

# TOWARDS A RICH THEATRE: WHERE DOES THE WOOSTER GROUP TAKE TECHNOLOGY? WHERE DOES TECHNOLOGY TAKE THEATRE PERFORMANCE?

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- »What keeps us watching this one man twenty-four hours a day – eating, sleeping, working, sitting for hours in contemplation?«

- »It has to be the reality. We've become tired of watching actors give us phony emotions, bored with pyrotechnics and special effects. [...] there's nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It's not always Shakespeare but it's genuine. That's how he can support an entire channel« (TRUMAN SHOW – Niccol: 85-86).

Two decades ago, in his preface to *BREAKING THE RULES*, Peter Sellars said that Wooster Group is »inventing theatrical vocabulary that ten and twenty years from now will become the lingua franca of a revived American Theatre« (Savran 1986: xvi). In his recent essay entitled *THE DEATH OF THE AVANTGARDE*, David Savran states that the last wave of the avant-garde is epitomized by the Wooster Group. Company director Elizabeth LeCompte's treatment of technology as an inseparable element of the production process has resulted in new approaches to staging, performing/acting, directing, and building the relationship between the spectators and the performers. The Wooster Group utilizes technology in building techniques to create a task based performance.

Wooster Group's main objective on stage is to do nothing that is not real. The performers are aided by high-tech devices the whole time both during the rehearsals and performances. People do not live with these high-tech devices the whole time in »real life«. It may seem contradictory, but it is partially their use that allows the Wooster Group performers »to do nothing that is not real«. However, the use of these high-tech devices such as the wireless in-ears, microphones, plasma sets and TV monitors enables the performers to be »real in the moment«, and to really grasp the essence of a theatrical event, in that it is a live event. The more the performers depart from performance techniques that aim for a »realistic« performance, the closer they are to being »real« during their interaction with the spectators in the performance space. Though a considerable part of the American avant-garde uses technology in their productions to enhance the spectacle or contribute to the plot. In the examples discussed here, on the other hand, the Wooster Group uses technology not to impress the spectators with visual or audio effects, or to add to the plot, but as an aid to fostering spontaneity. Before their European tour with *POOR THEATRE*, in June 2005<sup>1</sup>, the ensemble was working on a new scene. Its primary material was a tape of one of the earliest rehearsals of *POOR THEATRE*, made when they were working with a trainer on Grotowski's techniques called the *plastiques*. In

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1 By this time, *POOR THEATRE* had already been performed over two different seasons.

June 2005 the group were rehearsing a new piece based on HAMLET. Many of the rehearsals at this time involved the performers working on scenes from a taped production of HAMLET starring the British actor Richard Burton.<sup>2</sup> The performers tried to recreate the scenes in the performance space through the use of in-ear devices and monitors. In traditional Western rehearsal methods, a company usually starts by reading the play text, which continues until the text is memorized. One can say that the Wooster Group's first steps with a new play are quite similar to this; the company very often uses classic texts, but their interaction with these texts is not always in the form of reading from paper - there is often much film. Instead of only reading the words off a page and interpreting them in an »actorly« way, the Wooster Group members read the bodies of the performers in the footage and try to recreate them in their actual timing in the performance space. They do not look for new forms. LeCompte stated several times that she is not at all interested in creating new form (personal communication, May 9, 2005). Instead the company puts together the different texts which almost always results in the creation of a new text since they never merely imitate a single text. Often the result is an intercultural performance practice where different texts and forms from a variety of disciplines, cultures, geographies, time periods and traditions are juxtaposed and are »read« by the spectators by means of the bodies of the performers. Thus the final image that reaches the spectators is actually a reflection of the Wooster Group performers who have themselves looked at the reflection of different materials.

Throughout the rehearsal process when the performers are »imitating« a certain scene, they are in fact trying to get to the heart of the dominant perspective in the source work. In other words, capturing the *soul* of the »imitated scene« is far more important than presenting a replica. While they were rehearsing scenes from HAMLET, the performers had screens around them, situated so that wherever they turned they would easily see a screen. Depending on their positioning the technicians flip the image on the screen so that the performers do not get disoriented between their left and their right as they move. They also have in-ear devices, through which they hear the soundtrack of the footage. During the rehearsals the performers are not expected to learn their lines perfectly. For LeCompte, this is not important. She wants the performers to grasp the spirit of the source performers, and let their own sounds out even if they are becoming completely incomprehensible. Kate Valk, one of Wooster Group's performers, says that they are trying to copy the source performers in the way someone goes to the museum and copies a master piece in order to have an idea what this master piece is about.

K.V »The person I am copying in Acropolis, Rena, she is very different than me, [...] I am mushy, she is like a rod, she is like a lightning bulb, I am like a flower, so it is very very different, I resonate from here (she hits her chest), she resonates here (shows her head), she is very different and I had a very hard time, [...] it is not about us being as good as them, it is about a third thing, you have the thing and then you have us attempting to get in that somehow, which is the third thing, which is the performance to watch, so there is so much room in this piece for me.«

- 2 In 1964 Richard Burton starred in a very successful Broadway production of HAMLET at the Lunt-Fontanne theatre. For the film production of this performance, the crew deliberately performed in the style of a dress rehearsal, but performed in front of a live audience. The production was directed by Sir John Gielgud. The actors are in street clothes instead of period costumes, and the sets are minimal.

S.E. »Why is it interesting to you? Why do you enjoy performing that? «

K.V. »Because at this point we're very facile with it, it's just what we do, we like all this stuff, it's fun« (Kate Valk, personal communication, May 2005).

The Wooster Group's rehearsal process is very dynamic. Every rehearsal is recorded and can become source material for later rehearsals and performances. In one POOR THEATRE rehearsal, before a new European tour, the company watched a video of one of their own rehearsals from the research period for the production. LeCompte deliberately went back to that time and wanted the company to look at themselves being introduced to the work of Grotowski. Looking at this video the performers found a lot of elements were hilarious to them. However, they also found an element of the company's experience that they wanted to incorporate in the production two seasons later. The trainer of the plastiques – the physical exercises Grotowski designed for training performers – used a red suitcase in his work with the company in order to resonate their own experience at that stage. LeCompte brought the red suitcase back to the rehearsal/performing space. At that point she had a very precise idea of what she wanted the scene to look like. She explained to them »we are trying to imitate what really was the awkwardness of it«.

There is a section in POOR THEATRE when the performers improvise westerns and dances. The material for the section was first created by Johan Collins and it is all live. Collins has a collection of sounds on a sampler that he has generated over the course of the rehearsal process from TO YOU THE BIRDIE. He uses these sounds as a kind of vocabulary. So during the show, the performers are making movements and sound based on what they see on these monitors and what they hear. What they do is totally improvised because the technicians Geoff Abbas and Iver Findlay are ›feeding‹ material to them. This creates different dynamics of interaction with each other and with the performers. The choices of the material they decide to use are affected by the performers and by the material each technician uses. Geoff, for instance, can see one of the performers Ari Fliakos fall on to the floor as he is copying a video that Iver ›fed‹ in one of the screens. Seeing this happen, Geoff may decide to make the sound of someone falling or a glass breaking. Or he may see a performer doing something with his hands and he may ›feed in‹ a gunshot sound into the performance space. The spectators never directly see most of the visual material. They may hear some, but not all of it. The performers on the other hand are interacting with the technology they are surrounded by. LeCompte expects them to respond immediately so that the gap between thought and event is avoided. In traditional acting, the actor's body moves according to the choices they make cognitively. It is as much an intellectual process as an intuitive one. Since the brain is engaged also on an intellectual level, and commands the body what it is supposed to do, there is a lag time between the thought and the actual action taking place. In LeCompte's technique the lag time between the perception of the audio and video is much more minimal, much more like an involuntary or reflex reaction. In POOR THEATRE, the performers are like instruments that technology uses in order to channel AKROPOLIS through them. The performers of course think that they copy the material, but it is a physical thinking process rather than an intellectual process. In this type of interaction the Wooster Group performers are much more similar to a dancer than to a traditionally trained actor. The performers think through their bodies.

According to Sam Louise Gold, the Wooster Group performers use technology as a kind of substitute for the inner spiritual life that Grotowski's performers

attempt to reach. Gold says »with the exception of ten words over the course of the whole evening, everything that was said by a performer in POOR THEATRE was in their ear while they said it, and they are not in control of what is in their ear«.

K.V.: »... so I can be something else, I am not very good at being myself.«

S.E.: »Interesting, Liz says that the screens will make you do everything for the first time. Right? Then, [...] you have done Poor Theatre so many times [...] so is it still immediate response?«

K.V.: » ...we can do it without the screens but our consciousness would be different, we'd be in control of it«.

S.E.: »So you are not in control of it when there are the videos?«

K.V.: »Yeah, because you can't go before or after, you have to try and get it.«

S.E.: »But still you know it so well, that your body knows it, right?«

K.V.: »It is different; it is just different that's all I can tell you.«

In the second part of POOR THEATRE, LeCompte wished to incorporate a text by Max Ernst however she wanted a more abstract interpretation rather than a direct reference of the Ernst text. This was achieved with the use of technological devices. During rehearsals, Sheena See, the performer, narrated Ernst's words on a microphone. The other performers meanwhile were »fed« with See's narration of the Ernst text through their in-ears and recited what they heard into their microphones which »fed« Sheena's in-ear. The feed into Sheena's in-ear alternated consecutively between different recitals from the performers. The group repeated this about a hundred times and then chose one version to be the material played into Sheena's ear during the performance. So, during the performance, See/Sheena would hear Fliakos, Shepherd, Valk or other performers reciting the Ernst material from her own recital. Thus the awkwardness on the stage was achieved. During the performances See/Sheena also views films made by the group on different monitors. These films feature the group recreating an Ernst film/piece, in which See/Sheena is playing Ernst. So, during the performances, See/Sheena sees herself playing; Ernst as well as a video of Liz on another monitor. Through technological devices, she changes the words eventually so that they are taken away from Ernst and they become about LeCompte.

S.E.: »Sheena was sort of like Liz in that scene [...]. It was so clear to me that I thought maybe she had a tape of Liz in the ear ...«

S.L.G: »That is another fun little technical element. There is a very small LCD monitor that was pointed at Sheena during the show and it was playing a loop of hours of Liz directing. ...over the course of a few weeks and she would get up and talk to everybody and she was being filmed, I don't think even she knew it, and then that footage was played so that Sheena could every once in a while do something that Liz could do. ...Sheena got a lot of pleasure in imitating Liz, so she was encouraged ... one day in rehearsal Liz said ›you gotta be more like me‹, and Sheena said ›I can't make it up, we don't make things up, play something for me‹ and Liz said ›do we have any footage of me?‹« (Sam Louise Gold, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

During the epilogue of POOR THEATRE, the performers once more recreate a scene from Grotowski's production of AKROPOLIS. They are surrounded by monitors where the last scene of the AKROPOLIS is shown while they hear a sound score of

the tape through their in-ears. However, the physical score of the actors in this scene is not an exact imitation of the physical score of the actors in AKROPOLIS. There were two other sources for the physical score of the performers. The first one was the material from the earlier parts of the performance, from both the westerns and the Forsythe dances, that the video and the sound technicians would mix in to the footage from AKROPOLIS. In that way AKROPOLIS was »infected« by the dance improvisations from Act 2 of POOR THEATRE and the western improvisations from the second half of the show. The second source was a video of the Wooster Group performers re-creating the last section of AKROPOLIS. At the end of AKROPOLIS the performers enter the crematorium. The Wooster Group re-creates this scene by using a trap door in the aisle within the audience. They wound up going into the hole in the floor. The performers were recorded during a rehearsal. This recording was flipped in reverse and played on the flat panel screen in the performance space, so it seemed as if the flat panel was only a piece of glass that reflected what the performers were doing as they were going into the hole.

After the performers go into the hole the flat panel screen, that is now facing the spectators, shows again the video of AKROPOLIS featuring the spectators getting up and leaving. All that is heard is the spectators leaving. Unintentionally, the spectators standing up and leaving the Wooster Group performance are copying the spectators in the tape of AKROPOLIS. These spectators have now become performers in the AKROPOLIS footage, or the flat panel screen is simulating the spectators in the Performing Garage. LeCompte is now in fact directing the spectators in the Performing Garage. The spirit of the AKROPOLIS video is captured. The performers have disappeared from the performance space. The spectators, feeling a little awkward, start moving. That is all that is left happening both in the video and in the Performing Garage. The relationship between the big flat panel monitor and the spectators is similar to that between the performers and the monitors surrounding the performance space. In certain moments of the performances, it is unclear whether the Wooster Group performers copy the mediated performers, or the media is reflecting the live performers' action. LeCompte creates a similar ambivalence for the spectators exiting the garage as they look at the bare stage with the video of spectators exiting the Polish Laboratory Theatre.

LeCompte occasionally brings in images from the company's collective past. The peak of her heartfelt desire is evident throughout POOR THEATRE, which is a performance that has been built on the loss of many things. It is a piece about the feeling of loss. It is also a piece about the Wooster Group, a reflection of LeCompte's journey, survival and feeling of loss within the group. What makes Wooster Group the Wooster Group is its director Elizabeth LeCompte. She herself also acknowledges the fact that, if she left, the company would end. POOR THEATRE was made at a time when LeCompte was experiencing many losses of lifetime relationships. A picture can easily be drawn just by looking at a production from THREE PLACES IN RHODE ISLAND. The members of the Wooster Group in that picture were very close to LeCompte not only professionally but also on a personal level. Of those Ron Vawter and Spalding Gray have both died at a relatively young age, one died from an incurable illness, the other committed suicide. Libby Howes is away after being institutionalized, LeCompte's relationship with Willem Dafeo, another founding member of the company, has ended. Of the earlier members Paul Schmidt and Michael Kirby are also dead and Peyton Smith is far from New York. The ghosts in the garage are not only those of Jerzy Grotowski, Billy Forsythe's company and Max Ernst. They are also the ghosts of the founding members of the

Wooster Group who are present in LeCompte's consciousness when she is creating new work with mostly a new generation of performers from different backgrounds devoted not only to the Wooster Group.

Just as the moon reflects the light from the sun, in POOR THEATRE, performers reflect the light of the performers of Grotowski. When we look at Wooster Group performers we see the reflections of Grotowski's performers. But just as how the moon merely reflects the light of the sun and does not give us neither warmth nor energy, the work of Wooster Group and the work of Grotowski – or other source texts used – are as different from one another as day and night. The images we see, the simulacra, change form depending on how much the performers are looking at and how much they reflect. In many moments of the copying, the Wooster Group performers may be reflecting exactly the same light. The effect of this light on the performance and spectators is very different, though. The spectators build a different connection to the members of the Wooster Group copying, than the relationship between the spectators and performers of AKROPOLIS. The substantial material and the distance are very different.

Before the company started using copying so much in creating their scores, LeCompte was still looking for ways to stop performers from trying to be natural in the performance space. Most of the time she came up with task oriented commands. She did not want to invent situations for each performer. The use of the technological devices discussed here let her reach the pinnacle of her active experimentation on task-based performance.

## Interviews of author with:

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Gold, Sam Louise, 20 May 2005, Performing Garage, New York.  
LeCompte, Elizabeth, May and June 2005, Soho, New York.  
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