David Savran: So it's the material you're confronting, not the audience.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Yes—but with the audience as witness. Obviously, for many audience members, it's not pleasurable. I don't think that that's what you necessarily go to the theatre for. In fact, I don't know where you go for that... It's a very hard thing. But I think that's the politics of the piece.

Figure 11. Nayatt School, Part III, The Chicken Heart
Libby Howes, Spalding Gray.
(Bob Van Dantzig)



Part II

From the Rhode Island Trilogy to *Hula*: Simple Demonstrations of the Laws of Physics

Most perceptive students... must see through the fundamental misrepresentation in the typical lecture-table "experiment," in which a subtle and beautiful phenomenon is distorted beyond all recognition in order that the ephemeral visual clues can be amplified for the benefit of people seated at a distance. They must be aware of the fact that demonstrations tend to wrench phenomena from their natural context in order to make a "main point" stand out clearly before the average student. And the most interested and intuitive students must be very uncomfortable when... the attention is displaced from the real effect to a substitute or analogue, so that a gross model... becomes the means of discussing a basic phenomenon... without giving the class a glimpse of the actual case itself.

Gerald Holton, "Conveying Science by Visual Presentation"

Representation

Elizabeth LeCompte: The initial design for Rumstick Road had the booth in the center, on top, because of the picture I have here in "Conveying Science by Visual Presentation." Every night I'd go home and get into the bathtub and sit with this book, so it's all buckled. I'd read it over and over again. Later, I had an idea, coming off this thing of lecture-demonstration, that we would do a science experiment in Nayatt School, but it never came to be. And it carries over through all the pieces.

David Savran: In Nayatt the huge jar of maraschino cherries looked like pickled lab specimens.

Part III

L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...): History as Hallucination

History is the concrete body of development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells.... The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events.

Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"

The Concrete Body of Development

"I'd just started jogging my memory and so the stuff is still kind of coming up." The woman seated at the end of the table tries to remember, she tries to piece together what happened twenty years before. She tries to recall Timothy Leary from Cambridge in 1961. She provides two titles: "I decided to call it *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)* or *Leary about Leary*, which I was."¹ Then she remembers what the party was like.

L.S.D. begins when nine performers climb onto a large platform and all except two take their seats behind a long table. The lone woman, Nancy Reilly, sits at the stage right end of the table, a Walkman in hand, and, as the rest are getting settled, she holds the headphone up to her ear. She turns it on and listens to an interview that the Wooster Group conducted with Ann Rower in 1983. Rower had been a Harvard graduate student and babysat for Leary when he was living in Cambridge and conducting experiments at Harvard with LSD. She wrote to the Group offering them her recollections when she found out that they were

working on a piece about Leary. As Nancy Reilly hears Rower's voice, her own memory is jogged: speaking into a microphone, she remembers her lines—and Ann Rower's recollections.

The nature of Reilly's task and her placement on the rostrum allow her to recreate Rower's own position on the afternoon of the interview. She listens and talks, while next to her the men prepare to read. Jim Clayburgh, meanwhile, has put a Maynard Fergusson record on the record player. Beneath her words, the sad, gentle music rises. She listens and remembers and as she does the words and actions of others—her memories incarnate, as it were—interrupt her narrative, texts by Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and others. Each of the male performers reads the words of another man, someone who cannot be present, from the pile of books in front of him. Each performs for each is literally on stage, on a platform that isn't quite a conventional stage but that imitates a raised raked stage, complete with curtains hung at either end.

This platform is not the stage of memory on which the past is magically present. Instead, it is a part of a performance space that conjures up the dynamics of memory in the tension between the absent "real thing" and the substitute at hand: between stage and platform, character and performer, Ann Rower and Nancy Reilly, Timothy Leary and Jeff Webster. All of *L.S.D.* is structured around this difference, this gap which, like the downstage trough, the long slot cut out of the platform to accommodate a long lower step, divides imitator from model, present from past, here from there. All of the movement in the piece is movement back and forth across this gap, from the concrete here and now to events that took place elsewhere, in a past from which only phantasmic fragments can be salvaged. These fragments are called up as memories or written words, texts cut off from their now-departed authors, stranded, like the voice of Ann Rower on the cassette tape, or cast adrift, like the lines of a play.

Structurally, *L.S.D.* is the most intricate of the Wooster Group's pieces, the one in which the play of reflections is the most complex and elusive. (It is no wonder that the setting for *L.S.D.* is the reverse of the one for *Nayatt School*.) It is held together by the thread of Ann Rower's recollections and by the two basic performance tasks: reading and dancing. Both of these activities (Nancy Reilly's listening is also, of course, a form of reading) dramatize the gap inherent in the act of reflection, or figuring forth. Reading is made possible by temporal discontinuity, by the persistence of a discourse in time, by the disparity between author's intention and reader's interpretation. Dancing, on the other hand, as

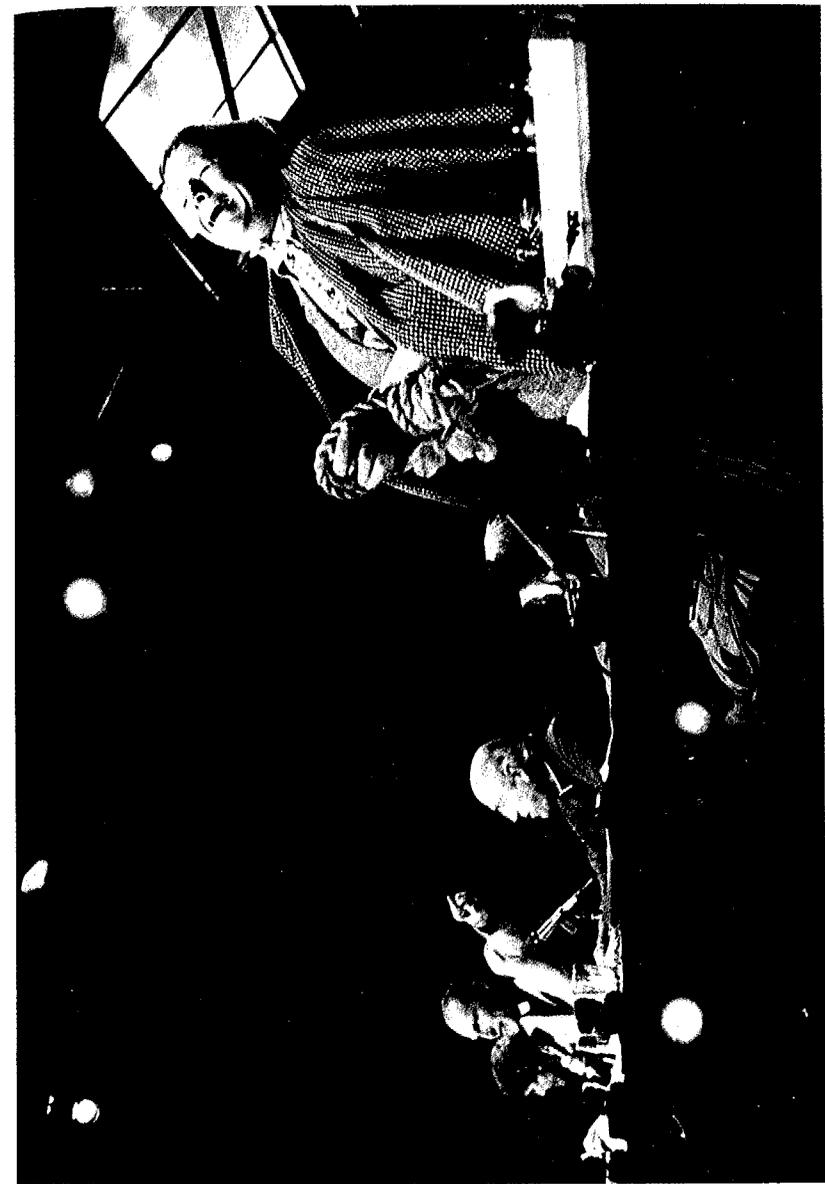


Figure 43 *L.S.D.*, Part II
 Jim Clayburgh, Ron Vawter, Michael Kirby,
 Nancy Reilly, Peyton Smith.
 (Bob Van Dantzig)

used in *L.S.D.*, exemplifies spatial discontinuity, the diffusion of images through illusional space. The two formal dances in the piece, ending Parts II and IV, are both built on a visual trick, on a *trompe l'oeil* connection of a pair of men's legs to a woman's body. Every turn of the piece dramatizes the schism that results as continuity in time and space is lost, as one attempts to look back to the past and out toward a different place.

* * *

Schema of L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)

Part I **NEWTON CENTER:** *In Which the Men Read From Great Books and The Babysitter Remembers the Leary Household*

Random reading from the books of authors who might have been at the Leary household, circa 1960
The Babysitter interrupts occasionally
Reenactment: "69" incident with Arthur Koestler

Part II **SALEM:** *In Which the Men are Joined at The Table by Women in Costume and Excerpts from a Play are Performed*

Excerpts from *The Crucible/The Hearing*
Poppet Dance

Part III **MILLBROOK:** *In Which The Reading Continues and a Man in Miami Arranges a Gig in One Of The Local Hotels*

Re-creation of LSD Session
The Babysitter continues
Video: Miami
Reenactment: "Bathroom" incident with Watts's secretary

(Same Scene Five Hours Later)

Ron calls from "Miami"
Band
Blackout
Faint Dance ("Pale Blue Eyes")
Video: Millbrook Woods

Part IV **MIAMI:** *In Which The Men Debate and a Troupe of Dancers Impersonates Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos*

Liddy/Leary Debate ("I feel very sad...")
Shoe Dance

* * *

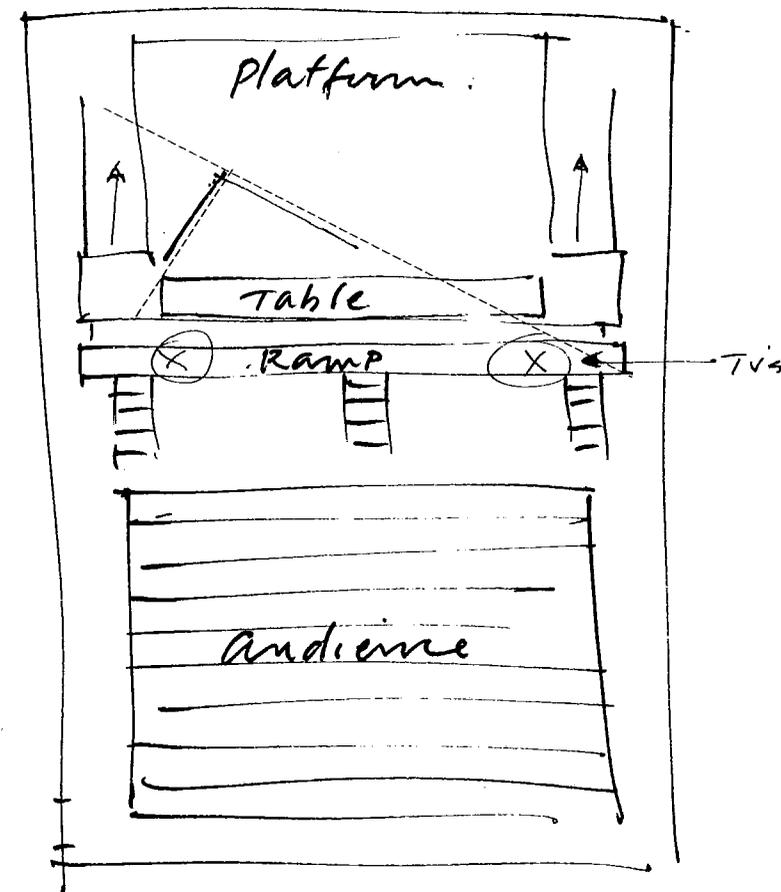


Figure 44. Performance Space for *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points...)*
(Elizabeth LeCompte)

Like the Rhode Island trilogy, *L.S.D.* performs the play of memory, the movement back and forth across the temporal gap. Unlike the earlier work, however, which focuses on personal memory, *L.S.D.* examines cultural memory—that is, history—by interweaving personal memories with a great diversity of texts, by setting Ann Rower's recollections in the midst of what is, in fact, a library. In Part I as Nancy Reilly remembers Ann Rower remembering Leary and his associates, the male performers read selections, most of them chosen at random, from the works of Leary and the writers of the fifties and sixties connected with him. As the voices play

from side to side across the table, the fabric of memories and readings becomes more and more complex. Rather than being clarified, the reality of the period becomes increasingly elusive as the gap between present and past expands, between Ann Rower's provisional observations and the men's far more assertive texts, their written monuments. Perhaps it is impossible to discover the "truth" of an era, perhaps memory and writing produce only chimeras, events distorted and disfigured, isolated in solitary reflection or in the lonely act of bringing pencil to paper. Perhaps history is only hallucination.

In exploring this "perhaps," *L.S.D.* examines the "flip side" of the "tranquillized Fifties,"² juxtaposing personal recollections against the writings of the men who spoke out against the quiescence of the Eisenhower years, who questioned the prevailing cultural order, who, as it were, made history. By reading excerpts from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, it examines Miller's denunciation of the U.S. Government's most repressive project, the Communist "witch hunt" then being conducted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. For the nine-year period from 1953 until 1962, these texts constitute a kind of counter-history. They record the loudest (and often the most articulate) voices of opposition against an oppressive status quo.

In *L.S.D.* the Wooster Group writes its own fictive history of these oppositional voices, but only by undermining the dialectic of culture versus counterculture. It refuses to produce a closely argued answer to Leary or Miller, in the knowledge that a rebuttal would fall prey to the very patterns of thought and action it is examining. Instead of schematizing events and producing a systematic critique, the Wooster Group's hallucinatory chronicle admits the several points of view that history, even alternative history, represses. It hearkens to the voices of the excluded. It listens to hearsay. It delights in the inconclusive and contradictory, in not putting the pieces together, in fostering dissent. It liberates that which is squelched in written history: the randomness of political and cultural activity, the background "noise" of events. *L.S.D.* thereby challenges the notion of history as systematic development and suggests that the memories and documents by which one hopes to know the past stand not as truth, but as a testament to the inaccessibility of historical truth, to the impossibility of recovering intention, sensation, event. It performs questions, not assertions, structuring the piece to move toward not a final synthesis but a distillation of the questions—in Part IV the many interrogatories are stripped down to one, "What is this dancing?"

By conceiving of history as a confluence of many memories, texts and points of view, *L.S.D.* demonstrates that it is always a fabrication—

both illusion and product of human labor. To visualize the process of fabrication, the Wooster Group begins the piece not with pretense but by acknowledging the concrete reality of the situation. Working from a real base, it shows how theatrical—and historical—illusion is constructed. Illuminating historical context, it reads excerpts from *The Crucible* in Part II, using period costuming for the first time—suggestions of seventeenth-century dress for the women and Matthew Hansell, a fifties suit for Ron Vawter and contemporary street clothes for the other men. The attire does not give the piece the accuracy of a costume drama but puts historical difference on stage: it exposes the play's archeological status, both for Miller and the Wooster Group. The contrast between costumes from three periods acknowledges *The Crucible's* status in *L.S.D.* as a reading, in the mid-eighties, of a 1950s drama set in the seventeenth century. Like a production of *Julius Caesar* which shows Shakespeare's Romans to be Englishmen, *L.S.D.* envisions Miller's characters not as seventeenth-century personages but as chimeras from the fifties. It uses a white actress in blackface to play Tituba to suggest that Miller's West Indian is more like the Aunt Jemima of fifties television commercials than a seventeenth-century slave.

L.S.D. uses difference, the gap between present and various pasts, between reading and writing, between disparate perspectives, to expose the illusionary, manufactured quality of history and the ways in which politics, economics and ideology determine what is recorded and how. Its juxtaposition of varied materials unsettles both official history and the unofficial. Even the frame provided by Nancy Reilly reading Ann Rower is far from an orthodox, deterministic base (what Foucault would call a "regulative mechanism"³). Her remembrance of the past is too haphazard, her style too extemporized and her tone of voice too laconic for her observations to be any more than a casual point of reference. Her most important function is to disrupt the assurance and certitude of the other voices, their habit of mythologizing their own activity and categorizing events according to an alleged truth-value—splitting human activity into the real and the unreal, the good and the bad, the free and the enslaved. For Ann Rower, the opposite of a truth is always equally true: not either/or but both/and. Memory blurs her recollection, giving the past many interpretations and her account two titles. She can't even remember exactly how *The Crucible* fits into the piece when she introduces it in Part II: "Ya, and then I think at that same time, um, um, there was a theatre troupe that came to the house or maybe I took Jackie [Leary] and the kids to see them... or maybe they were in it... I don't remember... you could say... you could say they were doing *The Crucible*."⁴ *L.S.D.* uses her as the voice that connects

illogically, that questions, guesses and doubts. It builds upon her memories a hallucinatory structure that jumps skittishly from one reading or dance to another, unable to offer the audience anything that pretends to the truth.

* * *

The Singular Randomness of Events

Elizabeth LeCompte: When we were working on Nayatt School Spalding brought in The Crucible for someone to read, just one speech. "Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer." And it stuck with me. And then... we finished Route 1 & 9 and our money had been cut. And I thought, why don't we do seven or eight plays? Like one a week. Real plays. Just to do them, what the hell. I can't remember why I re-read The Crucible, but I did. And I knew that I wanted that to be one of the plays. Route 1 & 9 had gotten terrible reviews. We knew we were going to go "out of business" because that cut really crippled us terrifically. I remembered, I guess, "Your justice would freeze beer," and I found the script and brought it in and we all sat around upstairs and I said, "I want to do this play." Then we started to count the characters and everybody discouraged me, in a nice way. Spalding said, "Look, this is crazy to try to do this piece. It's a huge piece and we don't want to do it in a small way." And I realized I didn't want to do it in a small way, either. I knew that it was attractive because of the witch hunt aspect, and all of that. But that was almost secondary. I think I was most attracted to the play because of the language, the imitation language, and the screaming of the girls. Those attracted me so much that my mouth would water just thinking about doing it.

Then, at the same time, we wanted to do another quickie record album interpretation. And everybody brought in records. There was one that I'd never heard all the way through, Ken Kobland's record, L.S.D. by Timothy Leary. I think Spalding had borrowed it many years ago. As soon as I heard Leary's voice and his description of the place in Millbrook, I knew. There was something about his paranoia and something about his quest. As I was working with that material, I suddenly realized that it was all part of the same piece.

In February 1983 the Wooster Group began performing open rehearsals of a work-in-progress entitled *L.S.D.*: a forty-five minute version of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* prefaced by a side of Timothy Leary's

record album, *L.S.D.* (1966). The Group presented a reading of the play, reducing Miller's text to "just the high points," accompanied by music and dance.

This first version of the piece began (much like the final version) with all the performers assembled behind the long table. Jim Clayburgh put the needle on the *L.S.D.* record and held up the record jacket as Timothy Leary's voice filled the Performing Garage. Speaking slowly and deliberately, Leary set forth his credo in a hypnotic monotone, his phrases separated by long and sleepy silences. Listening to his voice, one heard a man both enraptured by and detached from the world around him, and totally dedicated to his paranoia:

This is the home of the Castalia Foundation, a center for research on the scientific and religious implications of consciousness expanding drugs. This is a serene and beautiful place inhabited by serene and serious-minded people who are dedicating their lives and their energies to expanding their consciousness and harmonizing with the energies inside and outside their body. The situation here is not completely serene at the moment because this quiet island is under siege, for the last few days, the last few weeks, the last few months, this peaceful surrounding has been surrounded by government agents, wire-tappers, anxious and angry politicians....

I'm in trouble because I know too much....

By using psychedelic drugs, I became tuned in on a network of neurological signals and cellular wisdoms that radiate hundreds of millions per second within my body. In the last six years I have taken the voyage out of my mind into my head, into my cells, over three hundred times....

We gave these drugs to thirty-six prisoners who looked at the cops and robbers game through the brutal microscope of expanded consciousness, and laughed, and gave up crime....

In this time of hysteria and crisis, you must do what men have always done in such times: listen to your friends and trust your own judgment.⁵

After twenty minutes of random selections from the record, the Group performed excerpts of four scenes from *The Crucible*, casting Kate Valk in blackface as Tituba and Mary Warren and then fourteen-year-old Matthew Hansell as Deputy Governor Danforth. Three wizened older women (Beatrice Roth, Maria Myers and Irma St. Paule) played the parts of the young girls, moving back and forth in the trough in front of the table. Ron Vawter played Reverend Hale, delivering all of his speeches so

fast that they became near-gibberish harangues. As in the finished piece, the women wore suggestions of period costumes. Most of the men used microphones while the women did not.

Watching this first version of *L.S.D.*, one witnessed the juxtaposition of two texts produced in response to two different social crises, the one, an allegorical drama about the Salem witch trials and the other, a statement by the man the *L.S.D.* record jacket calls the "Messiah of the LSD cult."⁶ Both dramatize an adversarial relationship with a ruling orthodoxy: the former, between John Proctor (and the other falsely accused witches of Salem) and the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; the latter, between Timothy Leary (and the other members of the "LSD cult") and the civil authorities of the United States, the "government agents, wire-tappers, anxious and angry politicians."

Placed next to each other, the two texts delineate the major upheavals of two contiguous decades. In *The Crucible* Arthur Miller uses the Salem trials as a dramatic allegory of the "red hysteria" of the fifties in its most malignant manifestation, Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist "witch-hunt." In the printed script Miller makes the parallel explicit: "in America any man who is not reactionary in his views is open to the charge of alliance with the Red hell."⁷

During the next decade drugs became a powerful disruptive force, not simply for their biochemical effects but because they became the basis for a subculture complete with its own economy, politics and art. By the mid-sixties, drug culture had become one of several centers of "underground" activity, attracting those who were, in Leary's words, "alienated from the establishment power centers."⁸ Like the witches of Salem, or the "reds" of the fifties, he and his drug "underground" battled a terrified status quo that justified then, as it had in the past, its criminal repression by equating rebellion with demonism:

Three hundred years ago you'd be sitting here talking with me about the devil. In Salem . . . they were talking about witches. . . . The fear of those who are anti-God—which is what you are—the fear is always expressed in the metaphor of the time: witches, possessions, devils, and so forth.⁹

There are other parallels between *The Crucible* and Leary. Both witch and drug cults begin with forbidden intoxication and carousal, either dancing naked in the wood or ingesting LSD. In both, illegal activity threatens suspicious and fearful authorities who then institute widespread persecution. Both lead to courtroom and prison and from thence, however, to very different ends. The girl's dancing ends with the hanging of the accused witches, while Leary's activity leads to his several

Figure 45. *L.S.D.*, Part II
Ron Vawter, Matthew Hansell, Jim Clayburgh, Michael Stumm,
Nancy Reilly, Elion Sacker, Peyton Smith, Jeff Webster, Kate Valk.
(Nancy Campbell)



arrests and trials and, finally, his release from prison. In the last scene of *The Crucible*, John Proctor refuses to give in to the authorities, he refuses to name names. Leary's honor is more questionable. He has repeatedly denied "ratting on dope-dealer friends and the Weathermen" and maintains that assertions to that effect are simply part of the government's attempt to discredit him.¹⁰ His son, Jackie, takes a different view of the situation: "Timothy has shown he would inform on anybody he can to get out of jail..."¹¹

In the making of *L.S.D.*, the Wooster Group did not emphasize the parallelism between the two "plots," i.e., narratives and conspiracies. Instead, it visualized the dynamics of power within each "plot" by highlighting, tacitly but emphatically, the distribution of microphones and roles. By translating the young girls of Salem into old women, it dramatized their exclusion from the exercise of juridical power. By amplifying the men's voices, it underscored the forces of control within the "plots," the fact that each is organized around a dominant central character, John Proctor or Timothy Leary, who plays the part of heroic leader to his followers.

As the hero of Miller's dialectical and polemical tract, John Proctor is fashioned after the hero of Ibsen's social dramas. A loner, standing somewhat outside the community, he is a man of action and principle, the only one to understand the real motive behind the accusations. He struggles against the lies, answering what he believes is a higher power, a supra-legal morality. He even possesses a tragic flaw of sorts, a moral weakness that allows him to become involved sexually with Abigail. Like his dramatic forebears (Doctor Stockmann, in particular), he holds firm against a criminal society and suffers for it.

Timothy Leary, in contrast, cuts a different kind of hero. As a non-fictional personality, he comes without a single drama in which he is a player. Instead, he appears as a character in a number of contradictory histories written by his former associates, the press and Leary himself. Some fifteen years after his heyday, he remains a deeply ambiguous figure, the hero of a movement which, even in hindsight, resists simple moral and political categorization. It is precisely this complexity that *L.S.D.* explores, using *The Crucible* as a lens through which to focus Leary's would-be heroism and Leary himself as a lens through which to focus *The Crucible* and the values it promotes.

The completed piece of 1984, *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)*, elaborates on the Leary material and *The Crucible* by placing them in the framework of Ann Rower's recollections. There they loom as documents called forth by memory. Like a hallucination, the Miller play is fragmented with song, dance and *shtick*, its dramatic tension undermined. By being presented as *both* costume epic and

dramatization of the McCarthy hearings, it is de-allegorized, set behind a table with microphones and stacks of papers, its two settings evoked simultaneously, Salem and Washington. In *L.S.D.*, *The Crucible* takes its place less as a "timeless" work of art than as a social and theatrical document (quite in accord with Miller's intent), the commemoration of social upheaval poured into the "well-made play" mold, a staple of high school, university and community theatres. LeCompte has explained this process of contextualization in a letter to Miller:

I want to put the audience in a position of examining their own relation to this material as "witnesses"—witnesses to the play itself, as well as witnesses to the "story" of the play. Our own experience has been that many, many of our audience have strong associations with the play, having either studied it in school, performed in it in a community theatre production, or seen it as a college play. And the associations with the play are important to my *mise en scène*. It is a theatrical experience which has cut across two generations, a literary and political icon.¹²

In contrast with the historicization of *The Crucible*, the Wooster Group uses Timothy Leary's writings and those of his former associates to fictionalize him, to construct a drama in which Leary appears as a protagonist composed of and by discourse. This drama emerged out of the Wooster Group's research and finally relied most heavily on three sources: the interview with Ann Rower (a "participant in the great experiment"¹³), Leary's own writings and John Bryan's "unauthorized" biography, *Whatever Happened to Timothy Leary?* By juxtaposing Leary's words against often contradictory material, the Group focuses attention on the way Leary has been made and has made himself into a mythic figure. It urges the spectator toward a "character analysis" of Leary and an understanding of the relation between his psychological make-up and his political stance. It constructs a discontinuous and hallucinatory drama in which Leary emerges as a hero less valiant and less divided against himself than John Proctor but, in the end, every bit as unreal.

* * *

Reading Timothy Leary

Elizabeth LeCompte: *For Part I, I had all the material that everybody had gathered by the different writers involved with Leary. It was academic to try to make a situation where these characters were being "played." So the actors chose books that they wanted to read out loud. It was reading session for me.*

I wanted to have a narrator for this piece. It was a dialogue with the audience about Route 1 & 9. I wanted a comic narration to make fun, in a way. Originally, the narrator was going to be Jackie Leary. But then I got a letter from Ann Rower remembering an episode in the bathroom of the Leary house and I thought, "Ah, the babysitter. That was a voice even further removed." And Nancy Reilly developed as the perfect vehicle for that as she picked out different things she liked from the Ann Rower interview. Although I was cynical about using a single narrator for the piece (I felt forced by the 1 & 9 experience to revert back to the narrator "hook" of earlier work), I liked it more and more as we worked.

David Savran: One night when I saw L.S.D. in Boston, Richard Alpert was there. He came backstage afterwards and was sort of glowing... I was amazed.

Elizabeth LeCompte: They see what they want to see.

David Savran: I guess so.

Willem Dafoe: I was most taken by him saying, "Yeah, you really captured the Millbrook days." And I thought, "Man, if those were the Millbrook days... I mean, you were there, and we captured them?!"

Elizabeth LeCompte: I watched him during the whole show.

Willem Dafoe: He was beaming. I didn't recognize him, but I picked him up in the audience as... there is a guy that is really liking the show! [Laughter.]

Norman Frisch: It would have been interesting but I'm glad you didn't read the blow job thing that night. 'Cause that might have put him over the edge.

Kate Valk: What blow job?

Willem Dafoe: Leary and Alpert had a fight, took some acid...

Kate Valk: With friends and Jackie around him?

Willem Dafoe: In front of everybody... They did a wrestling match to get out the anger and it ended up with Alpert blowing Leary.

Michael Stumm: Or Leary allowing Alpert to blow him in a benevolent gesture.

Willem Dafoe: Right, right.

Elizabeth LeCompte: [Laughs] Benevolent gesture...

Norman Frisch: But then, didn't he turn on him?

Michael Stumm: Homos, shmomos, I don't care...

Willem Dafoe: That's a recurring thing. That's part of why Alpert started to lose gas as his righthand man, I think, because he found Leary terrifically homophobic. If couples would stay there, he would literally, like someone's parent, separate the gay couples. Not let them sleep together. If two guys came in he'd say, "You get the big room and you get the... But then Sally and Bobby get the..."

Ron Vawter: Certainly in L.S.D. we were addressing our origins in the Performance Group. Many of the things that were going on in the Millbrook house, the drugs, the breaking down of social inhibitions, all went into the kind of theatre we developed from. It's such a part of all of our pasts that it had to be there. And the guru—Schechner always thought of himself as a guru. Theatre was just a part of it. We never lived together in a collective, but our lives revolved around a kind of guru-follower, ashram, sixties experience, which has good and bad memories for me. And one of the reasons why, when we deal with the sixties in the piece, we keep waffling back and forth, is because we feel a great deal of ambivalence.—Were these people inspired? They did change ways of thinking and perceiving.—Were they destructive? They were obviously both. So there's repulsion and attraction, constantly. And the same was true with Richard who had some absolutely wonderful ideas. And some real, out-in-left-field, eccentric ones. And they have continued to affect us. When an emancipation occurs, lots of things are liberated, some good, some bad.

Part I of L.S.D. ("Newton") introduces Ann Rower and reads selections from the works of Timothy Leary and other writers of the fifties and sixties. It thereby provides a slice of the "official" history of the period, a recounting of the experiences and anecdotes of the beat poets and associates of Leary, their values, beliefs and aesthetics. The readings (which Ron Vawter limits to sixty seconds) are punctuated by Ann Rower's memories and the music of Maynard Ferguson (a friend of Leary). The sequence of texts is often surprisingly clearly focused despite (or perhaps, because of) the fact that most of the selections are chosen spontaneously. Indeed, the principal irony of Part I resides in the fact that, most nights, the random selections provide a far more assertive and deterministic frame than the tentative observations that comprise Nancy Reilly's set text. Part I thus reverses the relationship between the arbitrary and the pre-planned, thereby reaffirming what Foucault calls the *singular* randomness of events,¹⁴ the fact that history, composed by a multitude of events that could have happened in a multitude of different ways, instead unfolds (like the evening's performance) as the result of unique and irrevocable, but ultimately random choices. It turns the spectator's attention toward the rigor of the arbitrary, the throw of the dice—or round of Russian roulette—which apportions happiness and unhappiness, wealth and poverty, life and death.

When Norman Frisch reads an Allen Ginsberg letter to Peter Orlovsky from 1961, he provides a vivid sense of the revolution these men envisioned and their own position at its leading edge:

Figure 46. L.S.D., Part I
Jeff Webster, Michael Kirby on monitor, Matthew
Hansell, Michael Stumm.
(Nancy Campbell)



Leary was great here, calmed everyone, Bill [Burroughs] dug him... They both go to Harvard where Bill will experiment with white noise & sensory deprivation machines etc.

Leary told me he agreed with Bill that Poetry was finished. Because he felt the world was really moving on to a new super consciousness that might eliminate words and Ideas...

I think Bill & Leary at Harvard are going to start a beautiful consciousness alteration of the whole world—actually for real—Leary thinks it's the beginning of a new world.¹⁵

When Michael Kirby reads the opening of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) he evokes the danger and paranoia which are the dark side of Ginsberg's excitement, as well as the exultation of discovering a new literary language:

I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station, vault a turnstile and two flights down the iron stairs, catch an uptown A train...¹⁶

Like many of the other readings, *Naked Lunch* provided a source of inspiration for the sixties drug culture and the reaction against bourgeois values. For its young partisans, the use of hallucinogens was a pointed attack on what Leary calls the "mechanized, computerized, socialized, intellectualized, televised, Sanforized" patterns of the "air-conditioned anthill"¹⁷ in which they had been raised. This revolt was waged by a variety of groups, from flower power hippies to the S.D.S., Weathermen and Yippies. Although their tactics were different, the factions were united by a vision of the sterility of Western culture and by an understanding of the crushing economic and political weight of America's "military-industrial complex."

As the readings continue, the slightly adenoidal, matter-of-fact voice of Nancy Reilly as Ann Rower interrupts to provide personal glimpses of "King Leary"¹⁸ and his family and descriptions of the carryings-on by those who would visit in 1961 for the weekend "trips." Her observations

Nancy Reilly: I was on the panel with the guys and they all had books. And the babysitter was riding shotgun on the outside. So one day Liz said, "Everybody get your materials." And they all took the books. So I grabbed my tape which I had been transcribing. I said, "Well, here's my book."

provide a stark contrast to the effusions of the poets: "I came in, um, and we met Tim. And I just remember him standing there with his arms

around the kids, and they all looked very depressed. They were really very down. I guess, I guess the suicide of the wife was, whatever, fairly recent."¹⁹ (Leary's first wife, Marianne, had in fact committed suicide four years earlier.) She describes the focus of the household, the three-tiered ceramic candy dish which held the pink psilocybin pills from Switzerland, and how one weekend the candy dish was empty "and there was this atmosphere of ... waiting."²⁰

As presented in *L.S.D.*, Ann Rower's attitude toward Leary is highly equivocal, as she explains later in Part III: "He was a liar ... he was obviously a psychopath, in many ways ... you know ... he was a liar ... he was uhhh uhh a classic paranoid ... ya, but again, you know, like most paranoids he turned out to be right."²¹ Steve Buscemi, meanwhile, standing in the trough, presents similarly ambiguous feelings toward Leary, reading Jackie Leary's statements taken from the Bryan book. In Part I these two performers are differentiated from the rest by not being seated behind the long table. They are the two outsiders, the two composers of a history that is unofficial because it is oral, not written. Reilly and Buscemi read from interview transcripts. The men at the table read from books. The former have not taken pen in hand to justify themselves and their actions; their words have simply been intercepted by tape recorders. The others (including Arthur Miller) have purposefully set out to preserve and promulgate their ideas, to compose themselves and their epoch in print, to write history.

By using Ann Rower's casual observations as the scaffolding for the written texts, Part I encourages the spectator to make connections between the readings. Eschewing an interpretive authoritarianism, it opens up options. The nights that I attended *L.S.D.* I heard a wide variety of readings, each of which added to the ambiguous composite picture of the period. I remember one evening Jeff Webster read an excerpt from a 1966 *Playboy* interview with Leary which was so fascinating to me because I'd never heard it before (nor was I to hear it again). *Playboy* asked about his rumored promiscuity and Leary explained it as a necessary consequence of his work.

...a charismatic public figure does generate attraction and stimulate a sexual response.

Playboy: How often do you return this response?

Leary: Every woman has built into her cells and tissues the longing for a hero, sage-mythic male, to open up and share her own divinity. But casual sexual encounters do not satisfy this deep longing. Any charismatic person who is conscious of his own mythic potency awakens this basic hunger in women....²²

In observing any revolution from afar, one can discern tendencies and practices that seem to negate the goals being fought for. Listening to Webster read, I was struck by what seems the principle contradiction inherent in Leary's project: all the while that he has espoused rebellion, he has in fact, tacitly appropriated vital elements of the ideology he attempts to undermine. His statement is a gauge of his failure to understand that his concept of the heroic and mythic leader perpetuates an autocratic power structure that will, in turn, simply co-opt the social networks of "the establishment," thereby making his revolution into the mirror image of what it is fighting against. Further, he seems unaware of the implications of his identification of political with sexual power and blind to the fact that the patriarchal values he espouses have been a major force in upholding an oppressive status quo.

This random selection provides a striking counterpoint to the first dramatic presentation in *L.S.D.* At the end of Part I, Nancy Reilly reads Ann Rower's description of Arthur Koestler's visit to Leary's house. As she reads, the other performers casually reenact the narrated action, as they might re-create an event before a courtroom, Ron Vawter as Koestler walking in place or slipping his fingers matter-of-factly through his hair. Reilly describes Koestler on LSD going upstairs to his bedroom and seeing Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky making love there, "on [his] bed ... sixty-nine." He screams and runs out of the house, freaking out. Norman Frisch as Ginsberg, a blanket wrapped around him, goes after him and calms him down while Matthew Hansell as Orlovsky, his chest bared, a towel round his waist, stands proudly on a chair at the center of the table, "a radiant dish."²³ As startling as Ann Rower's story appears, it becomes even more so when compared with Koestler's own words, written two years before his "bad trip" in Cambridge.

As for the "sexual problem," the answer is contained in a remark overheard in a Zurich bookshop, where a girl of about twenty, pointing at a book which bore precisely that title, drily asked her companion, "Why problem?"²⁴

Which text provides the "true" portrait of Koestler? Or is their very contradiction the source of interest, the operative historical detail?

Some evenings (depending on which selections are read) *L.S.D.* presents Timothy Leary and many of his colleagues as part of the dance of fathers and sons evoked in *Point Judith*. As sketched by the Wooster Group, he is (sometimes) exposed as the producer of a *machismo* in which paranoia and tyranny prey off and reinforce each other. He is a mass of contradictions, the archetypal bourgeois rebel, launching a powerful and trenchant attack against middle-class culture only after

interiorizing its values. He is the endlessly reflective subject, the scientist (with a Ph.D. in psychology) pondering his own consciousness while he "freaks out."

Leary, Ginsberg, Burroughs and the other men whose words are read in Part I no doubt believed that their ingestion of LSD would inaugurate a new world (and *L.S.D.* questions less their sincerity than their methods). Certainly, they were promoting some powerful and revolutionary ideas for political reorganization and the rejection of consumer culture. And Leary himself (never one to disparage his own importance) certainly recognized the function of his sect in inspiring political change: "Every historical advance has resulted from the stern pressure of visionary men who have declared their independence from the game."²⁵ (It is far more than a figure of speech that excludes women from this vanguard.) Despite their insights, however, Leary and the others never realized how deeply they were always a part of the *ancien régime*, how their modes of thought and behavior were to a surprising extent quite compatible with those of "the establishment," and how their revolution was doomed to be co-opted by the society against which it rebelled. By the mid 1970s, the revolutionary potential of "LSD cult" had, in large part, collapsed, both from internal and external pressure. From the perspective of *L.S.D.*, the failure of Leary and his associates is seen as the result both of the contradictions within the movement itself and the sect's persecution (and prosecution) by those ubiquitous "government agents." For the audience cognizant of that failure, the prophecy of Allen Ginsberg resounds with a bitter poignance:

Peter and I went up to Harvard last week eating synthetic mushrooms—very high—*The Revolution Has Begun*—Stop giving your authority to Christ & the Void & the Imagination—you are it, now, the God...²⁶

* * *

Attempting to Secure Performance Rights for *The Crucible*

Peyton Smith: I heard from a dear friend who's on the scene that she was going to a cocktail party and that Arthur Miller would be there. So I went with her, because we had been trying unsuccessfully to get him to come and see what we were doing. It was the hundredth anniversary of the Chelsea Hotel and he was an honorary guest. And I thought, "I'm gonna go there and get right up next to him and lay the stuff on him." Right. So we get there and it's, like, a cartoon of a bursting room. Absolutely no

way you could get in. And there's about twenty-five video cameras, all the news, all these prestigious guests. It was horrible. I said, "forget it, it's not gonna work."

Elizabeth LeCompte: So she headed for the bar.

Peyton Smith: I might as well have a drink. Anyways, for Christ's sake, I got all the way up here, I'll have a drink, go down and do the show. 'Cause we had a show that night.

Elizabeth LeCompte: You were going to drink before a show?

Peyton Smith: Well...

Jim Clayburgh: She was just having a Perrier.

Peyton Smith: Yes, a Perrier. So I literally elbowed my way to the bar with a person pressed against my back, and I hear, "So, Arthur, what would you like?" I was so excited. I turned around and there he was. He's like six foot six, or something and he was real, like, charming. I had to say, "M-M-Mister M-M-Miller? M-M-My name is Peyton from the Performing Garage..." And he's going, "Well, yes, I do want to come down and see the show."

Willem Dafoe: [Smoothly] My name's Peyton, I'm a performer...

Peyton Smith: Performer...

Willem Dafoe: At the Performing Garage.

Peyton Smith: That's not what I did. That's what I was trying to do. [Laughter.] That I was Mrs. Proctor. [Laughter.] That it's perfectly pretentious!

[Laughter.]

Norman Frisch: Didn't he come, like, that night?

Peyton Smith: He came that night. He wrote it down in his little book and said he'd come. And I went back to the Garage and told Liz. But I couldn't tell anyone else in the Group, 'cause she didn't want people getting nervous.

David Savran: How did he react when he saw it?

Peyton Smith: He looked like he was having a good time.

Michael Stumm: He would have been much happier if it had been a Tennessee Williams play, let's put it that way.

Peyton Smith: He definitely enjoyed it.

David Savran: But then he said no.

Kate Valk: He never said no, he never said no, did he?

Michael Stumm: Sure he did.

Kate Valk: He just said, he wouldn't say yes, that's all.

Michael Stumm: What was the tenor of the letter, right after? It looked pretty cut and dried to me.

Peyton Smith: It was that we were not a "first class..."

Jim Clayburgh: That means Broadway.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Norm talked with him for a while. He didn't say no. Norman Frisch: That night, he was very positive. It was clear that if he was going to say no he wasn't going to say it to our faces. He was going to do it through his agent.

Peyton Smith: He didn't leave. He came up and wanted to talk to us. Norman Frisch: He loved the performances. He thought Matthew was great. He talked with Matthew.

Elizabeth LeCompte: He said, "You're going somewhere, young man."

Norman Frisch: On that evening, he was perfectly charming.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Something happened while we were talking to him.

Norman Frisch: He said something like, "Do you think the audience will think it's a parody?"

Peyton Smith: Because he came on a night when there were only about ten people in the audience. And nobody laughed.

David Savran: So he was afraid that people would laugh at him?

Elizabeth LeCompte: Yes.

Norman Frisch: The whole world was watching. . . .

Michael Stumm: The Day After.

Norman Frisch: So the house is empty.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Because, of course, our audience is so socially conscious.

Norman Frisch: So just before he left, he asked that question, did we think the audience would think it was a parody? And we immediately said "No, no, no." We made it clear that we didn't intend it to be humorous. It wasn't a send-up of the play. So at the moment, he seemed sort of satisfied with that, and went away.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Remember, he said one other thing before he left. He said, "How would this affect a revival of the play," remember that, "on Broadway?" We were standing out on the street.

Willem Dafoe: And Liz said, "Fat chance, Arthur. I read your reviews from '53."

Elizabeth LeCompte: He seemed confused and he was actually ruminating in front of us about how this would affect a big revival of *The Crucible*. I had the feeling that he was going to try to bring it into New York. And would this destroy that possibility?

Peyton Smith: We heard that he didn't want it revived because he didn't want to go through the bad reviews again. Because it's regarded as not such a good play.

Elizabeth LeCompte: He wants to control totally, of course, any production of it because he wants to try to revamp its rep.

Willem Dafoe: You've got to remember, this guy goes to cocktail parties. This guy's living off. . . you know, he's making deals for his old plays. His new stuff hasn't been received well.

Michael Stumm: He's not had a nice word come his way in a long time. Peyton Smith: Except revivals.

Michael Stumm: He's already a living fossil. He doesn't want to get shit on and beat up and have a bunch of punks downtown make him look like an asshole.

Elizabeth LeCompte: I think that's really what it was about. Finally he began to get worried about how he would look.

Willem Dafoe: It really stinks, when you think about it, because the way that the world knows *The Crucible* is when Appleton High puts it on.

Elizabeth LeCompte: One thing that's always present in my work is the opposition between high art and low art, high entertainment versus low entertainment, the good artist and the bad artist, the artist and the non-artist. And in L.S.D. it's Arthur Miller versus our dance at the end, actually all the dances that we do next to the Miller. What I did was to collide Arthur Miller with. . . I went to Salem and at one of the tourist traps I saw a re-enactment of the trial testimony by two high school girls surrounded by all these mannequins. And it was horribly done. So I took the idea of working on *The Crucible* as a high school play, so to speak, well-done and totally committed, but finally divinely amateur in a way that Arthur Miller sensed, I think. His vision of himself is in the realm of high moral art. But this is a play that most people see in high school productions, with people wearing cornstarch in their hair.

When the Wooster Group began working on Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* in November 1982, it immediately wrote to Dramatists Play Service to secure performance rights. The reply that came from the Service's Leasing Department, dated November 9, 1982, read: "I regret to inform you that *The Crucible* is not available for production in New York City and so we cannot grant you permission to perform. Sorry."²⁷

On January 15, 1983, Elizabeth LeCompte wrote to Miller's agent at ICM, Luis Sanjurjo, requesting "special permission to use excerpts from *The Crucible*" for a new piece, *L.S.D.*²⁸ Sanjurjo told her that before making any decision he would have to see the piece with a lawyer. "When you have something ready, call me," he told LeCompte. During the spring and summer of 1983 the Wooster Group was in Europe performing *Route 1 & 9* and developing *North Atlantic*, written by Jim Strahs, which was to be used as Part II of *L.S.D.* When the Group returned to New York, it set to work rehearsing and adapting *North Atlantic* for an

American cast and, in September, resumed performing open rehearsals of excerpts from *The Crucible*. Invited by the Group to attend, Sanjurjo, in discussion after the performance, suggested that Arthur Miller see it.

During the following weeks, the Wooster Group tried in vain to contact Miller. One afternoon in late October, however, Peyton Smith met him at a reception at the Chelsea Hotel and persuaded him to attend the show that night. Afterwards, in conversation with LeCompte, Miller voiced three concerns. First, the audience might think LeCompte's interpretation a parody. Secondly, the audience might believe the piece was a performance of the entire play and not just excerpts. And thirdly, Miller feared that these performances might preclude a "first-class," i.e., Broadway, production. He left saying he would have to think about it. A week later he instructed ICM to write the Wooster Group saying that he would not grant them permission to use excerpts from *The Crucible*. The letter indicated that Miller believed the use would "among other things, tend to inhibit first-class productions" of the play.²⁹

Between November 30, 1983 and October 22, 1984 Elizabeth LeCompte sent three letters to Miller and/or his agent. She argued that the production of excerpts in a tiny Off-Off Broadway theatre would not affect the possibility of a "first-class" production. She also declared her serious regard for *The Crucible*, explaining that her work was not intended as parody, and elaborated the reasons for its incorporation into *L.S.D.* Simultaneously, the Wooster Group continued the development of the piece. It retained *The Crucible* excerpts as Part II, reducing them to twenty-five minutes, and noted in the program that only a part of Miller's play was being used. The Group also excised *North Atlantic* (presenting it as a separate piece) and composed three new parts, all based on Leary material. In the spring it added the subtitle (... *Just the High Points* ...) and performed the first three parts in New York. On the invitation of Peter Sellars, then artistic director of the Boston Shakespeare Company, the Group took *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)* to Boston, where it was opened to the critics, who reviewed it favorably. In the final days of the Boston run, the Group presented Part IV publicly for the first time.

In September the Wooster Group began performing all four parts of *L.S.D.* in New York. LeCompte sent a letter to Sanjurjo informing him of the piece's development and explaining that *The Crucible* excerpts had been conflated to a twenty-five minute sequence. In a collective decision, the Group opened *L.S.D.* to the press at the end of October. On October 31, Mel Gussow panned the piece in the *New York Times*, referring to Part II as a "send-up" of *The Crucible*.³⁰ Ten days later, the Group received a "cease and desist" order from Miller's attorneys in which they threatened to "recommend to Mr. Miller that he take any and

all legal measures against you, including instituting court proceedings."³¹ LeCompte wrote Miller on November 15 to explain again her intentions. At the same time, in consultation with a copyright lawyer, the Group reworked Part II so that *The Crucible* section would be performed in gibberish. The incident was reported two days later in the *New York Times*³² and in the November 27 issue of the *Village Voice* by Don Shewey. According to Shewey, Miller denied receiving any of the letters—his agent refused to comment—and indicated that "The first thing they've gotta do is send me an apology."³³ LeCompte did so in a letter dated November 26 in which she also announced that she had "with great sadness" stopped performances of *L.S.D.* the preceding night.³⁴

During the month of December the Wooster Group reworked Part II of *L.S.D.*, substituting excerpts from a text by Michael Kirby for most of Miller's. Kirby's play, *The Hearing*, translated Miller's action back to 1950s suburbia, substituting microfilm for the poppet, drugs for Tituba's brew. The new section thus introduced another narrative layer that followed the shape of the *The Crucible* excerpts and simultaneously dramatized the enforced suppression of Miller's script. When a performer "accidentally" spoke a line of *The Crucible* or made a reference to one of Miller's characters, he or she was silenced by the buzzer. The new version was opened on January 4 for an intended eight performance run. On January 7, John A. Silberman, Miller's lawyer, wrote the members of the Wooster Group to inform them that one of the attorneys in his office had attended a performance on January 5. He told the Group that its current version "continues to constitute an infringement of Mr. Miller's copyright" and demanded that it "cease and desist." He warned them that the playwright could institute court proceedings "based upon all past, present and future performances" and insisted that "blatant and continuing violations of Mr. Miller's rights must not be allowed to continue."³⁵ On January 8, the day it received the letter, the Wooster Group closed *L.S.D.*

Arthur Miller is certainly acutely aware of the difference between his interpretation and that of the Wooster Group, since he has made the issue paramount in his interviews with the press. In an article from December 1983, Miller is quoted as saying, "The issue here is very simple. I don't want my play produced except in total agreement with the way I wrote it." He objects to the Wooster Group's use because "It's a blatant parody."³⁶ A year later Miller reiterated his position, explaining that the insistence on a "first-class" production was a smokescreen: "I'm not interested in the money. The aesthetics are involved. I don't want the play mangled that way. Period."³⁷

* * *

Elizabeth LeCompte: For L.S.D. I took the Nayatt set and inverted it so that the audience is on the floor looking up at the table. It's just a reversal. That came early in working on The Crucible. As I began to work... the difficulty in trying to find the form and the style of that piece with only seven or eight performers was overwhelming. Would I use puppets? Would I have doubled roles? What would I do? It took six months to work all those things through. I wanted it to be a fully cast production. I didn't want the full play, but I wanted a full production. Then I realized that everything would be performed on the table, everything. Originally the courtroom scene was behind the table and the other scenes were played very frontally. And the table would move back and forth. The performers had to be locked into the table for the entire piece.

The confrontation between Arthur Miller and the Wooster Group over performance rights for *The Crucible* has been the most widely reported dispute in the Wooster Group's history. Although it has been resolved—at least as of this writing—the implications will continue to reverberate. From now on, *L.S.D.* will be in part “about” Miller withholding the rights, in the same way that *Route 1 & 9* is now in part “about” the NYSCA funding cut. Both Miller and LeCompte seem to agree that the fundamental disagreement concerns the Group's interpretation of *The Crucible*. Since Miller never saw the completed version of the piece, he is unable to evaluate the play's function within the larger work. From what he saw, however, he realizes that the *mise en scène* submits the play to an incisive critique, even if he remains unconvinced of its ultimately equivocal attitude toward his drama.

It is clear from the way it is staged that *The Crucible* is not being used simply for the story it tells. If it were, the Wooster Group could have substituted some other version of the Salem witch trials when Miller denied them access to the play. Or it could have chosen other material about intoxication, witch hunting or imprisonment. Its decision to retain the Miller script is indicative of the Group's valuation of the play not simply for its intrinsic value but for the unique network of associations it brings with it. As LeCompte explains in her letter to Miller, the performance is calculated to distance the spectator, to transform him into a “witness” before whom the play becomes an “exhibit,” a historical and theatrical document.

Following the pattern of the earlier work, *L.S.D.* submits *The Crucible* to an examination. Like *Nayatt School* it elaborates a pedagogical intention, alternating between the simple act of reading and

the acting out of a highly theatricalized mania. It inverts the Nayatt set to erect a raised stage on which the long table now sits. The performers either read from behind it, present testimony from one end of it, or parade back and forth in front of it on the platform or in the trough. Their elevation gives them a grandeur, a sense of being larger-than-life. In Nayatt the performers descend into chaos, while in *L.S.D.* their pathos, madness and demagoguery tower above the audience, almost heroic in scale.

L.S.D. begins its examination straightforwardly. Even the dramatization of Arthur Koestler's “bad trip” remains cool and presentational, despite the “characters'” impassioned responses. So, too, the reading of *The Crucible* starts quietly, like a congressional hearing, building intensity to the courtroom scene, when it degenerates into a mad and wild spectacle, with witnesses trading accusations, screaming and raving. Led by the girls of Salem and inspired with a lust for revenge, for the blood of the innocent, the entire courtroom freaks out.³⁸

* * *

Dancing *The Crucible*

David Savran: What gave you the ideas for Parts III and IV?

Elizabeth LeCompte: After we'd worked on The Crucible for almost a year, I realized I wanted to break it down slowly in the course of the piece, to let it disintegrate over time. The structure of L.S.D. would be the disintegration of The Crucible, linguistically. The image that I was working from was a story [from the Bryan book] of a whole courtroom being given acid someplace in California. And jokey, clichéd sixties images of turning on the world. But I didn't know how to do it. I would start, “I'm going to break down the text and take lines that I like.” But I can never work that way, from my head. I have to work from watching the performers. It might have been perfectly fine but it was empty for me. So I finally knew the only thing to do was... the worst thing in the world you could do in the early seventies. And that was to take LSD to make art. So I said, “We have to do what was a ‘no-no’ in those days, especially for the Performance Group.” We set a situation where everybody took acid and then I videotaped them doing The Crucible. They just picked random parts to do. I was the only one who didn't take any. And it was pretty boring. It was pretty horrendously boring. They couldn't remember their lines. And you know when people laugh at themselves, and they think it's funny? But it's not funny, it's indulgent and... kind of... horrible? Well, I

recorded all of that. And then I realized that rhythmically it was what I wanted for the next part, a slow tempo, and a lack of concentration. And it left room for other things to come in between.

So then—I didn't know why but I didn't tell the actors because I was a little nervous about it—we set about recreating it second by second, to ten seconds, to twenty seconds, and so on. This goes back again to a real naturalism I'm interested in. They watched the videotape and recreated their actions exactly for this section—fifteen, eighteen minutes. Ken brought in the video... I just knew there was something about landscapes... "That Florida exists" was written real big in neon lights up in my head. So we began working with those images next to what was happening live. I could begin to play around now with the story of *The Crucible* coming in and out with lots of other material. And then we made Part I and I realized that Part III was just the continuation of the reading from Part I. And that's when the whole structure fell into place, because the whole piece is a reading that breaks down. The performers, the authors, are still, ten years later, trying to continue this reading. It's the same set-up, almost, and they're at the same table but it's years later. It's like the calendar changing on film. And then Part IV was very simple. I had this phrase in my head, "What?—is this dancing?" "What is this?—dancing?" It's what Danforth says to the girls when he hears they were dancing in the woods. "What is this dancing?" He wants to know about it. It was a horrifying thing to him. So in Part III he says, as *The Crucible* is broken down, "What is this dancing?" In Part IV the only thing left of *The Crucible* had to be the line "What is this dancing?" and there had to be a dance.

At the end of the last scene of *The Crucible*, six of the performers dance an epilogue to the play. The women—Valk, Smith and Kohler—stand at the front of the platform while the men—Vawter, Dafoe and Stumm—sit behind them, all hidden except their legs, hanging into the trough, their pants pulled up to their knees. Latin piano music begins ("Mambo-Jambo" and "Tico-Tico" played by George Feyer, circa 1954) and the women bob and sway to the rhythm while the men move their feet up and down, back and forth in time with the music. The three pairs form a trompe l'oeil chorus line: like Mary Warren's poppet or witches in flight, the hanged women of Salem dance together, kicking up "their" heels, blank expressions on their inert faces. Only for a moment does the dance intimate the horror of their death, as bodies shake and legs twitch spasmodically. Afterwards, they list and float as their souls, in a final victory over their persecutors, fly up to heaven, the paroxysms of death transformed into choreographic display.

In L.S.D. everything returns to reading and dancing, the two basic performance tasks. Although the one is verbal and the other kinetic and gestural, L.S.D. reveals their structural equivalency, the fact that reading is itself a dance—of denotation, connotation, memory and association. Whether the performers are reading from books or *The Crucible*, they dance their way through a series of texts, alternating between the present and the various pasts evoked by the readings, pairing off now Timothy Leary and Arthur Miller, now Leary and G. Gordon Liddy.

All the action of the piece takes place within the framework of this open-ended reading (which is also a dance) in which the performers are gradually infected by the mood of the texts that they are reading. More and more, they become Ann Rower's memories fleshed out, given independent, three-dimensional form and, in Part III, even a kind of plot: a party scene. They start to celebrate in the wake of *The Crucible*'s "high" spirits, but in the course of the party, their activity slowly winds down as they become more and more self-absorbed and the accompanying music, more and more melancholy. As the years pass fictively in Parts III and IV, the reading disintegrates, the dance breaks down. Character and text become recognizable for what they are: memories, hallucinations, random fragments, a story here, a line there. In the mouths of the revelers the individual texts become dissociated quotations, losing their "authors," their patronymic identity. The texts and actions, instead, become recognizable as the fragments that collectively constitute history, "with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells."³⁹ They become the testaments of an age, a party, an unfinished revolution.

* * *

Nancy Reilly: L.S.D. is so much an encapsulization of the days of my twenties. It's a wonderful feeling to present that play. It's a moving force for me. I remember being so happy when my father was in Boston to see it. I thought that, as a performer, because of the kind of work I've chosen, this is a true moment of autobiographical exchange with him. I can really give him a section of my life, with all the open ends, this loose wire in everybody's history. And I remember one night in Boston, I went through the part: "It was more than a party, I mean... it was more like a revolution... and on a certain level everyone really believed that if you could give this to everyone it would change the world... it's so hard to get back to feeling that now." And somebody in the audience went... it was such a heartfelt and mental collapse of a sigh. He was just, like, "WHOOO!"



Figure 47A *L.S.D., Part III*
Willem Dafoe, Nancy Reilly, Jeff Webster,
Kate Valk, Anna Kohler.
(Paula Court)



Figure 47B *L.S.D., Part III*
Jeff Webster, Michael Kirby on monitor,
Peyton Smith, Willem Dafoe.
(Bob Van Dantzig)

Part III is titled "Millbrook," evoking the house and commune in New York State where Leary and his followers lived in the mid-sixties. During its first portion, Ann Rower's memories are interrupted by eighteen minutes (with several gaps) of the "LSD version" of *The Crucible* and by Michael Kirby's reading of Alan Watts. (All of Part III is accompanied by Ken Kobland's video.) Duplicating exactly their actions on the videotape, the performers drink, smoke and party while fragments from Act III of *The Crucible* surface in a fitful rhythm. Several minutes into Part III, Willem Dafoe/John Proctor, speaking into the microphone, asks what's going on (his question invariably sparks laughter of recognition): "Umm, are we staying on the play or are we doing Leary stuff too?"⁴⁰ Kate Valk/Mary Warren, meanwhile, having applied whiteface make-up over her blackface, talks and laughs with Nancy Reilly/Ann Rower and the other performers seated at the stage left end of the table (their conversations can't be heard because they don't have microphones).

Ken Kobland: Watching Part III, as soon as you focus, you're missing something else that's going on, some other silly or gentle or crazy connection.

After about fifteen minutes of seemingly improvised activity, four of the performers take up musical instruments (Anna Kohler sings) and become a rock'n'roll band, spread out along the platform, while the video continues and the remaining performers become ever more absorbed in their variously obsessive activities.

The narrative climax of Part III occurs shortly before the band starts, when Nancy Reilly reads Ann Rower's description of Alan Watts's visit to Leary's house "not with his wife but with his girlfriend." She explains that "he had just written I think... *Man, God and Nature*" (in fact, the book, from which Michael Kirby reads, is titled *Nature, Man and Woman*). She continues: "everybody takes pills... and at one point, you know, there's this scream coming from the bathroom." The performers then rise and act out the story in the same way that they acted out Arthur Koestler's "bad trip" at the end of Part I.

Everybody's um banging and I come in, and there's this line of people... huddled outside the bathroom door pulling on the door. "Let us in... let us in"... and there's this woman screaming and screaming inside... um, finally you know, finally... somebody said to her... "what's the matter... what's the matter?" She says, "They're coming, they're after me, they're coming... they're coming." "Who's coming?"... that's the men. "They're coming, they're trying to steal my shit." And finally the door, you

know... they burst, they pulled the door open and she comes out, or something like that... and points to the wallpaper... with these little birds on it, um, that she had hallucinated into these horrible vultures, or something like that, that were coming down trying to steal her shit.⁴¹

Ann Rower explains that she remembered the scene because of *The Crucible*, with its "scene about the birds."⁴² She thus performs another elaboration on the play, a record of a hallucination even more incongruous than Abigail's alleged vision in the courtroom. The story also plays off John Proctor's adultery, casting Anna Kohler as both Abigail Williams and Alan Watts's girlfriend.

With the exception of this story, Part III offers little sustained narrative or dialogue. Instead, it presents kaleidoscopic imagery, the stage composition constantly and subtly shifting as the performers engage in their psychedelic ramblings, both verbal and gestural. It is

Ron Vawter: It's a little bit like a divining rod, or passing your hands over a Ouija board's heat. It's staying light on your toes over a lot of material and finding what's possible between them.

closer to being a mood piece than any work the Group has made since *Sakonnet Point*, striking a tone of subdued revelry, alternately silly and solemn, lucid and incoherent. Near its end, as the band plays stoned, melancholy music ("Pale Blue Eyes" by the Velvet Underground), the performers retreat more and more into their own private worlds as the nostalgic guitars and gentle tambourine hold sway. Although the

Elizabeth LeCompte: It's not so much that the piece is nostalgic but that the material is very nostalgic. And the music. Even I get a little bit weepy.

Kate Valk: Really?

Elizabeth LeCompte: Well, not quite. But it plays on that.

seeming antithesis of *The Crucible*, the ending of Part III in fact provides an ironic re-reading of both Miller's last act and Leary's capture. The imprisonment and isolation of Proctor and Leary becomes, in the Wooster Group's transformation, a series of non-interactive performances: Ron Vawter's solitary perusal of a newspaper or Peyton Smith's muffled sobbing.

During the last section of Part III the most arresting and disturbing of the solitary activities is Kate Valk's "faint dance." It comes directly out of the "LSD version" of *The Crucible* when Jeff Webster as Reverend Parris

Figure 48. *L.S.D.*, Part III, Faint Dance
Peyton Smith, Willem Dafoe, Kate Valk.
(Nancy Campbell)

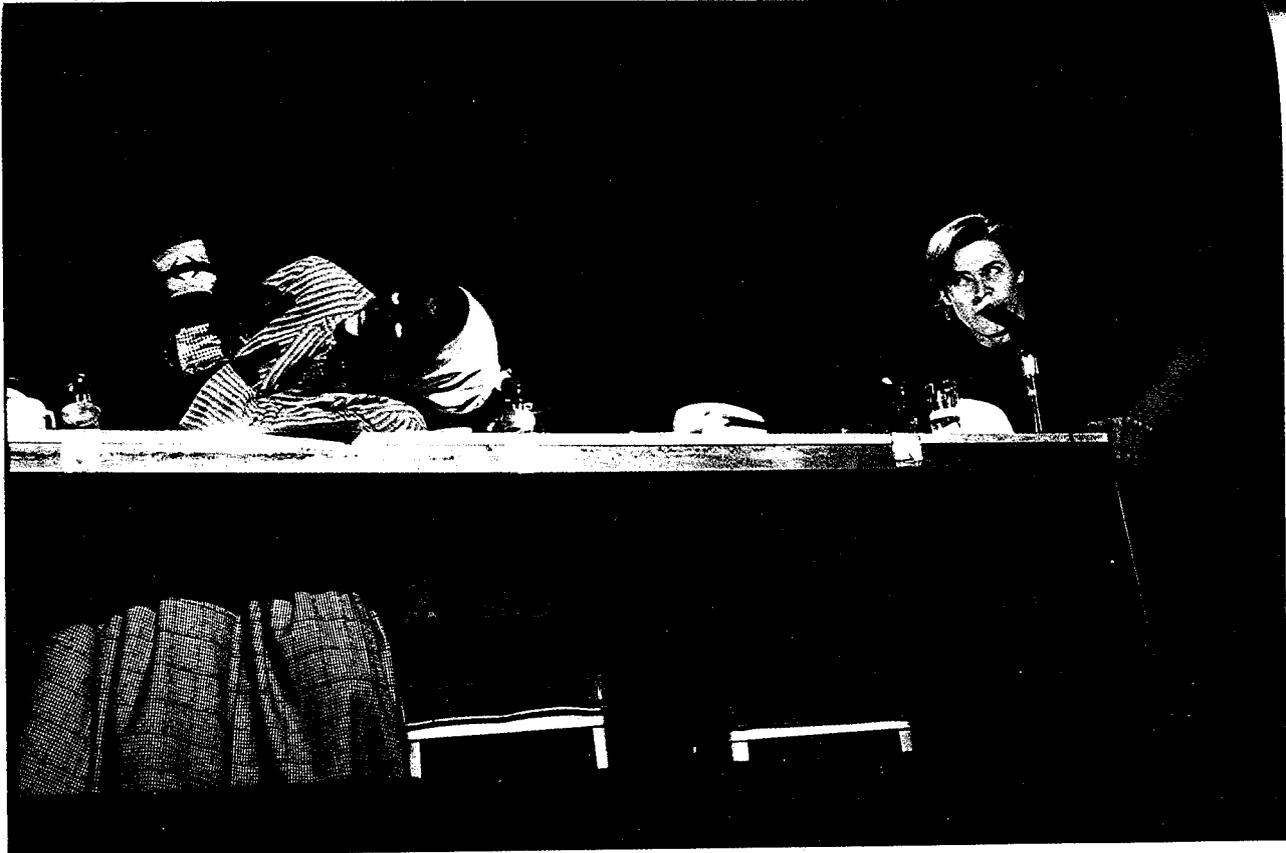
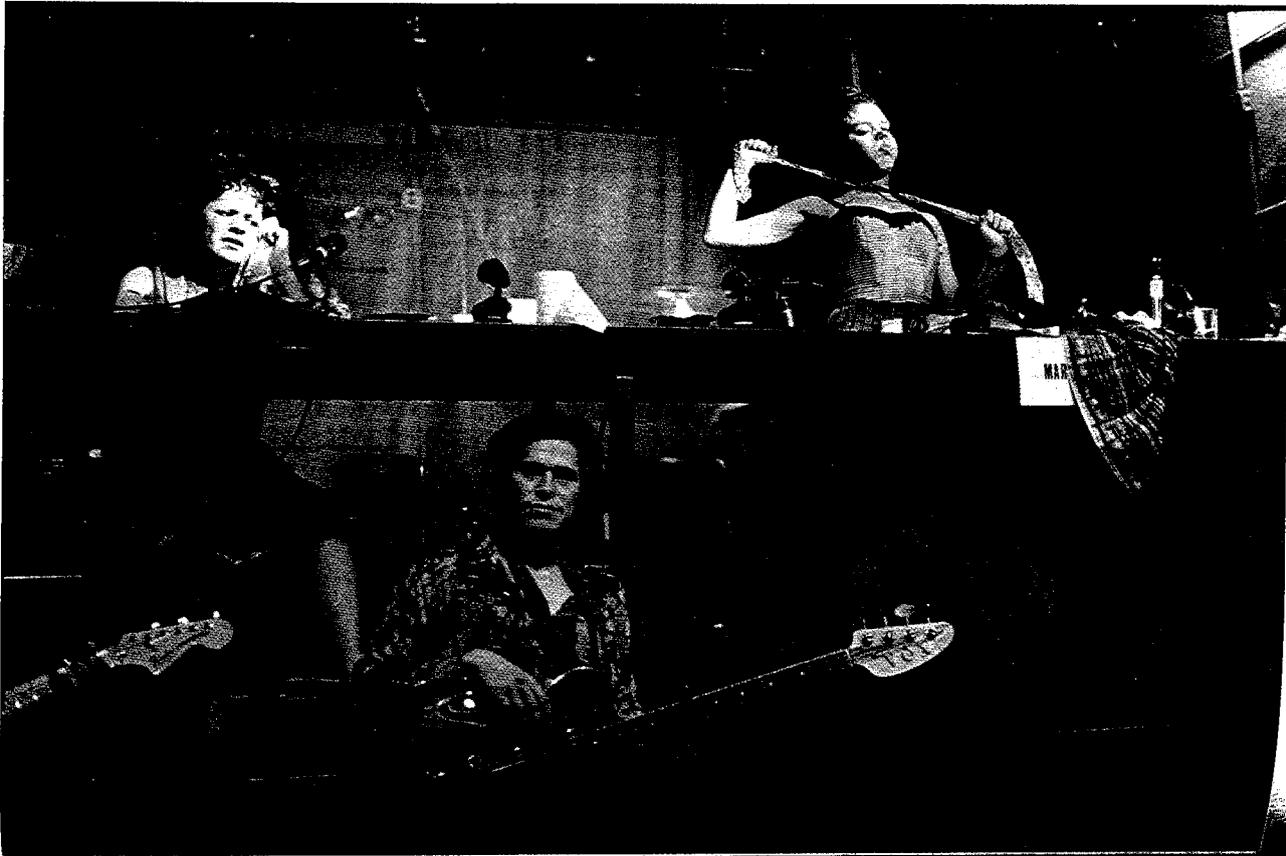


Figure 49. *L.S.D.*, Part II
Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe.
(Nancy Campbell)

questions Mary Warren's recantation and orders her to pretend to faint for the courtroom, as she pretended to faint before: "Let her turn herself cold now, let her pretend she is attacked now, let her faint. (He turns to Mary Warren.) Faint!"⁴³ While the band is playing Valk does all she can to lose consciousness. She hyperventilates and holds her breath. She spins wildly and again holds her breath. At Peyton Smith's suggestion, she tries pounding her chest with her fist, and finally takes a tie and, while holding her breath, tightens it around her neck. None of these stratagems

Kate Valk: When I was growing up, slumber parties were the big rage and one thing to do was to try to make ourselves pass out. Pre-drug highs. Then we'd tell each other, "Oh wow," what it was like when we were passed out. And we'd do levitation and seances and trances. The faint dance really upset my little sister when she came to see the piece.

succeeds, however, and the "faint dance" never achieves its goal, the ecstatic annihilation of consciousness. Kate Valk just continues to spin, deliriously and beautifully. Half-rapture and half-suicide, the closest thing to real intoxication in Part III, her dance unsettles "Pale Blue Eyes" and draws the sweetness and nostalgia out of the scene.

Far from being an isolated event in *L.S.D.*, the "faint dance" plays off many images of and references to the victimization and self-destruction of women. In *The Crucible* Kate Valk, in Tituba's blackface, plays Mary Warren as a beleaguered black teenage girl, screaming helplessly at her accusers before finally collapsing into cartoon-style unconsciousness. In Part I Ann Rower alludes to the suicide of Leary's first wife and in Part III the performers stage a multimedia reenactment of William Burroughs's murder of his wife, Joan Vollner. (In the early 1950s the couple was living in Mexico, she, addicted to benzedrine and he, to heroin. At a party on September 7, 1951, in a fatal variation on the William Tell trick, the near-sighted Burroughs shot his wife through the head while she balanced a champagne glass. He denied the story the next day, saying the gun went off accidentally, and the Mexican authorities never pressed charges.⁴⁴) In the Wooster Group's presentation, the gap between action and reenactment, between the present and an unknowable past (perhaps Burroughs, as he claimed, was not responsible for her death), is tacitly acknowledged in the gulf between the different media. Having read Burroughs in Part I, Michael Kirby draws a revolver (both "live" and on the video monitor sitting on the table) as Nancy Reilly, stage right, places a glass of water on her head. A gun shot rings out. Reilly slowly removes

the glass, looks at it and takes a drink of water. Ron Vawter turns to Kirby and repeats a line allegedly spoken to Burroughs after the shooting: "Bill, you missed."⁴⁵

In picking up themes and images broached in the first half of the piece, Part III freely associates off an array of primary texts. As a result, *L.S.D.*'s "party piece" is less about themes or ideas than it is a performance of history. It enacts associations between present and past; it makes hypothetical connections between people, things and ideas; it

Michael Stumm: Many people mention to me that during the third section, whether they get it or not, they feel a little tinge in the back of their heads, as if they'd taken LSD. At a certain point, it looks like a bunch of people had taken LSD. And it ebbs and flows.

hallucinates characters and texts. It dramatizes the affinity between theatrical experience and drugs, transforming the willing spectator into a member of Leary's "underground," inspiring in him (to paraphrase Leary) an array of possible sensations: curiosity, sensuality, shamelessness, freedom, mischief, rebellion, humor, play, spirituality.⁴⁶ It performs the inability of historical discourse to comprehend and describe the feelings aroused during several hours of unfamiliar experience. It performs the fact that history, like theatre, is always a dance of absence and substitution, a dance of death.

* * *

Reading The Crucible

Kate Valk: We read The Crucible over and over. And we edited it. That's how it started. And the blackface was a different experience compared with Route 1 & 9 because it was yet another distancing. It wasn't as risky because it's historical and so costume-y. Ron's not a minister. We're not Salem. It's so obviously placed in another time. Liz just didn't want to let go of the blackface, after Route 1 & 9. And the play was interesting to us because Arthur Miller wrote it as a moral play. He took responsibility, social responsibility. There was a hero. And everyone's contention was that Route 1 & 9 wasn't a moral play, that we were irresponsible.

Ron Vawter: L.S.D. is still such a problem because of Arthur Miller and the whole notion of theatrical property. That's interesting to us, that words can be owned, and that you can trespass even by the way you

interpret them. It's also very much about the great American play, the chestnut, and the reverence in which one holds it.

Elizabeth LeCompte: I think at the very core of L.S.D. is a discussion about "meaning" and responsibility for what you make. What people are calling responsible art is work that illustrates a theme toward which you already have a clear-cut "moral" attitude. But that's not the way we work.

Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* as an allegory to expose the ruthlessness and injustice of the McCarthy hearings. In the printed script, his parenthetical notes interrupt the dialogue to draw attention to the similarities between Salem of 1692 and America of the 1950s:

The times, to their eyes must have been out of joint, and to the common folk must have seemed as insoluble and complicated as do ours today. It is not hard to see how easily many could have been led to believe that the time of confusion had been brought upon them by deep and darkling forces.⁴⁷

In *The Crucible* Miller demonstrates that the "deep and darkling forces" of witchcraft are a sham, used only as justification for persecution. He shows that charges of wickedness, whether levelled against witches or communists, always serve to justify the suppression of those less powerful, the innocent victims on whom other people's frustrations are vented. He shows that witch-hunters manipulate the law to consolidate their power and profit from their enemies' economic ruin. He plumbs the characters' real motives and exposes Abigail's accusations as a ruthless attempt to snare John Proctor and destroy his wife. He shows that Reverend Parris's moral and religious crusade is a paranoid response to those, like John Proctor, who are critical of "him and all authority."⁴⁸ He shows that an accusation of witchcraft is an effective means of obtaining the property of one's adversaries. As Giles Corey points out to the court: "This man is killing his neighbors for their land!"⁴⁹

There is no doubt of the acuity of Miller's understanding of witch-hunting or of the play's importance in 1953 (or 1986, for that matter). What *L.S.D.* calls into question is not the playwright's intentions but the way he has realized them, the way he has designed the drama and colored characters and action. By juxtaposing *The Crucible* against the psychic violence of "Millbrook," the *mise en scène* exposes the play's implicit structure of values, its "unconscious" promotion and deprecation of certain characteristics and beliefs. It examines the play's contradictions, noting silently (while the girls of Salem scream) Miller's

tendency to justify his own beliefs by using the same device he denounces, by laying the blame for the witch hunt on yet another set of "deep and darkling forces."

Taking its place in *L.S.D.* as Part II ("Salem"), *The Crucible* provides another portrait of the rebel-hero and another (and less equivocal) example of a man's valiant struggle against the forces of tyranny and repression. From his first entrance, John Proctor has the mark of heroism upon him. He is described by the playwright as being independent of spirit and having a "sharp and biting way with hypocrites." He is "powerful of body, even-tempered, and not easily led," the kind of man who "instantly" would make a "fool" feel his "foolishness." But he is also a man who has fallen prey to temptation who, despite his "steady manner," remains a "sinner"—a divided man—lacking a way of "washing away" his "sins."⁵⁰

Miller tries and proves John Proctor's heroism by dramatizing his relationship with two women, one bad and the other good. To his shame, Proctor has committed "fornication"⁵¹ with the impassioned Abigail Williams, his former serving girl, and is plagued with guilt for having betrayed his "cold"⁵² but "honest"⁵³ wife, Elizabeth. He has been driven to adultery because his marriage has been an uneasy union, frustrating both for him and Elizabeth because she is unable (or unwilling) to offer him the passion he craves:

Proctor, with a grin: I mean to please you, Elizabeth.
Elizabeth—it is hard to say: I know it, John.
(He gets up, goes to her, kisses her. She receives it.
With a certain disappointment, he returns to the table.)⁵⁴

In contrast with his honest wife, Abigail is characterized as vengeful, deceptive and pitiless. She once "drank a charm to kill John Proctor's wife,"⁵⁵ and covers up her activity with a string of lies, hoping to dispatch Elizabeth and take her place. She is a creature of passion, the woman who looks into Proctor's eyes "feverishly,"⁵⁶ who makes him sweat "like a stallion"⁵⁷ whenever she is near. A wild, reckless, dangerous woman, a "mad...murderous bitch,"⁵⁸ she unleashes the "deep and darkling forces" in the play: the destructive power of female sexuality.

To dramatize John Proctor's ruin at the hands of the ruthless Abigail, Arthur Miller makes use of a highly emotional dramatic style unique among the plays the Wooster Group has appropriated. Writing a kind of agit-prop tragedy, he portrays John Proctor's heroism of spirit through a series of confrontations with the authorities (and less conventionally,

confrontations with himself). The Wooster Group's performance, however, does not induce the audience to empathize with Proctor's

Willem Dafoe: If someone's got to cry, they know I'm going to do that. And I like that role. I weep during Proctor's last speech and it has to sound like an aria—the rhythm and sound are very important.

emotional upheavals. The wild and grotesque performance of Willem Dafoe (quite in line, however, with Miller's stage directions) points up the playwright's highly manipulative and inflammatory style. The overacting distances the spectator so that he is able to contemplate the hysteria from a detached perspective and to recognize it as a device that is used to disguise a political situation even more disturbing than it initially appears.

Although the historical John Proctor was indeed hanged in 1692 for witchcraft, the action of *The Crucible* is Miller's invention. As Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum explain in *Salem Possessed*, Proctor was sixty years old and a rich tavernkeeper at the time of the hysteria. Like many of the accused witches, he was a successful businessman who had enjoyed a swift rise in economic fortunes. Being "wealthier than any of his accusers,"⁵⁹ he became an inevitable target of the witch-hunt and, according to Boyer and Nissenbaum, was the victim less of "a whore's vengeance"⁶⁰ than of an economic revolution:

The social order was being profoundly shaken by a superhuman force which had lured all too many into active complicity with it. We have chosen to construe this force as emergent mercantile capitalism.... Salem Village... called it witchcraft.⁶¹

Although Miller does not ignore the economic basis of the witch-hunt, he clearly subordinates it to Abigail's lust, thereby burying historical and economic reality in a psychosexual fiction.

Throughout *The Crucible* John Proctor refuses to recognize the economic force behind the witch-hunt, even after it is exposed by Giles Corey in Act III. Instead, at the end of the play, the man who has courageously refused to name names subordinates his innocence to his pride. He signs a confession but balks at the thought that it should be published lest it destroy his name. "You will not use me! I am no Sarah Good or Tituba, I am John Proctor! You will not use me!"⁶² He shudders to think the authorities will have had the satisfaction of manipulating him to their ends the way they have manipulated those weaker than he: the woman and the black slave. "I have three children—how may I teach

them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?"⁶³ Proctor fears that his humiliation will endanger his progeny and jeopardize their pride, as well as their inheritance. "Tell them I confessed myself; say Proctor broke his knees and wept like a woman...."⁶⁴ To make his demoralization more vivid, Willem Dafoe puts glycerine in eyes and blubbers away, his power lost, his pride shattered. But he will not sacrifice his name, reputation and racial identity. His wife may have willingly abandoned her own name on her marriage day but he will insure that his redeemed patronym be passed on to his children.

(with a cry of his whole soul): Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!⁶⁵

By insisting on his innocence and his name, John Proctor secures honor and property for his wife and children. In caring thus for his heirs, he unwittingly reinforces the social and economic system based on inherited land and wealth, to which he has fallen victim. Even in his final—and truly tragic—refusal, John Proctor fails to recognize that his heroism serves to safeguard the status quo and he dies a martyr to the economic system that has destroyed him.

* * *

Haphazard Conflicts

Ken Kobland: For the L.S.D. video we began with the notion of the Leary-Liddy opposition. And we began with a geographic opposition, too, between the New England woods and Miami. The tropical atmosphere was one of cheap, kind of Cuban intrigue. And the woods, having all those New England mystical associations. I went down to Miami in January 1984 with Ron to make the film. We had the idea to make some kind of film noir or intrigue, with a covert agent. And I wanted to use a lot of the filmic terms that go with that—details of things, drawers opening, faces appearing out of focus against backgrounds, lots of half-distorted images, looking out of windows, venetian blinds. So I worked along a line or scenario of coded images that, in repetition and formal structure, could play in lots of ways, depending on what live, physical things were going on. So we worked out highly defined images of waiting, secrecy, searching, hiding, all the things that circulate around the idea of a Liddy character, of intrigue and mystery. Set against

abstracted Miami: tropical landscapes in which things were just gestures, a hand reaching for something, a cigarette smoking, waiting.

We shot a great deal and edited the tape in New York, building in congruences with the live action. Because the third part was very intricately timed, we were able to say at 20.5 seconds we want to have a particular gesture come in. It would often happen that way, especially around pauses and caesuras in the piece, and around the story of the woman getting locked in the bathroom. There was a section of Ron's hands on the tiles. Either he was searching for something behind the tiles, knocking to find the hollow tile or else he was just spacing out. You can't really tell because the tape is too blank a screen to have any direct narrative meaning. But it's either someone waiting or someone cracking up. And there are moments of erratic snowy television images that come in. But this searching, this feeling over the tiles and the story of the woman in the bathroom freaking out on acid became a central point.

The strength of the third part is so much in visual and verbal gesture and detail, in refined, repeated gestures. And the monitors offer another dimension of image, of depth, of narrative. In terms of meaning, it's hard to say. It has visual meaning, providing pleasure for the eye and for the ear. We wanted the television to stand as a kind of wallpaper, that's why we neutral densitized, toned down the screen, to push it back and make it as flat as possible. It should be like a picture hung in the space. It shouldn't have that TV brightness. I've often thought of it as a kind of basso continuo, a continuous undercurrent that's drawing you in but that you can easily escape from. I'm constantly drawn into the sheer beauty of the live images against the flatness and depthlessness of the long table. It's as if the televisions were holes through which you can look out into the world. It's funny, it's a contradiction. The television which is obviously a depthless image gives us this sense of a hole in the space through which we look out into the world.

David Savran: And then, while the band is playing, there's the video of the woods.

Ken Kobland: For me, the music is a kind of funky sixties remake, and the woods are an image, very crudely, of a back-to-nature experience—the whole thing of Leary in the woods and Millbrook, and the sixties fascination with the natural environment.

David Savran: Which also connects with *The Crucible*, the dancing in the woods.

Ken Kobland: Exactly. And the fear that surrounds the mysticism of the woods. There's an element of a horror film in it, too, the traditional horror code of trucking through the woods. The camera's handheld and it's crashing through the grass and looking around. Very traditionally in

horror films there's the perspective of the monster walking through the woods. But you don't know how to connect it. Is it some kind of secret agent or some kind of horror, like the Devil? Or is it a trippy home movie, someone on acid walking through the woods and just looking at a tree and tripping out? It's hard to find out where it connects. There's also the climate opposition, from the sunny tropic to the cold wood.

David Savran: Where was that filmed?

Ken Kobland: Cape Cod, at Wellfleet. The footage of Ron in Miami has a sinister quality and this has another sinister quality. But with the music it almost becomes a kind of floating, trippy homage to the sixties.

David Savran: I also saw the romantic desolation.

Ken Kobland: As I said, it depends on where you connect it. There's a lot of that for me when I connect it to the bad rock 'n' roll, the funky, amateur quality of the music. That takes on a wonderful melancholy. And the woods are so barren. Depending on what you're reading, there are a lot of different feelings you can get from it.

The video in Part III introduces an opposition between Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy, to be developed further in Part IV when excerpts from a 1982 debate between them are read. (In fact, their historical connection goes back many years. In 1966 Liddy was the Assistant District Attorney for Dutchess County and was, in large part, responsible for "busting" Leary at Millbrook.⁶⁶) The video contrasts less the two men than the associations they bring with them. It pits the bare, cold Northern woods against the sunny tropics, the inhibited and guilty New England conscience against the freedom and laxity of Hispanic/American culture, the academic against the secret agent, the natural world against the commercial, monochrome against garish color, the subtle against the tawdry, Cape Cod against Miami Beach. It opposes two romanticisms, the horror movie and the *film noir*, exploiting and enlarging upon the mystery and ambiguous tonality of each.

The antithesis between Miami and New England brings a new formal and imagistic parameter into the piece. However, it also plays off and visualizes one already inscribed in both *The Crucible* and the Leary material (and in *Route 1 & 9*). In each it is evident in the opposition between the pressure and constraint of everyday life and the longing for freedom, pleasure and release. In *The Crucible* this longing envisions a tropical island on which Puritan values have no place, a paradise that the imprisoned Tituba in Act IV recalls to Sarah Good in her drunken reverie:

Oh, it be no Hell in Barbados. Devil, him be pleasureman in Barbados, him be singin' and dancin' in Barbados. It's you folks—you riles him up 'round

here; it be too cold 'round here for that Old Boy. He freeze his soul in Massachusetts, but in Barbados he just as sweet and—(A bellowing cow is heard, and Tituba leaps up and calls to the window:) Aye, sir! That's him, Sarah!⁶⁷

As if elaborating on Tituba's vision, Leary describes Mexicans and Puerto Ricans as part of the "underground"⁶⁸ with which he identifies. Elsewhere, John Bryan explains that Leary is drawn to the tropics and its people as a means of escape from a repressive culture:

Mexico always loosened Timothy Leary up.

Hispanic culture appealed to the romantic, poetic side of his nature and, down there, the constraints of home evaporated and he no longer had to play the part of the charming widower and the overpoweringly brilliant social scientist.

Cheap booze. Plentiful whores; those warmblooded little women who appealed to his old Catholic double-standards, reverent Earth Mothers who said a Hail Mary before fucking for cash beneath a color litho of the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁶⁹

The tropics, however, are only a paradise in part. They have more menacing associations as well, linked in *L.S.D.* to G. Gordon Liddy. As he confesses in his autobiography, he recruited and worked with Cuban-Americans from 1971 to 1973 on intelligence gathering operations and

Ron Vawter: Liddy was down in Miami, training a bunch of Cubans. It's another stream in the piece. He is this odd man. Busting Leary, the Cubans, Watergate, then joining with Leary again. It's a great American portrait.

domestic sabotage. (The latter included a foiled attempt to spike Daniel Ellsberg's soup with LSD before he was to deliver a speech.⁷⁰) The program note for Part IV ("Miami") quotes an excerpt from the Leary/Liddy debate in which he describes the "natural order" he observed off the coast of Honduras:

And I saw the barracuda attacking the yellow tail (inaudible), devouring him. I looked a long time and I did not see a yellow tail attacking, devouring a barracuda. And all the preaching you can possibly do is not going to reverse that natural order. And if you think it doesn't apply to human beings, ask the Poles.⁷¹

Although introducing a festive and paradisiac strain into the piece, the evocation of the tropics also suggests a more disturbing context: an

indifferent and impassive natural world, social Darwinism and poverty, espionage and revolution. As a segue into Part IV Steve Buscemi reads Jackie Leary's description of his trip to Antigua with his father in 1963 and their stay (until they were thrown out) at a hotel called the Bucket of Blood where they saw a man who had "flipped out on acid."⁷²

In the midst of its hallucinatory fragments, Part III introduces a crucial plot element that follows through into Part IV. Several minutes into the party Ron Vawter telephones Kate Valk, sitting at the other end of the table.

RON VAWTER: Hi, it's me.

KATE VALK: Where are you?

RON VAWTER: Miami.⁷³

She giggles and immediately hangs up, laughing with Peyton Smith (his video image is in Miami). Later, he calls again and she talks to him.

RON VAWTER: Listen, there's gonna be a no-show at the Shelbourne tomorrow night. Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos aren't gonna make it. You think we can get the old Cuban act together?

KATE VALK: Uh, huh.

RON VAWTER: Take the 12:01 and I'll pick you up at the airport.

KATE VALK: OK. I'll bring the shoes. How many?

RON VAWTER: Oh, six of one, half a dozen of the other.⁷⁴

In Part IV everyone heads toward Miami, toward sun, freedom, azure waters and hungry barracudas.

* * *

David Savran: I loved the final dance, the Cuban one...

Kate Valk: With the shoes.

David Savran: The sneakers, all the sneakers hanging from your dress, like extra pairs of feet, that the guys smash down on the platform.

Kate Valk: That was inspired by Jack [LeCompte and Dafoe's then two-year-old son].

David Savran: Yeah?

Kate Valk: We were working on the dance, on rolls over the table, just thinking of Ron and Willem and me as the entertainment, the dancers, the Del Fuegos. And then one morning Jack had his shoes, was doing a dance with his shoes hanging from the shoestrings. And Liz thought, what a great idea. First, we all had the shoes, then it was just me, with the boys running them.

David Savran: *And Part IV, "What is this dancing?"*

Ken Kobland: *It ties in with the whole thing Liz has elaborated for Ron, for the dance troupe. And suddenly the dancing in the woods—one aspect of The Crucible and one icon of liberation in the sixties—becomes this cheap, seedy dance troupe.*

David Savran: *And when they punctuate the dance by crashing all the pairs of sneakers down on the platform, the TV...*

Ken Kobland: *The TV image smashes, goes wild, yes. That's wonderful.*

David Savran: *And that just happens naturally in performance?*

Ken Kobland: *That actually happens because the connections get smacked.*

David Savran: *And the violence is being inflicted all around, on the people performing, on the spectators, on Earl Sandle, even on the equipment.*

Ken Kobland: *Exactly. The television freaks because of the violence being inflicted on the stage... it snaps.*

Willem Dafoe: *I had the sense that the final dance was the ultimate entertainment after all of that, because it had the tone of the whole show wrapped up in it. It was kind of irresponsible, amateurish but absolutely correct.*

Michael Stumm: *You could almost take it on the Ed Sullivan Show and do it right after Topo Gigio.*

David Savran: *Why does everyone end up in Miami? A vacation?*

Ron Vawter: *Yeah, being a tourist in a lackluster resort. It's the place you'll eventually arrive at. Miami. The elephant's graveyard, at the same time, infused with this Latin energy—vibrant, third world, Central American, jazzy, energetic. It's a kind of metaphorical place. But because of Liz's suspicion of metaphor, she doesn't let it operate that way. She doesn't weigh it, in any way. It's just a place, the last place, where the piece ends.*

Part IV of *L.S.D.* brings Ann Rower's memories up to date, it flips the pages on the calendar to 1982, to a debate between Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy. While excerpts are being read, Kate Valk, Ron Vawter, Willem Dafoe and Matthew Hansell fill in for the absent Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos, straddling both the gap in the platform and the gulf between imitation and the real thing—the "real" performers never show up, only their substitute. Valk stands center stage, at the very front of the platform while Vawter and Dafoe stand next to and behind her in the



Figure 50. *L.S.D.*, Part IV, Shoe Dance, Rehearsal Shots
Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, Jeff Webster.
(Nancy Campbell)

trough. She wears a red and black Cuban/Mexican dress, sombrero and black sneakers. The men have their chests bared, wearing Mexican hats

Kate Valk: After The Crucible I smudge the blackface and put chalky stuff over it and blush and lipstick. It comes from a book Liz was looking at one day of the prostitutes of India, with the dark skin, that paint their faces white.

and painted mustaches. Hansell carries a rifle and stands behind her on the platform. The other two hold three sneakers each that are tied to the hem of Valk's dress. When the Latin pop music begins ("Franjas de Agua" by the Trio Armonica⁷⁵), Valk proceeds with a dance that is a combination of ballet exercises and flamenco, an arched arm over her head, kicking her feet up and down, forward and back from the ankles and knees. The men manipulate the extra sneakers, keeping them alongside her own feet, as if impersonating two absent dancers next to her, following her own steps exactly. At each cadence Valk jumps and the men, in time with her, smash their sneakers down on the platform, shaking it so violently that the brightly colored image on the television monitors ("What is this dancing?") almost disappears into video snow. After each section (or raga), the three pause, stepping out of character momentarily to adjust themselves and prepare for the next round.

During the first several minutes of the dance, excerpts are read from the question period following a Leary/Liddy debate. Peyton Smith reads the part of the moderator while Ron Vawter and Jeff Webster fill in for Liddy and Leary, respectively. First, a young man (read by Michael Stumm) notes that although both of them "talk of power," they "disregard the power of the Lord." (Substituting for the real audience at the debate, the performers boo and hiss.) He continues: "Let us learn to love one another and not preach power and greed and escape through drugs so on and so forth." (Applause.) Liddy answers with "a brief poem," his own porno-theology:

May the bleeding piles possess thee.
 May thorns adorn your feet.
 May crabs as big as [inaudible] turds
 Crawl on your balls and eat.
 [inaudible]
 [inaudible]
 May a [inaudible] crawl through your asshole
 And break your fucking neck.⁷⁶

This is followed by loud applause and laughing.

Finally, from the end of the table Norman Frisch, wearing "blind" glasses, raises his hand and reads the final question from the text he holds before him.

EARL SANDLE: My name is Earl Sandle and, ah, my question is directed at Dr. Leary... Let me inform you that I did serve in Vietnam with the Marine Corps and I came back and was shot in the face with a shotgun. I have over 130 pellets left on my brain, my eyes are made of plastic and the people that did this got the false courage to do it because they followed the teachings that you put in your books... they were high, high on LSD and because of LSD they got the false courage to do what they've done.

TIMOTHY LEARY: Well, I'm certainly opposed to that and I think that's the most terrible thing I've ever heard. I denounce the people that did this to you... I have done more to serve than anyone in history, to warn people, to prepare people, ah, to do exactly the opposite of what you're talking about. I'm very sorry this happened and I assure you that no teachings of mine that would ever... I'm a pacifist... I've always been that and no one that ever took up a gun, drunk or sober, can say they were a follower of mine.

EARL SANDLE: They were following teaching... they were looking for a cheap thrill in drugs—they used LSD. The false courage that LSD gave them they got, and they were under hallucinations, and were under some kind of trip that that house was there because of the colors, because the bushes were jumping around at them and all, that they have to start shooting. And here I am, sir. So thank you, and I hope you can sleep very peacefully when I bump my face on the walls, when I stumble and trip. God bless you. Good night.

TIMOTHY LEARY: God bless you and good night.

(Pause.)

MODERATOR: Dr. Leary, how do you feel?

TIMOTHY LEARY: I feel very sad.⁷⁷

At the end of the excerpts, the long table moves five or six feet upstage on the hydraulics and the fake Del Fuegos perform their dance finale. Kate Valk lies down on the now vacated platform and Matthew Hansell, carrying his rifle, straddles her, his feet stretched behind him invisibly. He seats his torso on top of her hips so that her legs appear to be his own. The two thus unite to comprise a single *trompe l'oeil* entity, a squatting dancer, miraculously propelling "his" outstretched legs. Vawter and Dafoe, meanwhile, continue to follow "his" feet with their sneakers, as "he" spreads "his" legs wide, bends "his" legs at the knees in time to the music, and smashes "his" feet down on the platform. The other performers, silhouetted in the low light, wave their arms slowly, following the dance, as Michael Stumm whistles sweetly into the

microphone. At its end, there is a last moment when the dancers, their work finished, take a final siesta, a last moment of rest, and the piece is over.

Elizabeth LeCompte: For Part IV we created a dance that for me represents all that I've done in my work. The reading is still going on, but now the locale has changed. Is it Miami? Is it south of the border? Where is it? It's southern, it's emigres, people who have left New York and moved south... to die? Old age homes? And the performing team is still performing. And the questions are still being asked. The reading is from Leary's most recent work. And it culminates in the question, "Dr. Leary, how do you feel?" And "What is this dancing?" from The Crucible.

* * *

The Choreography of Persecution

David Savran: Why is there no Kennedy assassination material in L.S.D.? Elizabeth LeCompte: The same reason it's not in Nayatt School. It's too loaded. I know too unambiguously what it is for me. So it becomes boring very quickly.

Willem Dafoe: It's why we'd never do a play on nuclear disarmament.

Michael Stumm: It's too small.

Elizabeth LeCompte: It's too specific.

Michael Stumm: It's like Monopoly. There's no choreography of persecution.

Elizabeth LeCompte: We tried it in Nayatt. We abstracted the Zapruder film and took away its recognizability, but it lost its potency. And when we played it straight and everyone knew what it was, I hated it.

Michael Stumm: There's nothing truly paranoid about it unless you know what it is.

Elizabeth LeCompte: Exactly. And it couldn't take on any more meaning.

Michael Stumm: You found it much easier to invent situations that acquire their own paranoia.

As the readings that comprise *L.S.D.* move fictionally through time toward the present, the problems of writing and interpretation remain. *L.S.D.* provides no answers. It only asks questions. "Dr. Leary, how do you feel?" Are you responsible for what has happened? Have your writings encouraged criminal activity? Have you, in attempting to bring about

peace and understanding, effected destruction instead? But what of this "effect"? Is a writer responsible for the way others have interpreted his texts? Is not writing, by definition, cut off from the living hand, from the active, creative consciousness? Isn't it always cast adrift, always open to interpretation, always potentially dangerous?

L.S.D. demonstrates that every reading is a political act; every interpretation, an exercise of power. It dramatizes the process that bestows the force of "truth" upon certain cultural voices and interpretations. It shows how isolated points of view are subordinated to more systematic perspectives allied with institutional power, be it the power of the state or the literary and cultural establishments. It visualizes the play of meaning across a table, across a field of knowledge, among a group of intimates who have systematically, if not premeditatedly, suppressed those perspectives that threaten to subvert their control of the field. It visualizes the process that grants certain aggressive voices the status of cultural history and excludes the voices of the disenfranchised. It dramatizes history's reliance on the written text and its exclusion of those points of view, tentative and impermanent, which are not written down, not subject to the linearity of writing. It challenges the assumption that history in the theatre means fictionalized costume drama. It suggests instead that theatre, on account of its pretense, its use of simultaneous actions and its separation of role from actor, is the most suitable medium in which to "write" history.

Quite by accident, Arthur Miller's threat of legal action has proven the veracity of the Wooster Group's demonstration. It has confirmed the suggestion that the sphere of interpretation is not a pure, aesthetic realm but the world of political power. In this world, Miller's own reading of the play is distinguished from all others not because it is more correct but because it is empowered with the force of law. By insisting on his own interpretation, Miller has, ironically, aligned himself with the very forces that *The Crucible* condemns, those authorities who exercise their power arrogantly and arbitrarily to ensure their own continued political and cultural dominion. Miller's act of condemnation exacerbates what, in the play, he so clearly recognizes to be the hazards of a "divided empire in which certain ideas and emotions and actions are of God, and their opposites are of Lucifer." In place of this destructive dualism he urges the less judgmental conception of a "unity... in which good and evil are relative, ever-changing, and always joined to the same phenomenon..."⁷⁸ a description that perfectly characterizes *L.S.D.* The Wooster Group there realizes, by undermining the opposition between good and bad, culture and counterculture, precisely those free-floating dynamics

that Miller envisions: a semantic utopia in which meaning is liberated to circulate exuberantly and incessantly, without coming to rest upon any conclusive evaluation.

L.S.D. dispenses with the idea of history as dialectical development and conceives it instead as hallucinatory dance, a choreography of persecution, an "endlessly repeated play of dominations."⁷⁹ The piece brings this choreography into focus, this interplay of constantly shifting power relations (the dancers constantly swapping partners), both on a microscopic level—in the minute interactions between participants—and on a grosser cultural level—in the struggles between ideologies and interpretations. The choreography coalesces the paradisaic and the tyrannous, the free and the enslaved, into a dance in which each step is at once oppressive and radiant. It produces the beatific vision of the souls of the hanged flying up to heaven in the "poppet dance" and the sheer exultation and delirium of Kate Valk's spinning in the "faint dance." It animates the final ragas of Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos: Kate Valk dancing and Matthew Hansell straddling her, while the men smash the sneakers down on the platform, sending shock waves through the television cables. As if in horror and disbelief, the screens ask, "What is this dancing?" But they, too, succumb to the dance, as the very words dissolve into a shimmer of green and magenta snow.

Afterword

Looking back at the history of theatre, one sees that much of the most important and certainly all of the most radical work has been deconstructive—from the indecorous tragedy of Euripides which ridicules and indicts the gods, to Büchner's demonic comedy, to Brecht's non-"Aristotelian," non-cathartic Epic Theatre. The work of these three playwrights was so revolutionary—and remains so—not because it tried to create something wholly new but because it worked within history, and within metaphysics, to launch a trenchant critique of the ideology spoken through history and through metaphysics. Each manipulated preexisting forms to reveal their mode of operation, to expose the theatrical and dramatic devices on whose "invisibility" they traditionally relied. By exposing the forms (whether making ludicrous or strange, using *ostranie* or *Verfremdung*), the three playwrights challenged the entrenched theatre that demanded their silence and efficiency.

During the 1970s and 1980s the most important experimental theatre has likewise been deconstructive in strategy, performing a more or less trenchant critique of theatre and culture from within. Besides the Wooster Group, notable American practitioners include Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer, Richard Nelson, Meredith Monk. Among the aforementioned artists, the Wooster Group is perhaps the most politically radical, not because it pursues a revolutionary agenda, but because it is so deeply aware of the "chain of brutality" of which it is a part. Unlike the dominant liberal art of the period, it does not seek a moral high ground, knowing that it cannot detach itself from the process it examines: it recognizes that its activity will always produce the very objectification it deplors. As a result, the Wooster Group's work describes an urgent moment of politicized deconstruction which is in no way compromised by Elizabeth LeCompte's refusal of commitment. On the contrary, the work performs a skepticism that is so deeply political not because its material is political (what material isn't?) but because the Group's working process, its confrontation of the material, disentangles