

4 Postmodern Collage: The Wooster Group

Since using video in its 1981 production of *Route 1 & 9*, The Wooster Group has included video in all its theatre productions, consistently experimenting with the content and style of material used and the interplay between video materials, their means of display, and the live performers. In the process it has influenced many other companies in the US and abroad.¹ Unlike subsequent practitioners who have taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by developing technologies such as video projection and video walls, The Wooster Group is unusual in continuing to deliver video material on television monitors.

The company emerged, under the directorship of Elizabeth LeCompte, from a group of performers who were working in New York in the 1970s with Richard Schechner's Performance Group – a leading experimental company of the time which drew inspiration from the work of Brecht, Artaud and Grotowski, amongst others.² Its highly intertextual work is characterised by playful collaging of found materials and daily life activities with both 'high' and popular cultural forms and texts and by ironic, self-conscious performances. Their productions have incorporated a striking diversity of texts and performance approaches. Dramatic texts have ranged from neoclassical French drama (Racine's *Phèdre*), drama of a more naturalistic kind (*The Crucible*, *Three Sisters*), to a modernist experimental text (Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*); productions have also included texts from novels, biographies and films, along with autobiographical material and material found in rehearsal. Even more extensive have been the performance styles explored in both live and videotaped performance, as they 'face off' with the found texts (Kate Valk, in Rosten, 1998, 18). They have experimented with blackface, cartoons, musicals, soap opera, porn movies, chat shows, Polynesian dance, Japanese

Noh and Kyogen. LeCompte speaks of 'composing' the productions visually and musically and her background in the visual arts is often noticeable in her adoption of visual motifs from painting, as seen in recollections of Dali and Holbein discussed below. The Group's handling of video and its playing with different televisual styles must, then, be seen in the context of this broader collagist approach and ongoing play with different 'masks' for addressing and defamiliarising the chosen texts.³

Some critics portray such collagism and eclecticism as simply symptomatic of a depthless, ahistorical postmodernism and a fetishisation of the signifier at the expense of the signified, and comments by LeCompte and members of the company have discouraged the idea that a deliberate deconstructive project lies behind the work. LeCompte delights in testing to the extreme ideas about collage which derive from Dadaism, and accounts of devising sessions and rehearsals make clear that the company adopts a genuinely *experimental* approach to the collocation of different types of text, narrative or styles. Typifying Lyotard's postmodern artist who 'works without rules in order to formulate the rules of *what will have been done*' (Lyotard, 1984, 81), they *test out* what it might be like to have black-face performers doing crude comic routines while video plays a classic Thornton Wilder text performed like a soap opera, or what might be the effect of including a Polynesian dance in the middle of a Chekhov play, with LeCompte insisting on allowing different elements 'to be in the space together, without this demand for meaning. "Meaning" in quotes' (Kaye, 1996, 256).

Nevertheless, the Group's approach does, in effect if not intention, encourage a deconstructive response towards the various texts and performance styles, and towards representation in general. The very act of laying one system of representation against another (or in The Wooster Group's case, often several others) tends to call the differing systems into question, or at the very least, to denaturalise them. In handling video, the knowing play with particular televisual conventions leads to fruitful collisions with different conventions of dramatic writing and performance and brings to light the absences and erasures in each and the dynamics of authority which they instigate. While the dominant place of television within contemporary culture is reflected in the Group's persistent use of the television monitor rather than video projection, the way in which LeCompte continually reframes its location and contents challenges the place of television just as much as her use of video expands and challenges theatrical texts and conventions.

LeCompte cites two significant ways television practice influenced her broader approach to composition. She describes her love for old television shows such as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and *I Love Lucy*, in which the performers regularly moved to and fro between performing as characters and performing as themselves, breaking the televisual fourth wall to comment on what had just been done, before returning to the action – often with comic effect (LeCompte, 1990). As in contemporary shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, aspects of the performers' own lives were folded into the story-lines, blurring boundaries between the fictional and the autobiographical. Similarly, Wooster Group performers, especially in earlier productions, move fluidly between the characters they present and a stage version of themselves, as they speak to each other or the audience and aspects of their lives in the company appear in the productions. A version of this appeared in earlier Performance Group productions, where the influence of Brecht could be seen, and it was familiar in popular entertainments such as vaudeville and variety shows, but it is noteworthy that LeCompte identifies her own approach as influenced more by popular television.

In common with other contemporary theatremakers, LeCompte also likens the way productions flit to and fro between various narratives and modes of performance to channel-hopping on television, moving backwards and forwards between fiction, documentary, news, comedy, and so on. She sees no reason why, if we are comfortable doing this when watching television, we should not feel comfortable when theatre produces the same effect. Again, there are precursors in earlier forms of popular theatre, and such an approach is often seen as characteristic of much postmodern cultural production.

Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)

In earlier productions, such as *Rumstick Road*, The Wooster Group collaged music, slide-projections and other sound-recordings alongside related and apparently non-related stage action. In 1981, however, for *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, LeCompte introduced video for the first time. Three distinct sections of video appeared; though controversial at the time, seen in retrospect today, their use seems quite straightforward in comparison with later experiments.

The first use was, for all its simplicity, quite disconcerting. The production began not with live performance, but with a twenty-minute

video of performer Ron Vawter mimicking a 1965 educational film featuring Clifton Fadiman lecturing about Thornton Wilder's depiction of small-town America, *Our Town*. In early performances spectators watched this in a separate room in the Performance Garage before going down into the performance space for the rest of the production. In subsequent performances elsewhere, the video usually appeared on four monitors suspended above the performers and one on ground level, in the same space as the rest of the performance.

Vawter delivered the lecture in a very deliberate manner, deploying rhetorical gestures and illustrative materials in ways that mark the moment of their use. He studied Fadiman's film in great detail, and his prompt-script shows how closely he plotted every gesture – opening out his palms, placing his hands in each other, touching fingers and thumbs together in what he calls a 'church' gesture, and so on. He produces an almost Brechtian demonstration of Fadiman's lecture style. His stiff movements across the lecture theatre – to and fro between a toy theatre and a stepladder, were also filmed in such a way as to mimic the self-conscious variation of setting often found in educational television lectures. Capitalised sub-titles underscored certain points, as when the lecturer speaks of THE USE OF A CONDENSED LINE OR WORD. The video retained moments that would normally be edited out in a broadcast television programme: as well as awkward editing jumps, Vawter sometimes coughs, corrects himself, or repeats a line. All this served to expose how such television normally tries to operate seamlessly in order to generate an authoritative meaning. In refusing such seamless presentation, the video undermined the authority of the interpretation put forward in the lecture.

The lecture presents a traditional humanist analysis, focusing on the graveyard scene of Act Three. Fadiman endorses Wilder's idea that the inhabitants of Grover's Corners undergo universal, trans-historical experiences and feelings. He places *Our Town* within a Western tradition of art as consolation in the face of death. At the end of the play 'we see that Emily's life, and all our lives, are part of something vast and eternal'. It helps us 'to create order out of the confusion of everyday living'. He refers to a series of sculpted heads, from Greeks and Egyptians up to Degas and Picasso, images of which appear on the monitors. These are citizens of *Our Town*, 'just as we all are'. As Savran observes, the lecturer's use of the first person plural continually inscribes the spectators as sharing this humanist tradition. LeCompte herself acknowledges that she 'liked the Fadiman film, but was bothered about liking it. It touched nostalgic chords of comfort for me that

made me angry' (Savran, 1986, 17). The style of the video here, however, problematises Fadiman's approach, provoking spectators to question the extent to which they are imbued with the beliefs assumed by the lecturer.

What follows the lecture is the antithesis of such art: it seems chaotic, grotesque, unsettling, and presents a view of America very different from the middle-class, white America that dominates *Our Town*. Where Wilder refers in passing to 'the other side of the railway tracks' as a place where Poles and various others live (but note, no mention of a black population), *Route 1 & 9* enacts an extreme version of an 'other side' – one that was not depicted in the dominant American drama of the 1930s, but largely relegated to marginalised theatrical forms such as vaudeville.

The live action begins with Vawter and Willem Dafoe, wearing blackface make-up and dark sunglasses with tape across them, constructing a skeletal house in the style of Laurel and Hardy, accompanied by a sound-tape of two men discussing house-building in New Jersey.⁴ Their clumsy attempts to erect the frame and install a large window become a perverse echo of the Stage Manager setting up the houses of the Webb and Gibbs families early in *Our Town*, but here the builders are black labourers (or more properly, white performers blacked up) – a sort of *lumpenproletariat* not depicted in *Our Town*. As building work proceeds, Kate Valk and Peyton Smith, also in blackface, plan a birthday party. Adopting a black 'jive' voice, Valk phones friends to invite them and calls real local food outlets, trying to order food – with the shopkeepers' responses being amplified for the audience. Again, this parallels scenes of food and party preparation in *Our Town*: but in contrast with the homey, apple-pie female domesticity of the play, Valk orders chicken and mash from fast-food joints.

Throughout all this a television monitor inside the house-frame flickers with electrostatic 'snow' – an image of television's constant presence in modern homes. The upper four monitors show Wooster Group performers, shot in close-up, quietly speaking dialogue from *Our Town*. As the text competes with the interspersed dialogues of the live performers and intermittent sound effects of drills, gunfire, and alarms, it is only possible to decipher an occasional exchange when the volume is increased or other activities subside. The atmosphere is that of soap opera. LeCompte thought that:

when you took the Stage Manager out of *Our Town*, it became a soap opera. ... We did improvise 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 actor's pacing is soap opera, but the visual style is more 'portraiture', the actors speaking directly to the camera. (Savran, 1986, 34)

Wilder's Stage Manager was, of course, originally intended as a Brechtian device to defamiliarise the action of *Our Town*, and Wilder himself disliked the way the play was taken up as sentimentally as it was, with the Stage Manager often played as rather too folksy. The Stage Manager's removal and the remediation of the play here highlight the potential the text contains for such a sentimentalising take-up.

As the building concludes, the performers enact a wild, drunken party. The performers alternate high-energy dance numbers and raucous re-enactments of blackface comedy routines originally performed by Pigmeat Markham, including pouring 'castor oil' into a punch bowl (actually onto the floor) and a sequence in which Pigmeat defecates in his pants.⁵ As the party reaches a crescendo, the four monitors are winched forward, until they loom over the heads of the performers at the front of the performing space – forcing spectators to crane their heads back in order to watch the subsequent sequence. As a loud alarm rings incessantly, the lights dim and the performers give way to twenty minutes of video.

Again using head-shots, the video includes much of Act Three of *Our Town*, in which the recently dead Emily joins the ghosts of those who pre-deceased her, in the cemetery above Grover's Corners. She wrestles with her in-between state, still feeling part of life 'down there'. Ironically, given her own confined existence and her presentation here in a television 'box', she describes the living as 'sort of shut up in little boxes'. Allowed to revisit her life for one last time, she returns to Grover's Corners on her twelfth birthday. The bitter-sweet experience culminates in an elegiac farewell to Grover's Corners and her parents before she asks, 'Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute?' (Wilder, 1962, 89).

As Mrs Gibbs and Emily observe a tearful George falling to the ground in the graveyard, the video shows Dafoe's face contorted with pain – a sculptural image that echoes ironically the sculpted heads shown at the end of the opening lecture. The intimate sound, overtly manipulative music, soft focus and close-up technique of soap opera produce a wistful atmosphere. Swelling chords contribute to a sense of double-coding: spectators may be torn between the emotional impact of the presentation and a sense of irony created by the televisual framing and the excessive underlining of the scene's pathos. This is followed

by crashing music accompanying Simon Stimson's bitter outburst, 'That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance.'

The conflicted viewing of this is also underscored by the onstage activity, which reverses the background/foreground relationship between party and play earlier in the production. After remaining still initially, the blackface performers begin tiptoeing about, shifting furniture and whispering inaudibly, lit only by the glow of the monitors. Occasionally dancing slowly, they function as the partygoers of the previous sequence (and of Emily's twelfth birthday) and as stagehands preparing the scene for the next part of the show (the lower monitor is moved centre-stage and another monitor placed above it). While the silent cavorting initially heightens the melancholic atmosphere created on video, it gradually provides a counterpoint: a telephone rings, loud music suddenly erupts, and then a boisterous calypso starts playing. As in *Our Town*, life begins to resume amongst those left 'down below'. As the monitors freeze on the tortured image of Dafoe, the music is turned up full blast and the performers, with their make-up half wiped off, launch into a final frenetic dance:

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 performers to remain quiet during the video now explode into a frenzy of bloodlust and rage. (Savran, 1986, 36)

If this brief dance is extremely confrontational, what follows is even more so. Following a further loud alarm, the performers abruptly stop and sit down, and the monitors flicker into life again. They show LeCompte and Vawter driving a van into New Jersey. Initially, this seems to invert early European examples of film showing performers coming through neighbouring streets to the theatre. Here they are shown leaving the theatre, heading into the real world through which Route 1 and 9 runs. But they soon pick up two hitchhikers. While the journey continues on the upper colour monitors, the smaller, lower black and white monitor begins to show the hitchhikers engaging in copulation and oral sex with each other.⁶ The sequence focuses like a porn movie on the bodies of the performers: they are effectively headless sex objects. Just as the blackface routines suggested a grotesque contrast with the repressed world of *Our Town*, so the head-shots of the *Our Town* videos and the educational pieties of the lecturer (and his sculpted heads) seem to be answered by the obscene *bodily* display of this video. (It might also be seen as a riposte to the sentimental

treatment of George and Emily's romance.) Throughout its playing there is no sound, no other distraction for the audience. When the videotape stops playing, the performance ends abruptly.

The controversies over the pornographic video and the use of blackface have been extensively discussed, and Savran and Vanden Heuvel provide stimulating readings of how the various elements play against each other. LeCompte herself claimed that when she started working, she 'didn't have any idea that these routines from Pigmear Markham would have anything to do with *Our Town*. ... I was working on Pigmear Markham material because I was interested in it formally' (Kaye, 1996, 254). She 'just overlapped and scissored', refusing 'to judge what material was relevant and what was not' (Savran, 1986, 41). Nevertheless, Vanden Heuvel argues that the antics of the blackface performers and the pornographic video expose the falsifying 'order' of Wilder's supposedly universal portrait of middle-America and alert the spectator to what the play represses:

Framed outside Wilder's text and town, these disorderly phenomena (sexual threat, racial difference, violent physicality, death rather than eternal verities) find representation in *Route 1 & 9* as local perturbations which will – as they cannot in the closed system of *Our Town* – cause widespread transformation of the overall system (Vanden Heuvel, 1995, 68)

Of course, the contrast drawn is made problematic by the use of white performers to play the blackface routines; the critique of Wilder is framed by The Wooster Group's own recognition that it, as a group, does not have any black performers.

While such arguments are persuasive, Savran warns against too readily attempting a conclusive dialectical reading of the production, and in *What Is This Dancing?* (2004) I suggest that the quest for meaning production may too easily smooth over the production's gaps and contradictions, to produce a coherent, politically progressive interpretation, at the expense of sufficient acknowledgement of the libidinal impact of the performances and of the extent to which its radical structuring challenged attempts by early spectators to read the production as a whole. Even spectators who were familiar with the avant-garde scene in New York initially found the work highly offensive and less neatly dialectical than subsequent analysis suggests. Here we might note how LeCompte's deployment of video, for all that it appears quite simple in comparison with later usage, was, at the time, striking in its divergence from previous practice with film, in

particular the Piscatorian model favoured by political theatre. LeCompte effectively inverted the sort of use Piscator and, to some extent, Svoboda made of film. Where they used film to expand the world presented by the play-text that was being enacted live, LeCompte placed *Our Town* on video, and set up a stage world that, at first sight, seems to bear no relation to its world or to the preceding lecture. To the extent that one implicitly 'comments' on the other, the stage world seems to function as a contrast to the videoed world, rather than vice-versa. Where earlier practitioners exploited film's potential to shift scene and show large-scale action, LeCompte confined herself mostly to the 'talking heads' more normally associated with television. The continuous length of the videos exceeded previous practice (excepting *Laterna Magika*): the first runs for almost twenty minutes, and the *Our Town* material lasts over thirty. Although there was some simultaneous action during the *Our Town* tapes, running the first and third films on their own exceeded anything Piscator or others had attempted with film and owed more to the collagist practices of video installations. In common with contemporary video art, it also played more knowingly with the formal properties of the medium than earlier practitioners.

LSD (... Just the High Points ...)

Developed during 1983–84 and shown over the next six years, *LSD (... Just the High Points ...)* combined a collagist treatment of the drug culture of the 1960s (particularly the activities of LSD guru Timothy Leary) with a scrambled treatment of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*.⁷ Video did not play a great part, although it is worth noting briefly how LeCompte introduced certain practices which were explored more fully in subsequent shows.

In the first of its four Acts, the performers, seated behind a long table, provided a quick snapshot of the 1950s and 1960s by reading excerpts from works by Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs and others, interspersed with memories of Leary's baby-sitter. Act Two originally involved a condensed, rapid-fire reading of excerpts from *The Crucible*, but after Miller had the company prosecuted, Michael Kirby provided a text that closely paralleled *The Crucible*. In Act Three the performers re-enacted a rehearsal during which they worked on *The Crucible* after taking LSD, a sequence that was variously comic, tedious, and quite dark and frightening. This merged with re-enacting

a riotous drug-fuelled party at Leary's farm, Millbrook. Meanwhile, a parallel narrative on video involved a man in Miami arranging a gig in a hotel. Act Four drew on the fact that in the 1980s Leary and Watergate burglar Gordon Liddy toured a staged debate in which they discussed issues to do with the individual and society. The performers enacted an incident when a man who had been shot by someone on LSD confronted Leary. Alongside this, a fake Spanish dance troupe, Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos, performed a hilarious dance.

The video material was shown on two monitors, one placed on the table beside the performers, the other in front of it. The first usage was not originally planned, but was a product of circumstance; it nevertheless initiated a subsequent line of development and raised questions about the place of an actor's literal presence in theatrical performance. When Kirby was unavailable for a few performances, some of his contributions were videotaped and played when appropriate. The collagist structure made the substitution easier than it might have been in a more naturalistic performance, especially as the presentational style, with the performers often reading from books or scripts, or delivering the text at breakneck speed, generally challenged traditional notions of actorly presence. As LeCompte rejects the spurious authenticity associated with a Method approach to acting, she saw Kirby's appearance on video as just another mask, and subsequent productions began to include such video substitutions, reaching its logical conclusion in *Fish Story*, when video footage included appearances by Ron Vawter, who died while the show was being made.

When Kirby subsequently returned, some of the video was retained, producing a doubling effect, as 'live' Kirby sat alongside his video image. This led to a wittily structured comic effect in the drug party scene. Kirby enacted a version of the notorious incident in which William Burroughs shot his wife – when attempting an Annie Oakley style trick-shot. Here a fused image of the real Kirby and his televised arm 'shot' at the live Nancy Reilly. Such a moment functions as a comic turn or 'attraction' (and recalls Svoboda's shoot-out scene in 1950), but its hallucinatory quality also seemed apt, coming during a party in which everyone was high on drugs. The cyborgian fusion of live and videotaped performer also further marked the making of the performance, showing it as a product of mediation and refusing to naturalise its depiction of events; in later work such cyborg-like images become almost a Wooster Group trademark. Subsequent use of video in Acts Three and Four was relatively minor in significance, although it did contribute to the emotional texture of the acid-trip scene.

Frank Dell's *The Temptation of Saint Antony*

More complex integration of video was found in *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony* (1987), aptly described by Elinor Fuchs as 'part mystery play and meditation on morality, part an in-the-theater burlesque filled with tricks, gags and numbers' (1988, 104). This drew on a bewildering array of source materials, including: Ingmar Bergman's 1958 film, *The Magician*, in which a magic troupe under investigation by the police is forced to demonstrate their tricks; Gustave Flaubert's 1874 closet-drama *The Temptation of St Antony*, which depicts the 3rd-century hermit being tempted by the Devil with manifestations of the Seven Deadly Sins; dances devised with director Peter Sellars; a biography of the comedian Lenny Bruce, who adopted the name 'Frank Dell' in one of his routines; Geraldine Cummins' 1932 book, *The Road to Immortality* – in his last weeks Bruce had his assistant read extracts from this to him; nude chat shows of the sort shown on late-night cable television; a hallucinatory film made by Ken Kobland; and incidents and interruptions which occurred during the rehearsal process.⁸ As Savran has noted, 'No other Wooster Group piece ... is as complex and deeply intertextual; no other will as consistently frustrate any attempt to fix the freeplay of references or to contain the plurality of signifiers' (1990, 43). Such complex layering of activities prevents any attempt here to do anything more than provide a rudimentary sense of action and text, so that its use of video may be more fully explored.

The action is nominally set in a hotel room in Washington, substituting, as the Programme suggests, for Flaubert's 'sunset in the desert' location. In practice, the set consists of the long platform from *LSD*, behind which a long wall with two doors and a window is lowered and raised at certain points. Centre-stage is a metal-framed bed. To the sides are two television monitors, with a third suspended above. While the published text gives no clues as to setting, performance approaches or the use of video, the layout, in two parallel columns, does reflect something of the underlying structure of the production's seven episodes. One column consists mostly of a long, rambling text delivered by Vawter as Frank; the other consists of dialogue of other cast members, who sometimes interact with Frank, but often follow an almost separate track of activity.

Frank merges three main identities: he hosts a nude television chat show (with the activities shown on the upper monitor); as the leader of a performing troupe, he veers between recounting a Lenny Bruce style

autobiographical monologue and attempting to rehearse two women in a dance version of the St Antony story;⁹ as both figures he slips in and out of playing St Antony, making observations about life, death and God, while also being visited by various visions from Flaubert's text – Ammonaria, Hilarion, and the Chimera. Vawter's monologue is punctuated by exchanges with the production's technicians and an assistant called Sue (who reads him extracts from Cummins and Flaubert and goes shopping for him), and by videotaped phone-calls from Dafoe. Wearing a bathrobe and sunglasses, with a hand-held microphone, Vawter performs mostly down in front of the platform on which the rest of the cast generally performs. Here Onna and Phyllis (Valk and Smith) move between partying, recalling past disastrous performances, and rehearsing a melodramatic tale of drugs and death. In Episode Six, in a scene derived from Bergman, they stage some magic acts, for which Vawter is enlisted. In the final episode Phyllis announces she is abandoning theatre, while Onna organizes a hasty departure, responding to a request for a performance from the King of Sweden, again a trace of Bergman's narrative.

From the opening lines, in which Vawter tests the sound levels and asks 'JJ' (James Johnson) to 'throw that tape on' and 'Dieter' for a little music (blurring Jeff Webster's role as both sound operator and a character), the production becomes 'a piece about the making of the piece', as LeCompte described it (Cole, 1992, 96). The quest to get things right, the banalities surrounding rehearsal, the highs and lows of performance and relationships with audiences are constantly referenced. The use of lighting, sound, music, and video to manipulate atmospheres and affect audiences is often marked in the very moment of their use. Taking its cue from *The Magician*, the production plays with, but also exposes, the 'magic' of theatre. Interwoven with the metatheatrical playing about are frequent encounters with mortality, a desire for ecstasy and transcendence, and a recurrent collapse into a soulless eroticism.

Typical of the mixing of sacred and profane, the profound and the banal, and also illustrative of the tightly integrated use of video, is a sequence in Episode One: The Monologue.¹⁰ Vawter tiffs about a quasi-mystical experience on drugs, interspersing a vision of stars with a flippant account of an encounter with a woman. The vision is soon undercut by his comment, 'the harmony of the planets gave me a real pain in the old proverbial butt' (The Wooster Group, 1996, 269). As the video shows him with a naked woman, Vawter lip-synchs a brief dialogue with the woman, doing her voice as well as his own. (He

reverses the sort of lip-synch associated with music-video performances: the live Vawter speaks into his microphone, synchronising with the videotaped figures, whose voices are silenced.) They are then joined by Dafoe, naked and wearing a markedly fake moustache. Dafoe is introduced as Cubby from Wales. As they engage in a faltering discussion of the attraction and repulsion of stars and the appearance of the Milky Way, Vawter lip-synchs Cubby's dialogue also. He then looks at his script and prompts himself to get going on 'that bit about the prayers, tears, physical suffering'. After speculating about 'the absolute and the big questions', he calls a bearded woman to come to him (Ammonaria from the St Antony story) and continues:

Everywhere, everywhere here is ... there's no bounds .. the infinite ... the infinite . you can never reach the top ... you can never come to the bottom. Because there is no bottom. There's no bottom? Let's see if there's no bottom. You wanna loss that thing around? (Ibid., 271; ellipses are in the text)

Over this last section the video, which has shown a naked bearded woman joining him, closes in on her crotch. After musing about 'something beyond death, something beyond God', Vawter adopts a female voice to say, 'Maybe appearance is the only reality.' To this he replies, in leering fashion, 'Well, appearance is the only reality ... and what an appearance.' So the scene proceeds, mixing metaphysical speculation with asides, chat-up lines and sight-gags, while the video's naked figures gyrate with a jaded lassitude and Vawter's lip-synching becomes an increasingly virtuosic display of the performer's skills. Pathos and bathos combine towards the end as, in the face of Ammonaria's acknowledgement that you can't 'ever see the cradle without seeing the grave' (ibid., 274), Vawter calls for a little dance to cheer them up: the video displays them in a naked line-up jiggling about, with the camera trained on their pubic areas.

In the following three episodes, while Onna and Phyllis dance and rehearse and Vawter alternates between the various tracks of his monologue and his dialogues with the others, the videos are used principally to show his encounters with the figures from the St Antony narrative, such as the bearded lady, the Sphinx and the Chimera. He interviews them, they lounge about or dance, always naked and with the camera often freeze-framing shots of the chest to pubic area. The effect is more comic than erotic, as in, for example, Dafoe's appearance as a sand-dancing Chimera crying out 'You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man.' While the style mimics its cable

television model, its framing also recalls the iconography of Salvador Dali's *The Temptation of St Antony* (1946). Dali shows a naked St Antony raising a crucifix up against an elongated white horse that advances on him from above, followed by four elephants carrying images of sensuality. One of these is a naked female torso (from the neck to the pubic area) framed in the doorway of a Renaissance cathedral. This was strikingly echoed in the way Vawter at ground level stood looking up at the video monitor's freeze-frames of similarly naked torsos. The mixture of sacred and profane in Dali's painting thus reappears, but with the television monitor as the contemporary equivalent of the cathedral.

At a narrative level, video apparently has a simple theatrical function, to show the visions that distract St Antony from 'concentrating on holy things'. It recalls Robert Edmond Jones' vision of film showing characters' thoughts, dreams, and fantasies. But the style of presentation has further implications and effects. There is a suggestive parallel with the 19th-century touring versions of the story. Just as they exploited the surface moralism of the overall tale as an excuse for playing out scenes of lust and excess, so the conversations on the chat shows are only a pretext for their real interest – the titillating exposure of the naked participants. Furthermore, where Flaubert's text embraces a rich range of temptations, spiritual, carnal and fantastical, the reduction of these to the soft-porn of late-night television suggests a poverty of both spiritual and erotic imagination in a world saturated with quasi-potnographic imagery. We are presented with a rather pathetic version of 'temptation-lite', more ridiculous than erotic. For all the supposed seductiveness of the naked flesh on display, the close-up televisual framing eventually reduces the bodies to mere objects, stripped of humanity and eroticism.

The underlying melancholia is evoked forcefully in Ken Kobland's *Flaubert Dreams of Travel*, sections of which play later in the production. The film shows Vawter, sometimes wearing a moustache and goatee beard (modelled on Georges Méliès), sometimes with a turban, moving in desultory fashion about a desolate motel room. Other cast-members appear in various states of disguise and undress. Hand-held camera shots, colourisation, distorted angles and close-ups lend a surreal air. At times Vawter stares at a naked body splayed out on the floor, tracking its contours with a cane: the layout recalls how Lenny Bruce's naked body was found after his morphine overdose. The body has the ghastly tonalities of the British painter Stanley Spencer's studies of naked bodies, bodies reduced to cadavers. The

film's atmosphere suggests a post-orgiastic torpor, a sense of decadence turned sour.

The further major use of video is for three phone-calls between Dafoe's Cubby and Vawter. Cubby reports that he has gone to Hollywood to act in a movie about Christ – echoing Dafoe's real-life absence, performing in Scorsese's controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Coming between the various temptations, and conveying Cubby's excitement at being out in Hollywood, the calls operate at two levels: they suggest another potential aspiration or temptation for Frank / St Antony and they reflect how Dafoe's developing film career was affecting the company's work.

The final call, however, assumes more complex resonances. Having endured his dark night of the soul, Vawter / Frank summons up the energy to begin playing St Antony once more. While, above him, Onna calls on Frank to hurry, because they have to get out of the room/theatre, he repeatedly addresses the absent Ammonaria, asking, 'What are you afraid of? A big black hole?' Hearing no answer, he asserts, 'there is happiness, happiness to be found. Birds, birds in the air. OK, you can join them ... [my ellipsis] and uh ... fly into the winds' (The Wooster Group, 1996, 313). He soon qualifies this, 'Don't, don't feel that you have to fly always. You can walk. Walk on.' As Vawter prepares to leave, Cubby phones, and simultaneously Onna receives a phone call summoning the group to the King of Sweden's palace. Cubby holds up to the camera a picture – of Dafoe as Christ. The St Antony story coalesces here once more with that of the performing troupe. In Flaubert's text St Antony finally sees a redemptive vision of Christ's face in the sun as it rises. In Bergman's film the travelling troupe is saved by a last-minute summons from the King, and as they head off the sun shines down on them, an image echoed here by a bright light coming up on Valk and Anna Kohler dressed for travel. But this being The Wooster Group, the ending is not as simple as this neat coalescence might suggest. Vawter ignores Onna's calls and seems not to hear Cubby, who desperately tries to attract his attention, whistling and repeatedly calling him. Without looking at the image of Christ, Vawter switches the monitor off, puts on an overcoat and walks off, leaving Sue calling out to an empty theatre, 'Frank?' As if the portrayal of Flaubert's Christ by a videotaped photograph of a movie star playing Christ, a multiply deferred signifier, had not been ironic enough, Vawter's ignoring of the image, and of Onna, serves to underline even further the sceptical handling of the *deus ex machina* endings of both source texts.

Brace Up!

After such complexities, the next production, *Brace Up!* (1990), seems like a relatively direct response to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, with more of the core text being delivered than in previous shows. This was a fresh, colloquial American translation by Paul Schmidt, a noted scholar of Russian theatre, who also performed as Chebutykin. A framing device was provided by the group's researches in Pacific Island dances and Japanese theatre and film. Paralleling *Saint Antony's* use of Bergman's travelling troupe, the group studied a documentary about a Japanese Geinin troupe and developed the idea that Chekhov's play was being presented by such an itinerant group in New York. This influenced costume and set design and certain aspects of the gestural and movement style.¹¹ Excerpts from Japanese films also occasionally accompanied the stage action. A major development was the use of live relay to capture and frame live action on monitors.

Live relay played a significant part in the way, from the start, the production declared its intention to clear away the dead wood of a tradition of handling Chekhov in a reverential, naturalistic fashion. The play begins with a typical Chekhovian exposition scene, with the eldest sister Olga effectively delivering a monologue (punctuated briefly by 'feeds' from others), in which Chekhov introduces the members of the Prozorov household, their past, their removal from Moscow, and so on. Such expositions often seem heavy-handed to contemporary audiences. LeCompte wittily sidesteps any awkwardness by openly acknowledging the expository function. While the audience enters the auditorium, performers move about the platform set, adjusting props and chatting to each other quietly, before taking up positions about the set and on a long bench behind it. Performers' faces appear on two monitors located on parallel floor-tracks – on which they move to and fro throughout the performance. Kate Valk, microphone in hand, gets the show underway, reading Chekhov's stage directions to set the scene. In chat show style, she interviews Peyton Smith's Olga, asking her about the family, the weather and such like. Smith, who is seated to the rear, is videoed as she responds, and her image relayed live to the monitors. Such remediation makes the sequence more palatable for a contemporary audience and draws attention to its expository function.

This defamiliarisation process carries on as the scene proceeds. When Chekhov indicates a clock striking twelve, Valk's request for a sound effect is answered by loud bonging; when Chekhov indicates that Masha whistles under her breath, Valk says the actress playing

Masha hasn't arrived yet – so she whistles briefly. She subsequently introduces the performers, including Beatrice Roth and Joan Jonas: Roth, in her 70s, plays the 21-year-old Itina, and Jonas, in her 50s, plays the middle sister Masha. Valk also introduces two 'video performers', informing us that, 'Since the actor playing Soliony cannot be here tonight, every time he has to speak, we'll turn the TV loud'; creating an amplified static noise, this does have a certain appropriateness for the argumentative Soliony.¹² She announces that since the woman playing the servant Anfisa is too old to travel, she will appear on video. Anfisa's words were spoken by Josephine Buscemi, the 95 year-old great-grandmother of actor Steve Buscemi, whose wife videotaped her at home, while Buscemi fed her the cues. The overall effect of these first ten minutes is to establish that *The Wooster Group* is presenting its encounter with a text in the 1990s, rather than attempting to create a naturalistic portrait of the Prozorov household in the 1890s. This is underscored by the way cabling for microphones and monitors, extra floor lights, and people wielding cameras, all lent the setting the atmosphere of a television studio, with Valk sometimes resembling a Floor Manager coordinating the production.

Subsequent use of live feed recalls some of Svoboda's rhetorical effects: it is employed for close-ups and to multiply points of focus in a scene, as well as producing style-shifts through jumping from one medium to the other. For example, when Anna Kohler's socially inept and fashion-challenged Natalya first appears, she remains in the background, while her image is shown on video; when Olga remarks cattily on her green belt, the screens fill with a close-up of the offending belt. When Chekhov has Natalya rush from the dinner (here replaced by a comic stick-dance), tears are shown welling up in Kohler's eyes. When Dafoe's Andrei declares his love, it is played out on video, with Kohler sitting with her back to the audience, while Dafoe sits at the bench behind the set. Turning the scene into a soap opera proposal scene filmed in two-shot heightens its sentimentality, just as the sound of it on video underscores its intimacy. Simultaneously it ironises it in a gently comic way.

Further distancing is achieved through having Schmidt, doubling as both translator and Chebutykin, sit for much of the production in an upstage corner watching a monitor – with a camera, in turn, trained on him. Valk occasionally asks for comments. For example, introducing Act Two, Valk, rather like fast-forwarding a video, suggests that they skip the early expository part and asks Schmidt to summarise it – which he does, on video. Later, when Vershinin, Tusenbach and Masha are philosophising about life, Valk suggests

fast-forwarding once again, but Schmidt interrupts, 'No, Kate, let Masha say the lines; it is a beautiful speech.' Jonas chimes in:

I remember, Paul, she says, 'I think a person has to believe in something, or has to look for something to believe in, otherwise his life is empty, empty ... Just to live, and not to know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky ... Either you know the reason why you are alive, or nothing makes any difference.' That it?

As Arratia observes, this 'dramatizes the multiplicity of choices involved in selecting and editing the text' (1992, 130). It also foregrounds these lines and contributes to an ongoing, witty marking of Schmidt's role in the production. His continuing appearance on one of the monitors observing the action produces the effect of seeing the author/translator watching over the production.

LeCompte describes the video usage as evolving in a way that may seem haphazard:

I had originally thought that the three sisters would not be on video, and almost everyone else would. Then that broke down. I like Peyton on video, she has a wonderful, soap opera performance quality. But basically it was who was near the video cameras, and who wanted to be onstage, and who was going in and out a lot. (Mee, 1992, 146)

She also describes the scenes as being structured like autonomous 'islands' between which Valk provided bridging commentary, allowing some to be omitted if necessary:

We may have people coming and going because of the money situation. So I developed from the beginning the idea that anyone could come and go without disturbing the piece ... Willem went in the middle of *St. Antony*, and I substituted him on video, but it wasn't an easy process (Arratia, 1992, 128)

LeCompte's presentational approach and readiness to mix videotaped and live performances facilitates such pragmatic responses to the company's circumstances. Nevertheless, as *Brace Up!* evolved, certain patterns and effects emerged. LeCompte saw the space as divided into different zones of performance:

The back area becomes the area of 'most private performance.' Performers in the middle section put their dark glasses on and 'think pure dance.' ... the front section is the place for a 'declamatory style, speaking to the whole room' (ibid., 129)

The 'most private performances' were mostly those relayed on video, while Vershinin and others often delivered their philosophical musings into a microphone in the front zone, underlining their grandstanding, and contrasting with the soap opera intimacy of encounters in the back area.

As well as live relay and pre-recorded performances, public domain film appears periodically, sometimes illustrating events in a way that is both literalising and amusingly at odds with the supposed setting of the Chekhov text. For example, when the fire rages through the town, Chekhov's stage directions state, 'A window, red with the glow of fire, can be seen through the open door. The sound of a passing fire engine is heard.' For this LeCompte substituted video of a fire sequence from *The Harvey Girls*, a 1946 musical featuring Judy Garland.¹³ Also, underlining the fact that most of the male characters are army officers who are eventually mobilised and despatched to a garrison in Poland, scenes from samurai movies occasionally appear, along with Kenneth Branagh's film of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In the October 1990 version the latter played against the departure scenes of Act Four. While the incongruity of seeing Branagh rallying troops for battle was comic, it also provided a provocative parallel to the mobilisation: these men whom Chekhov portrays as idling about purposelessly in a sleepy provincial town are suddenly shipping off to a potentially dangerous posting.

The overall design, the use of video, microphones and other sound technology, the destruction of the fourth wall, the fluctuating performance styles and the almost Brechtian episodic presentation (emphasised by Valk and Schmidt's functions) all combined to overturn most of the conventions usually associated with Chekhovian production. Nevertheless, *Brace Up!* managed to shine a sharp light on Chekhov's text and evoke something of the ironic comedy found in the most satisfying Chekhov productions, 'opening up the full subtlety, pathos and irony of Chekhov's drama, analysing its elements, demonstrating how these can still work through and alongside the barrage of fragmented images that makes up modern cultural experience' (J. McMillan, *Guardian*, 4 November, 1992).

House/Lights

From the point of view of video usage, the 1993 productions *Fish Story* (a further reworking of *Three Sisters*) and Eugene O'Neill's *The*

Emperor Jones largely marked a consolidation in the company's approach. Play between live relay and pre-recorded material and the use of hybridised live and mediated figures were taken further, in ways that *House/Lights* (1998) would more fully exploit; there was also some exploration of special effects editing and video was employed for setting purposes in *Emperor Jones*, although in an ironic manner very different from earlier practitioners' scenographic use of film. LeCompte abolished the naturalistic clutter that O'Neill's detailed stage directions call for, in favour of an almost empty playing space – except for a television monitor, which in the first half showed a plantation house, and in the second half a jungle. A fake palm tree stood alongside. The effect was to mark wittily the production's refusal to fulfil expectations of the sort of full-blown naturalistic set associated with Broadway productions of O'Neill.

In *House/Lights* LeCompte returned to a more complex interplay between live and mediated, mixing publicly released film with pre-recorded and live relay material, and playing with CG effects and cyborgian interfaces between live and mediated performers. The centrality of video, both pre-recorded and live, was emphasised by placing two monitors centre stage: while one was raised and upstage, the other sat waist-high downstage and performers continually delivered lines or performed actions behind it, often creating a hybrid live/video image. Paradoxically for a production in which Faust's disillusionment with technology was thematically significant, *House/Lights* was one of the company's most technologically complex shows.

Central to the production was the recreation of a film on stage. As discussed in the Introduction, early cinema frequently adapted theatre texts for the screen; subsequently, as cinema became the dominant medium, popular films were adapted for the stage. One of Mark Lawson's complaints, apart from the presence of video in the theatre, was that London's West End increasingly relied on such adaptations; in 2006, for example, productions such as *The Thirty Nine Steps*, *The Producers*, and *Billy Elliot* all originated in successful films. Given LeCompte's work with various film or television sources in earlier productions, it was a logical progression to adapt a film to the stage, but this was very different from the examples cited. For one thing, she showed excerpts of the film simultaneously with the action, showing the actors mimicking the film's action; and the film itself was Joseph Mawra's little-known sexploitation thriller *Olga's House of Shame* (1964), which was set off against a rarely performed avant-garde opera libretto, Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938).

Having encountered the film while developing another project, LeCompte decided to transpose its action to the stage:

We had the performers watching the *Olga* film on TV and mimicking exactly what they saw gesturally and translating the logic of the camera – close-up, medium shot, long shot – into the theatrical space. It was making for a very quirky physical vocabulary (Rosten, 1998, 17)

Only subsequently did she decide to play Stein's text against it. These materials were supplemented by several other sources, including films by Mel Brooks and the Marx Brothers, Hollywood musicals, an episode of *I Love Lucy*, and music by Hans Peter Kuhn.

Olga's House of Shame follows the fortunes of Elaine, a jewel-smuggler for a sadistic crime boss, Olga. Having betrayed Olga and attempted to escape through a forest, Elaine is captured and tortured by Olga's sinister brother Nick, until she agrees to become Elaine's lieutenant. Olga engages in some lesbian 'party games' and then enlists Elaine's help in treating another girl to some 'horse discipline'. By the end Olga, like God creating man, has 'created Elaine in her own image and likeness. Now there were two of them. Two vicious minds working as one' (The Wooster Group, 2000, 56). Shot in black and white, the film has a low-budget look, with settings alternating between the forest and a minimally furnished backwoods cabin. Much of the narrative is conveyed through a male voice-over delivered in the style of a documentary crime-series. Action is more suggestive than explicit – there's little flesh on display, and violence is more implied than shown.

Stein's adaptation of the Faustus tale is full of her characteristic repetition and rhythmic riddling language. Faustus sells his soul in order to discover the electric light. Disappointed with a world always filled with light, he rebels against Mephisto and claims he had no soul to sell. Margaret, whom Faustus seduces in Goethe's version, is transformed into a character called Margarete Ida and Helena Annabel (hereafter MIHA), whose very name marks her thoroughly confused identity. She first appears lost in a wood; bitten by a viper (with all its sexual and biblical connotations), she seeks a cure from Faustus. Saved from death (simultaneously acquiring Faust's knowledge), she sits wearing a halo, a cross between a Madonna and a movie star, surrounded by candles and a chorus that sings and dances attendance. Falling for a 'man from over the seas', she spurns Faustus when he seeks to take her to Hell with him. Faustus, who has been accompanied much of the time by a

boy and a dog that repeatedly says 'Thank you', shoots them both on Mephisto's orders and descends to Hell.

Stein's frequently comic gloss on the tale supplements the usual themes of knowledge, power and identity that circulate around Faustus with a further theme to do with the effects of fame. Stein wrote the libretto after a trip to the US in 1934 had turned her into a celebrity, culminating in having her name in lights on Broadway. Unsettled by her public notoriety, she began writing *Ida*, a story in which she attempted 'a study of the effects of publicity on a personality' (Neuman, 1988, 171). Its plot, of a girl with a dog who is lost in a wood and bitten by a viper, anticipates the opera libretto, which she commenced after putting *Ida* aside, unfinished. Although Faustus' disillusionment with electric light, which erases the difference between night and day, may be read as a metaphor for disillusionment with modern technology and the broader Enlightenment project associated with it, Stein also employs electric light as a metaphor for fame and celebrity, embodied in two 'ballets of lights' mounted for Faustus and MIHA: rather than clarifying their identities, light is seen as confusing them.

Recalling *Route 1 & 9*, the production essentially layered the two core sources against each other, although the interweaving was more complex. While *Olga's House of Shame* appeared on monitors, an edited version of Stein's text was intercut with text from the film. Most of this was delivered by Valk through a downstage microphone. Much of the stage action mimicked the film's action. Doubling the playing of roles pointed up provocative parallels between the narratives and central characters of the two very different sources. As well as delivering most of the text, Valk also played Faustus and Elaine – both seekers of power and rebels who try to escape their 'bosses'. She also played MIHA, whose wanderings were relayed on video in a way that echoed Elaine's flight through the woods. Suzzy Roche, wearing trashy plastic devil horns, doubled as Mephisto and the sadistic Olga, reflecting the narrator's comment that 'To incur Olga's wrath is to invite the Devil from Hell.'

Seamless transitions between scenes heightened the sense of parallels. For example, towards the end of Act One, Scene One, Olga strikes a devil's bargain with the captured Elaine, just as Faustus attempts to renege on his bargain with Mephisto, with attendant ironies in the conflation of the two narratives:

Olga: Well after what you've gone through here do you think you're willing to talk business with me?

- (Faust). Oh you devil go to hell, that is all you know to tell, and who is interested in hell just a devil is interested in hell
- Elaine. I think so.
- (Faust) Whether I stamp or whether I cry whether I live or whether I die, I can know that all a devil can say is just about going to hell the same way.
- Olga Well . . . I think now's the time I'm in a position to offer you some nice work with some nice dividends
- (Faust) Get out of here devil, it does not interest me whether (you can buy or I can sell);
- Elaine Oh, I'm always interested in nice . . . dividends.

(The Wooster Group, 2000, 23)

Here the interwoven sequences produce divergent responses. Subsequently, in Act Three, Elaine, having rejoined Olga, is described as enjoying her new power of life and death and being 'like a god here' – just like Faust, who also holds the power of life and death over MIHA, the boy and the dog. Olga persuades Elaine to join her in disciplining Nadja; while the video shows Olga using a whip and reins to walk Nadja about like a 'filly', Roche and Tanya Selvaratnam play out the scene live. Simultaneously, Valk, as Faustus, shoots the boy and dog, before taking over the reins to train Nadja, just as Elaine does on video.

The interweaving of seemingly disparate texts and actions and the abstracted mimicry of the film action was all made more coherent by Jim Findlay's set which exemplified superbly the company's Meyerholdian approach to sets as 'theatre machines'. Attached to a metal railing at the front were a microphone, a video monitor, stools, and a pair of small tables (one of them supporting a laptop computer at which Selvaratnam sat orchestrating a series of noises that punctuated the text's delivery). Behind it were two seesaws, each with a sliding table attached. Further back were two tall frames carrying monitors which could slide up and down. Four large light bulbs swung periodically above the heads of the performers.

Valk's delivery, which she described as 'channelling', derived from listening through a wireless receiver to the composer Kuhn reading the text and then repeating it, a device that helped avoid any temptation to produce a psychological interpretation. This was further estranged by computer manipulation of her voice, frequently producing a strangled high-pitched sound. The mimed action assumed a cartoon-like appearance, as performers heightened and abstracted the melodramatic action of the film, often to hilarious effect. For example, while the monitors show Elaine being pursued through the woods, Valk and the others run to and fro across the stage, up and down the seesaw

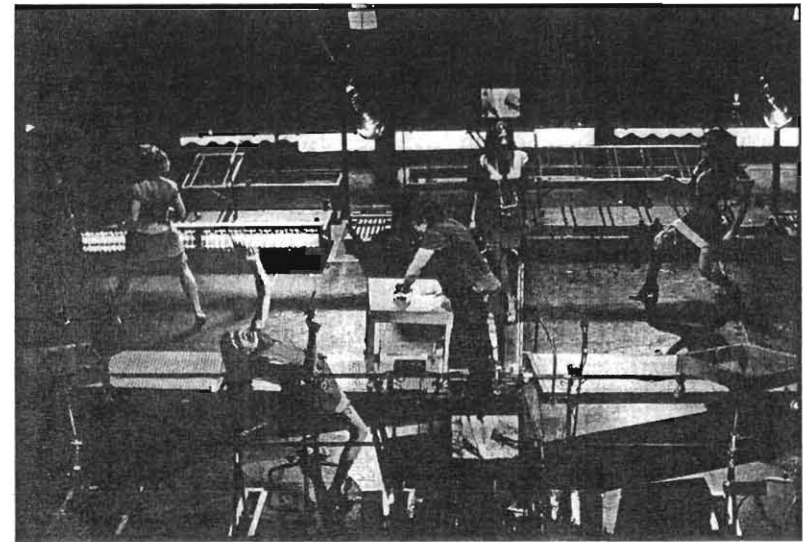


Figure 9 *House/Lights Pictured* (l-r): Sheena See, Helen Eve Pickett, Kate Valk, Roy Faudree, Tanya Selvaratnam, Süzzy Roche. Photo: © Paula Court

ramps in a precisely choreographed cartoon chase. At times live action and video intersect. Soon after Elaine's capture, for example, when Nick asks if she enjoyed her swim, the video shows a shot of the lower part of a seated man wielding a pair of pliers menacingly. Onstage, Roy Faudree moves behind the monitor, his upper body completing the picture; further hack, Valk stands with her bound hands raised in the air, an image then echoed on the video monitor. Conventional distinctions between live and videotaped performers become confounded and a sort of cyborgian representation occurs. Along with the contribution of technology to the creation of Valk's various characters, a Frankensteinian dynamic pervades the production.

In the sequence following Elaine's torture, while Valk delivers MIHA's lament over being lost in the woods, the video superimposes Valk's head on a tracking shot through the woods, giving the effect of her head floating through them. When the film voice-over interrupts to describe 'a very special party', the video shows a woman doing a belly dance. Valk begins to belly dance, with her image superimposed over the *Olga* material. Two men then tip her upside down and Roche enters and sticks her head between her legs – all relayed live on the

upstage monitor. While Olga's narration describes the girls as 'ready to go the limit', Roche moves over to fondle Selvaratnam, with a close-up being superimposed on the film. Meanwhile, as Stein's text describes MIHA being lost in the wood, an overtly fake tree is brought on. Live relay of Valk shot through the tree is then intercut with the Olga/Elaine material. The whole sequence, only a few minutes long, becomes a dazzling display of video editing crossed with live performance and live relay, conflating in an ironic fashion the erotics of MIHA's wander in the woods (and her viper bite) and the scenes in Olga's house of shame.

In addition to facilitating the merging of identities and narratives, video frequently expands the resonances of particular moments, usually through shadowing the Stein text with scenes from popular film or television. When MIHA visits Faustus, for example, the upstage monitors show a sequence from Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* in which the monster is brought to life. Foreshadowing Faustus' saving of MIHA's life, this also evokes the alchemical tradition that links the Faustus and Frankenstein myths and the way their treatment in literature and film embodies a continuing suspicion of the role of science and scientists.¹⁴ Soon after, when Stein calls for MIHA to be depicted with a halo of lights, the videos display Valk's head superimposed on a floating circular chorus from a Busby Berkeley water ballet. Later, when MIHA, confused at the sight of Mephisto behind the man from over the seas, whispers, 'They two I two they two that makes six it should be seven they two I two they two five is heaven,' Valk's head is accordingly multiplied on video, followed soon after by the halo of swimmers again.

The production's overall approach is embodied in the literalising response to Stein's number play here, as Valk's multiplied head is echoed by the multiplied female bodies of this aquatic halo. Where Stein's adaptation of the myth multiplies and splits the personalities of MIHA, Faustus and Mephisto, LeCompte uses technology and her supplementary sources to multiply everyone even further. The crossing of Stein's figures with figures from film, the play with hybrid images of performers, the doubling of onstage action with live relay, and Valk's channelling of the text, all operate as figures of the divided selves of Stein's play and undermine any possibility of employing conventional notions of a unified self as a way of approaching it. Foregrounding the literary and filmic construction of the characters and obviating any potential spectatorial desire for a naturalistic portrayal, they provide a dazzling theatrical response to Stein's anti-psychological mode of



Figure 10 *House/Lights Pictured* (l-r): Suzzy Roche, Kate Valk (upside down), Ari Fliakos. Photo: © Mary Gearhart

writing. Equally, the abstracted, condensed mimicry of Mawra's film estranges its narrative and performing conventions, echoing the way Stein's treatment of the Faust myth functions to defamiliarise conventional Faustian productions.

This approach also, of course, contributes considerably to the theatrical energy of the production. The technical ingenuity and the sheer bravura with which the performers play out the intersections between the various materials produce a theatre of attractions writ large: watching it, one could sense the audience around thrilling to the roller-coaster ride of the performance. The pyrotechnics of the performances and production match Stein's linguistic pyrotechnics, with the rhythmic choreography of the production answering the rhythmic play of Stein's text. The resulting focus on the signifier rather than the signified echoes the spirit of Stein, a writer more concerned with the processes of representation than the object of representation, and for whom the shape and rhythm of a sentence was always paramount.

To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)

Jean Racine wrote his adaptation of Euripides' drama about Phaedra's love for her stepson Hippolytus in 1677, just before quitting the theatre and becoming Louis XIV's royal historiographer. It signalled his reversion to Jansenism, an extremely puritanical version of Catholicism – a turn that coincided with a growing sobriety at Louis' court. Arguing that dramatists should be 'as keen to edify their spectators as to amuse them, thereby complying with the real purpose of tragedy', Racine defended his portrayal of Phaedra's illicit passion:

The slightest transgressions are severely punished. The very thought of crime is regarded with as much horror as crime itself. . . The passions are portrayed merely in order to show the aberrations to which they give rise (Racine, 1963, 147)

When LeCompte received Paul Schmidt's translation in 1993, she felt the play was too Catholic, 'tedious, boring and stupid'. Six years later, after Schmidt's death, she was persuaded to direct it by Valk, 'who wanted to play the queen, and because it was her I trusted that there was something there' (Gardner, 2002). The resulting production contained few of the collagist elements usually found in Wooster Group productions. There were no parallel texts layered against Racine's text, which was delivered fairly faithfully (bar a few cuts and minor

additions); there were no extracts from public domain media or extra-dramatic footage of Wooster Group members. Indeed, framing devices were relatively sparse. The production's title derives from the French term for a shuttlecock, *oiseau* or 'bird', reflecting the fact that the royal court effectively became a badminton court. All the characters played badminton at some point – with the goddess Venus as referee. Phaedra's near-death state as a result of her guilty passion was graphically represented by having her tended by servants administering drips and enemas. Inverting the situation in *House/Lights*, most of Valk's lines (and Dafoe's as Theseus) were spoken by another performer, Scott Shepherd (who also played Theramenes). The overall effect was seen by some critics as a terrible undermining of what is generally seen as one of the great tragedies in the Western canon, with Charles Isherwood asserting, 'The triumph of Racine's "Phèdre" was its ability to evoke compassion for a monstrous woman; The Wooster Group reverses the equation, and makes us feel practically nothing for her. . . Game, set, match to the postmodernists!' (*Variety*, 25 February, 2002).

The set resembled a modified version of the *Brace Up!* set – a metal frame enclosing the playing space and a low bench behind it. Replacing the television monitors found in most Wooster Group productions, upstage and downstage centre were two 'video totems' – metal structures which allowed a large plasma screen on each to rise and fall. Additionally, a large Plexiglass screen moved laterally to and fro. Perhaps a nod in the direction of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the effect was to continually reconfigure the playing space, to create more or less intimate areas, appropriate enough for a court full of intrigues and people looking over their shoulders.

Video appears from the start. The performance opens with Hippolytus and Theramenes, semi-naked apart from short kilts, sitting behind the downstage screen, which obscures their lower bodies. Where Euripides and Racine portray Hippolytus' hyper-masculinity and misogyny through his devotion to hunting, LeCompte shows him as a sports jock: the discussion of Theseus' long absence and Phaedra's apparent hostility towards Hippolytus becomes a locker-room chat. The video plays comically with their masculinity. With a sound-track of intermittent laughter, cheering and bird-calls, the (pre-recorded) video appears to show the obscured action of the lower half of the men's bodies (in a hybrid image of the sort seen previously in *House/Lights*). They cross and re-cross legs, scratch buttocks and fiddle with genitals. Comically capturing a common male bodily behaviour, the activity also evokes the latent homo-eroticism of the locker-room.¹⁵

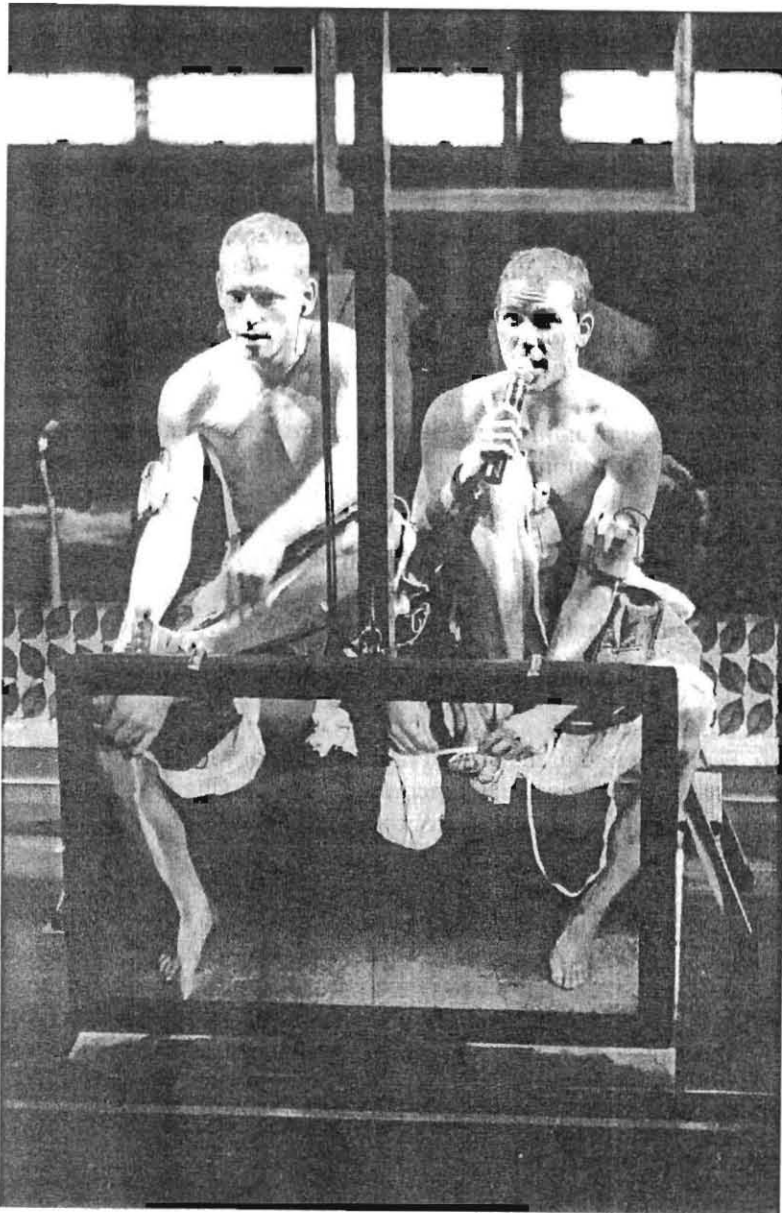


Figure 11 *To You, the Birdiel (Phèdre)* Pictured (l-r): Scott Shepherd, Ari Fliakos. Photo: © Mary Gearhart

The scene also initiates the frequent use of video to isolate and draw attention to parts of the performers' bodies and to play with notions of revealing the hidden. Framing the images on plasma screens and playing with their colouring often also lends a painterly feel to their use. Valk's first appearance illustrates this. Wheeled in by a maid, she barely staggers to her feet before her servant Enone knocks her over with a shuttlecock. Helped to a seat behind the (lowered) downstage screen, her legs are substituted by videotaped legs. While the maid washes her feet (again mixing live and video image), Phaedra complains that her shoes are not suitable for playing badminton. Others are brought and placed on her feet – also shown on video. Her grand address to the Sun is punctuated by her calling again for her seat: the wheelchair, which has a toilet attached to it, is brought over, with another change of shoes. The video doubling of the maid's servile ministrations underlines a view of Phaedra as a pampered, neurasthenic aristocrat, an impression borne out by the fact that Phaedra does not even speak her own words – Shepherd delivers them into a microphone behind the platform. The disjunctive voicing of her lines and the video dislocations of her body also operate as figures of her being torn apart, being *disintegrated*, by her passion for Hippolytus. This is reinforced soon afterwards. Valk stands behind the screen, her head hidden, while the video shows an enlarged image of her face trapped behind a barred window. Even as she moves away, the image of her face, mouth agape, remains briefly. A hitherto broadly satiric device for isolating and doubling parts of the characters' bodies becomes at this point an Expressionist, painterly device for amplifying a subjective feeling that is beyond words.

The grotesque imagery around Phaedra's enemas is similarly ambiguous. Just before revealing her passion for Hippolytus, her maids help Phaedra to squat and defecate. When she subsequently encounters Hippolytus semi-naked by a swimming pool, she declares her love, grabbing at him and rolling to the floor, in a scene that tips Racinian decorum on its head. Her desperation becomes increasingly grotesque, as maids wrestle her into a chair and administer an enema, while she grabs at Hippolytus' naked buttock. As she pursues the retreating Hippolytus the enema tube trailing behind is reproduced on the video screen. Towards the end of the play, wracked by guilt, she undergoes another enema. Having poisoned herself, she confesses to Theseus and collapses. Her death is portrayed in another hybrid moment, with her upper body revealed, while her lower body, enema tube trailing behind, is again shown on the downstage video screen.

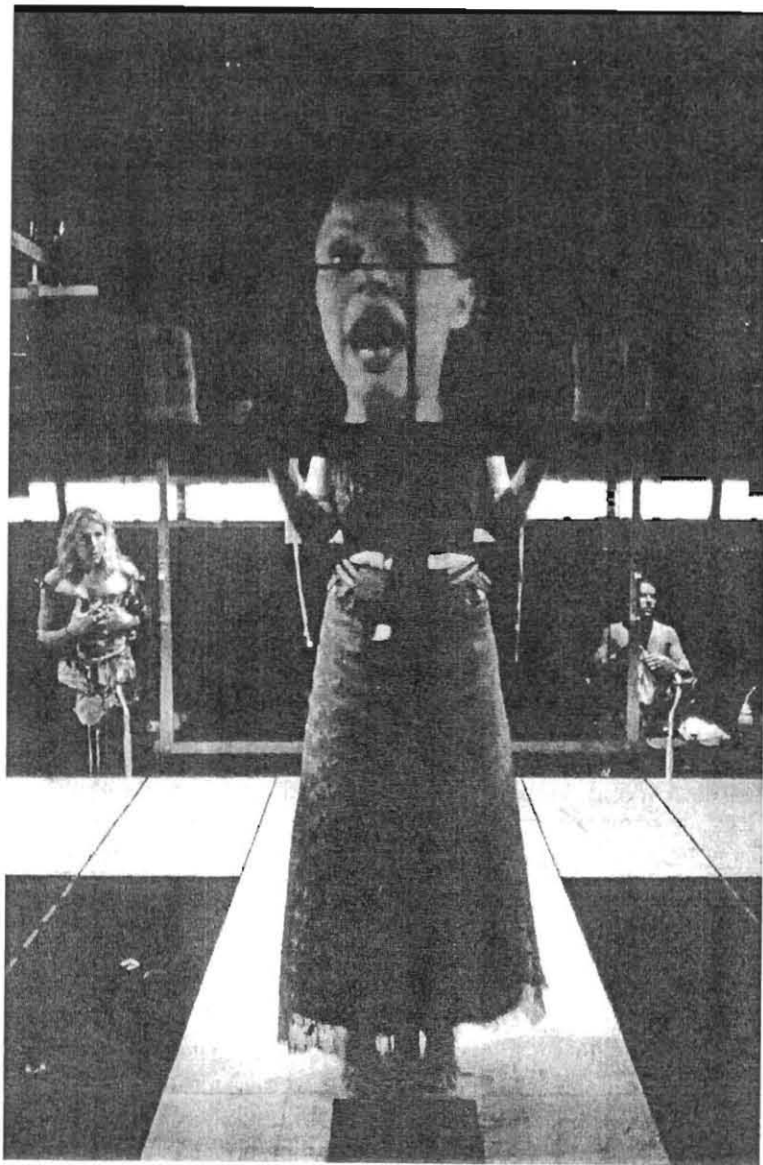


Figure 12 *To You, the Birdie!* (*Phèdre*) Pictured (l-r): Frances McDormand, Kare Valk, Ari Fliakos. Photo: © Paula Court

Almost inevitably, in performance, such business appears initially as a satiric device. However, as the performance continues, it becomes a disturbing literal playing out of the effects of Phaedra's passion, particularly as Schmidt's translation handles it. Immediately after her first enema, Phaedra describes her passion for Hippolytus in terms of disease: 'I sweat and shivered both at once ... I had Venus like a virus in my blood.' Here Schmidt changes Racine's original metaphor of Venus making Phaedra her prey into one of infecting her with a virus. Any present-day audience is likely to sense the shadow of HIV behind the language here; the sort of integral audience that forms a large part of The Wooster Group's audience and is aware of the history of its members, could hardly avoid thinking of the deaths of Ron Vawter and Schmidt himself from AIDS-related illnesses.¹⁶ The enemas, then, become a powerfully loaded medical image of the effects of passion. Moreover, they also seem to reflect literally the notion of tragic *catharsis*. Aristotle's famous term derives from Greek medical practice, in which illness was treated with emetics and enemas as a way of purging the body of infection. When Phaedra undergoes her final enema, accompanied by screaming that seems to mix agony and ecstasy, it has the appearance of a final literal attempt at *catharsis* before committing suicide.

The videos also play a major part in reconfiguring Venus' involvement in the play. Immediately after the opening dialogue, the raised upstage plasma screen reveals an image of Venus: Suzy Roche, with red hair frizzed up, filmed against a blue sky with wispy clouds floating by. Again, there is disjunction at work, since Venus' lines are spoken from behind the stage by a live performer, Fiona Leaming.¹⁷ She announces that she is the referee, tells how she made Phaedra fall for Hippolytus and declares that 'this is the last day he will look upon the light'. Here the text draws on Aphrodite's vindictive prologue in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Although Racine's characters blame Venus for their plight, neoclassical decorum inhibited him from having the goddess appear. In *The Hidden God*, Lucien Goldmann defines Racinian tragedy 'as a spectacle under the permanent observation of a deity', observing that, 'though he is *always present*, this God remains a *hidden god*, a god who is always absent' and 'never shows the hero which path he should follow in order to realize an authentic existence' (1964, 7). Reverting to Euripides, The Wooster Group makes present the 'hidden god(dess)' of Racine, but in a bifurcated way: while the live Venus calls faults and awards points in a game which Phaedra is too feeble to play, the virtually present Video Venus impassively observes all.

Again, initially comic imagery becomes increasingly sinister. So, the first badminton match, under Video Venus' watchful eye and refereed by the live Venus, is fast and furious and accompanied by a series of buzzes, tweets, and whistles – a cartoonish arcade game soundtrack. Such games function throughout as an image of the players' capacities for waging the personal and political struggles at court. The boys' energetic playing displays a sort of narcissistic vitality, whereas the enfeebled Phaedra can barely lift her racquet and hits the weakest of shots. Later, Theseus fires shot after shot against Hippolytus, figuratively destroying him before his prayer to Neptune actually brings about his death.

Video Venus' recurring appearances become increasingly ominous. When Phaedra discusses her first encounter with Hippolytus, Video Venus pops up on cue. As Phaedra describes having Hippolytus banished, Venus' head drops comically off screen, only to reappear almost immediately when Phaedra reports the consequences of being reunited with him during Theseus' absence – 'it's Venus clawing at my heart, drinking my lifeblood'. She later witnesses Phaedra's desperate appeal to Hippolytus. After sending Enone to offer Hippolytus the Athenian crown, Phaedra pleads with Video Venus: 'Avenge yourself on him, not me! Make him love me!' When Enone reports Theseus' imminent return, Video Venus watches her persuade Phaedra to accuse Hippolytus of attempted rape. After Theseus banishes Hippolytus, Phaedra momentarily repents, but her intended confession is forestalled by Theseus' revelation that Hippolytus had admitted his love for Aricia. Sure enough, Video Venus surfaces to watch Phaedra's convulsion of grief at this news. Finally, Phaedra's death takes place under the eye of the absent yet present goddess whose virus has brought such destruction.

The scenes with Theseus before Phaedra's death further illustrate how video provides ironic visual commentary. Theseus' entrance is heralded by comically thunderous crashing noises, accompanied by video images of a classic male torso set against a green background. Dafoe appears, a strutting, puffed-up cockerel wearing only a short white tunic, made more ridiculous by the weedy nasal voice Shepherd adopts to deliver his lines. When Phaedra exits, Theseus lies down to be massaged by two maids. After his first encounter with Hippolytus, the maids carry him down and line him up with the lowered downstage video screen – so that his head is hidden and replaced by an enlarged video image. The resulting image recalls Hans Holbein's 1521 painting of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, while the

maids' action of washing his arms and feet resembles a corpse being laid out for burial. While the hybrid image continues devices from earlier in the production, the referencing of the Holbein burial adds a tremendous visual power to the image, setting in play many resonances. Although Theseus lives at the end of Racine's play, the image foreshadows both the laying out of Hippolytus' corpse and a sort of death-in-life for Theseus that will come from Enone's allegations. The image also, of course, recalls Dafoe's film portrayal of Christ.

After calling on Neptune to drown Hippolytus, Theseus jumps up and begins striking macho poses – while both screens display shots of male torsos again. After Phaedra decides not to confess, thus sealing Hippolytus' fate, the background to the torsos becomes red. As she grieves over Hippolytus' love for Aricia, not only is she watched over by Video Venus, but also the downstage screen switches to an image of a closed purple theatrical curtain, a metatheatrical reference to both the impending end of the play and the mounting melodrama of the situation.

As with other Wooster Group productions, closer examination reveals a very precise structure behind what may initially seem to be a

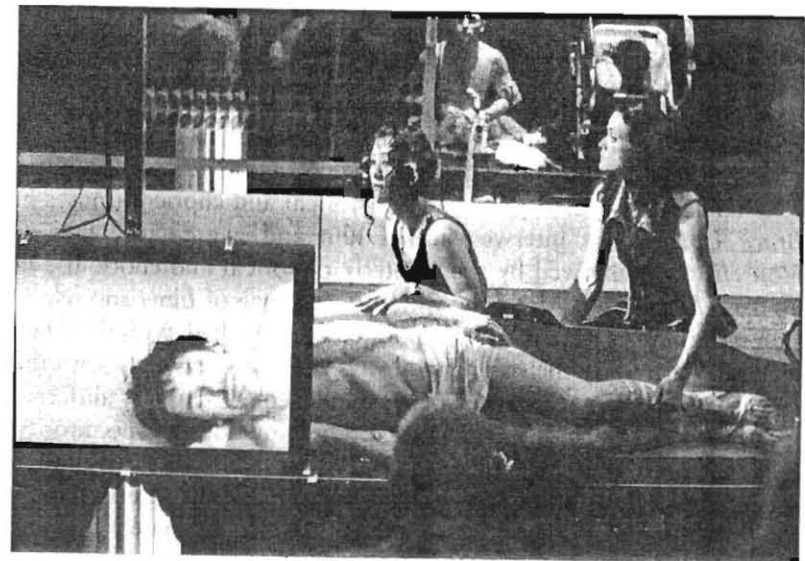


Figure 13 *To You, the Birdie!* (*Phèdre*) Pictured (l-r): Willem Dafoe, Koosilja Hwang, Ari Fliakos, Dominique Bousquet. Photo: © Mary Gearhart

bizarre surface. While the different performance frames operate at a broader emblematic level, they are closely modulated to the evolving moment by moment action. Again, much of the play with sound and video technology functions emblematically, suggesting a world in which characters are alienated from themselves, in which their language and bodies are in a continuous state of dislocation and disintegration, as they are wasted by Venus' virus. But their deployment at particular moments is precisely organised around the drama of the moment, amplifying or ironising individual actions, or marking a moment of crisis. After years of experimenting with very different uses of video, here The Wooster Group seems to move towards employing it in ways that recall Piscator's choric use of film: to a large extent, the video material highlights or brings out a sort of sub-text to the action. While the overall result is not a production that leaves in place the tragic world of Racine's play, neither is it simply a postmodern mockery of Racine's tragedy, as some critics suggested. To be sure, the production takes a cynical view of the royal court (and by implication the 17th-century court for which Racine wrote); there is no final sense of redemption or of suffering as ennobling, but, against expectation, as the production evolves, there is a growing darkness to the grotesque vision embodied in Phaedra's portrayal and the increasingly sinister presence of Video Venus.

Surveying LeCompte's use of video in the works discussed, what is remarkable is the variety of ways in which it has been incorporated in relatively few projects. There is a constant development from the more segregated use for three very different sequences in *Route 1 & 9*, through the more integrated dramatic use in *Saint Antony* and the use of live relay for a mix of dramatic, rhetorical and choric purposes in *Brace Up!*, to the interweaving of film and avant-garde text in *House/Lights*, followed by the painterly rhetorical and choric use in *To You, the Birdie!*. Along the way, a wide range of films and television programmes have been incorporated or mimicked, with the video material created by the company always playing knowingly with the televisual or cinematic genres being mimicked. Often very different styles have been collided against each other, inviting the spectator to read the different performing media and styles against or through each other. The underlying dialogue between the materials often acquires multiple resonances, tempting, if sometimes also ultimately defying, dialectical or synthesising readings of the relationships. After *LSD* the appearance of hybrid or cyborg images of performers becomes a growing feature; while at one level it appears as an 'attraction', it also

becomes more emblematic of the hybrid nature of Wooster Group performances, calling attention to diverse mediations which occur in their work, whether literally through transfer of text or action to electronic media or simply through the adoption of the various stylistic 'masks' they employ.

LeCompte is very matter of fact when discussing her use of video, suggesting she sees it as just something that is part of the contemporary cultural context in which she works, which, therefore, should be available as a tool for her work. While sometimes her accounts of the seeming randomness with which she begins to collage materials may seem disingenuous, given the resonances particular collocations of material evoke, they are testimony to the creative experimental processes that the company uses. That the process does employ a lot of trial and error playing with different materials should not, however, disguise the fact that, as the productions evolve, a very precise selection process also comes into play which depends on LeCompte's astute sense of what materials work well in dialogue with each other. Thus what sometimes seem to be at first sight arbitrary juxtapositions often emerge as very precisely organised imagistic, textual or sensory structures.



© Greg Gieseckam 2007

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2007 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-1698-3 hardback
ISBN-10: 1-4039-1698-5 hardback
ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-1699-0 paperback
ISBN-10: 1-4039-1699-3 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

Printed and bound in China

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>General Editors' Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction: Contamination or Remediation?	1
1 Magic to Realism: European Pioneers	27
2 Polyscenicness: Josef Svoboda and Laterna Magika	51
3 Big Screen to Small Screen	72
4 Postmodern Collage: The Wooster Group	80
5 Third-hand Photocopies: Forced Entertainment	116
6 Live Films ou Stage: The Builders Association	142
7 Crossing the Celluloid Divide: Forkbeard Fantasy	176
8 Quantum Theatre: Station House Opera	201
9 Electric Campfires: Robert Lepage	218
Conclusion	245
<i>Notes</i>	253
<i>A Selective Bibliography</i>	268
<i>Index</i>	277