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“Strange and Imponderable:” The Wooster Group and *Vieux Carré*

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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During a six month internship (from May to November 2009) with the experimental theatre company the Wooster Group, I documented the rehearsal process of their latest piece based on Tennessee Williams’s *Vieux Carré*. In this thesis I provide, after a brief survey of the performance history and theory surrounding the company’s oeuvre, an inside look into the group’s new performance centered around *Vieux Carré*, and show how they use sub-texts, such as Andy Warhol’s cinematic trilogy, *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Heat*, along with work from postmodern video artist Ryan Trecartin, to demonstrate how the Wooster Group brings three qualities to their performance: precision, teeth, and the imponderable. Simply put, the Wooster Group is one of the most formative experimental companies in American theatre, whose unique process strives to invite audiences to strange and new experiences every performance, whether it be based on Gertrude Stein, Eugene O’Neil, or Arthur Miller. Williams’s *Vieux Carré* is no exception.

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## INTRODUCTION: INSIDE THE PERFORMING GARAGE

The date is August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and after touring their production of *Hamlet* in Gdańsk, Poland, the Wooster Group has just resumed rehearsals for Tennessee Williams's *Vieux Carré*. It is my first day as an intern for the company, and I sit quietly in the back of the Performing Garage surrounded by rafters, metallic totems, trusses, wooden platforms (many on wheels), computer screens, microphones, folding chairs, assorted props and costume pieces strewn about the floor, watching and waiting, *Godot*-like for Elizabeth LeCompte. Even though the space has been converted into a theatre, its atmosphere and temperature are still that of a SoHo factory on a summer afternoon.<sup>1</sup> On several of the LCD screens hung around the set, there is a paused clip from the Andy Warhol produced film *Flesh* – an image of a tan, muscular, and naked Joe Dallesandro. This image remains on most of the screens for the entirety of rehearsal, unacknowledged by the denizens of the Garage.

When LeCompte finally arrives, carrying a few books and a bottle of Australian Malbec Red Wine, she immediately greets the crew with three pieces she'd like to share. The first is a film clip from *Farewell My Concubine*, where a Peking opera actor dazzles the audience with meticulous control of his hands and gestures. While the movie is playing, LeCompte mocks the clip saying the actor in the movie learned just enough to perform the gestures for the film, but never mastered the technique. Scott Shepherd agrees, noting, "I wasn't all that impressed with the thing he's doing with his fingers there. That doesn't excite me." Later in rehearsal Scott will incorporate a similar style of dancing while playing the role of Nightingale.

The second piece LeCompte shares is Ben Brantley's review of JoAnne Akalaitis's production for Shakespeare in the Park, *The Bacchae*. Brantley starts, "I saw a wonderful raccoon at the Delacorte Theater the other night. It appeared, as serene and silent as a rising moon, at the far edge of the open-air stage in Central Park," and then criticizes the production for lacking everything the raccoon possessed: "mystery, grace, charisma and (though they didn't bare them) teeth." After reading it out loud, LeCompte remarks that *The Bacchae* review was much more vicious than any ill treatment Brantley<sup>2</sup> has given the Wooster Group in the past.

Finally, LeCompte doles out the third piece from her morning inspirations: Alexander Star's appreciation of the recently deceased literary critic Richard Poirier. "Mr. Poirier's most important contribution," Star writes, "came in his criticism, which tried to convey why the act of reading is – and should be – so difficult. The most powerful works of literature, he insisted, offer 'a fairly direct access to pleasure' but become 'on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable.'" It is this last line that LeCompte repeats methodically, "On longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable," before she casually resumes, "So, I just wanted you guys to think about

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<sup>1</sup> Before being converted into a theatre space, The Performing Garage used to be a metal stamping/flatware factory.

<sup>2</sup> The irony here is that Brantley has actually been a great supporter of the Wooster Group since he became chief critic of the *New York Times*. David Savran notes in his article "Obeying the Rules" that Brantley's reviews of the Group "read more like hagiography than criticism" (66).

that.” The group appears rather unfazed. Their looks speak as if they’ve heard the words. Digested them. But like all the other sources, pieces of inspiration, layers, and venerable axioms the Group ponders during the rehearsal process, Poirer’s thoughts will simply enter the ether, and there remain during the Group’s process of creation.

Yet Poirer’s line, “on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable,” speaks of a paradox where the art encountered, known better, more richly and fuller suddenly becomes increasingly enigmatic. The word imponderable evokes an art that transcends utterance -- a work that creates an experience, but an experience that is impossible to articulate. The greatest literature, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, beckon the reader to gaze deep into the heart of its text to find the answers to those indissoluble mysteries that bind man to his mortality. But in the process the reader only encounters more questions, more riddles than before. These works illustrate that the tragedy of man is an insatiable perplexity.

Poirer’s line hits to the very quality of the Wooster Group’s *oeuvre*. LeCompte’s work is akin to the most postmodern of art forms, similar to a Marcel Duchamp readymade or a Robert Rauschenberg combine. These sculptures are assembled with seemingly disparate items, like a three-legged stool and a bicycle wheel in Duchamp’s readymade *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), or a stuffed angora goat wrapped in a large rubber tire in Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* (1959). The unusual and perplexing juxtaposition of these disparate items destabilizes the viewer and causes them to consider the items anew. Likewise, LeCompte scavenges all forms of art – high and low, popular and obscure, Eastern and Western – and assembles them together on stage to make each source, each item suddenly a stranger unto itself.

Over the past thirty years, the Wooster Group’s work has been characterized by critics and scholars alike as an effort to deconstruct or politicize the various texts employed in their performances. Yet, I believe the primary goal for LeCompte and her company is not to present a critical viewpoint on source material, but rather to achieve the very effect found in Poirer’s words. More than anything else, the Wooster Group aims to create performances that excite the imagination and beg more questions than answer. In referencing three separate sources – *Farewell, My Concubine*, Brantley’s review, and Star’s appreciation of Poirer -- at the start of rehearsal that day, LeCompte was re-instilling the heart and nature of the Wooster Group. She was challenging her cast and crew to bring three essentials to performance: precision, teeth, and, above all, the imponderable.

After exploring the background, technique, and theory behind the Wooster Group’s process, I provide an inside look into the group’s new performance centered around Tennessee Williams’s *Vieux Carré*, and show how they use sub-texts, such as Andy Warhol’s cinematic trilogy, *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Heat*, along with work from postmodern video artist Ryan Trecartin, to demonstrate how the Wooster Group brings all three, precision, teeth, and the imponderable, to performance. Simply put, the Wooster Group is one of the most formative experimental companies in American theatre, whose unique process strives to invite audiences to strange and new experiences every performance, whether it be based on Gertrude Stein, Eugene O’Neil, or Arthur Miller. Williams’s *Vieux Carré* is no exception.

## HISTORY AND TECHNIQUE: STEPS TOWARDS NEW NATURALISM

Since David Savran's book, *Breaking the Rules*, has been so successful in documenting the Wooster Group's earlier works -- from *The Rhode Island Trilogy*<sup>3</sup> to *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points. . .)* (1984) -- my aim is build upon many of the ideas in that book by concentrating on many of the pieces developed over the past two decades since its publication, from *Brace Up!* (1991) to *La Didone* (2008). After providing a brief history documenting how the Wooster Group developed as a company, I wish to discuss how the company's home, the Performing Garage, has been integral to the company's collaboration process, and also how LeCompte's notion of "new naturalism" has shaped and defined the way in which the Wooster Group works. Ultimately, the Performing Garage affords the company time, stability and flexibility, all valuable commodities in the New York theatre climate, while New Naturalism informs the way in which the Wooster Group approaches character, games, and technology. The combination of these two elements -- the Garage and New Naturalism -- structures both the rehearsal process and each production.

### ***From Dionysus and Beyond: The Genesis of the Wooster Group***

While the Group certainly resembles a pack rat in its dependence on collecting and recycling materials, sets and techniques, it also has made a deliberate point to reinvent itself over the past 35 years. LeCompte is the only founding member remaining and second to her is Kate Valk who has appeared in every production since *Route 1 & 9* in the early 80s. The Wooster Group emerged from Richard Schechner's The Performance Group (TPG) where Spalding Gray and LeCompte became disciples of Schechner after witnessing his *Dionysus in 69*. This performance, which took place in the Performing Garage at 33 Wooster Street, was emblematic of Schechner's dramatic sensibilities. As the title suggests, in it actors engaged in a Dionysian frenzy, kissing and groping each other and sometimes the audience. At the end of the performance the actors opened the Garage door and invited the audience to engage in a parade outside the theatre down Canal Street.

Something about this performance must have struck Gray and LeCompte as particularly inspiring, as the two worked under Schechner for the TPG's remaining ten years. While Schechner remained the TPG's figurehead, he encouraged his group to experiment and develop their own pieces. Gray approached LeCompte and the two began developing *The Rhode Island Trilogy*, a set of three plays (plus an epilogue) that used Gray's life as the "text." These performances included several of the Wooster Group's founding members, including Ron Vawter and Libby Howe.

Towards the end of the 70s, TPG was experiencing great financial difficulty. In his essay, "The Death of the Avant-Garde," Schechner attributes the fall of his company in part to these problems. "From the time the Garage was first acquired in 1968 until the mid-70s it was used only for our own work," Schechner claims. "Then the mid-70s lack of cash dictated a more economically feasible use of the space. We could no longer afford 'dead time' just to workshop with ourselves or with students. But this 'dead time' is

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<sup>3</sup> *The Rhode Island Trilogy* consists of the plays *Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1976), *Nayatt School* (1978), and an epilogue, *Point Judith* (1980).



actually theatrical pregnancy: without it experimentation aborts” (35). Consequently, the financial pressures forced TPG to split focus in many ways, and many sub-companies started developing under the Performing Garage’s roof, but directors, such as LeCompte, wanted to use “the same actors in the same space at the same time” (Schechner 37). Schechner says that once he returned from India in February 1977, after touring a production of *Mother Courage and her Children*, “things were coming apart” (38), and actors and directors began splintering off outside the Performing Garage to explore their own work.

By 1980, TPG’s overall debt was above \$100,000, and the company was on the verge of imploding. LeCompte offered to adopt both the space and original title of Schechner’s company, The Wooster Group, and in turn seized all TPG’s accumulated debt. Schechner says LeCompte was a scrupulous business woman, slashing and cutting wherever necessary. He says, “She brought in new managers, instituted very strict budgetary controls, and lowered the deficit in part by cutting salaries” (55). And apparently, given the Wooster Group’s longstanding reputation in the American theatre (over thirty years now), LeCompte’s adjustments were enough to sustain a once floundering company.

### ***The Performing Garage***

Even though Gray and LeCompte would have likely left TPG to focus on their own work, adopting the Performing Garage was instrumental to their success as artists. Many theatrical companies in New York City do not have the luxury of space to develop their work. Artists are forced to work in and out of rented rehearsal halls, apartments and improvised lofts. While many companies have flourished under these conditions (i.e. the Elevator Repair Service or the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma), their itinerancy limits both the time and resources to devise a collaborative, actor-driven work. The Performing Garage, however, provides the Wooster Group the stability and resources to flourish.

The primary resource the Performing Garage affords the group is time. This is especially valuable as the Wooster Group’s chief mode of creation is through improvisation. Usually their improvisations are guided by a dramatic work, a film or a game. In *Rumstick Road*, for example, the Group spent the greater part of a year improvising movement and dances to tape recordings of interviews Gray had conducted with family members and doctors, all revolving around the subject of his mother’s death. The improvisations eventually developed into fragments which were then organized to form a full-length performance.

Often times, the Wooster Group uses improvisation to explore a text that someone in the group is curious about. They may stage sections of Gertrude Stein’s *Dr. Faustus, the Lights the Lights* to get a better feel for the text, to see how it reacts when mixed with, say, the b-rated horror film, *Olga’s House of Shame*. Eventually the Group will detect fascinating resonances between these pieces, and out of the improvisations develop a full-scale performance.<sup>4</sup> Without the Performing Garage, where the company is given the space to improvise, to explore, many of the Group’s productions may never have come to fruition. LeCompte admits to this, especially in regards to *House/Lights*:

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<sup>4</sup> In this case, *House/Lights* (1999).

If we worked on [*House/Lights*] in some other way, I think I would have given up on it. If we'd had to rent the rehearsal space, then, maybe, I would have gone, "Oh, this doesn't work," and not finished it. But because I have the Performing Garage I keep coming back and sometimes I'll fool myself into thinking, "Alright, I'm not going to do this piece but we'll do a little work on something else that I like." And this will take me back into the piece. . . I might have to watch what I like for a long while – it's like a meditation. Then something comes out of the process. (qtd. in Quick 217)

The process can be slow and arduous, but the more time the Group has to improvise, the more LeCompte is able to become engulfed by a text. Gertrude Stein's play, in this case, was particularly cumbersome for LeCompte. She could not connect with it and was forced into dead time where she had to fill rehearsals with something different. Like Schechner says, however, dead time is "theatrical pregnancy." Moments when LeCompte may feel stumped by a work, moments where she says "we'll do a little work on something else," gives the Wooster Group time to incubate ideas, until those ideas erupt and give birth to something previously incomprehensible. Stagnancy is central to innovation, and the Performing Garage gives the Wooster Group the liberty to be stagnant.

Furthermore, the Wooster Group needs time to perfect techniques they use in a particular show. Almost every work features a new way for actors to move, a new language for them to speak, a new skill for them to master. In the past, the Wooster Group has taken it upon themselves to learn dances (William Forsythe for *Poor Theatre*), games (badminton in *To You, the Birdie*), or foreign languages (Polish in *Poor Theatre*) to support whatever piece they are working on. Each of these areas would take a lifetime to master, yet the Wooster Group is able to perform them with aplomb. This is because they don't take shortcuts. The Group was said to practice badminton, sometimes three to four hours a day, for almost two years under the tutelage of Olympics badminton trainer, Chi-Bing Wu (Quick 103). Many of the actors learned fluent Polish, even though they only needed to be able to imitate a filmed version of Grotowski's *Akropolis*. Again, time is a main factor in this developmental process. Without the Performing Garage, the group would be hard pressed to find a venue where these techniques could be perfected.

The Performing Garage also allows the Group some fluidity between rehearsals. Rarely does one production simply end and another begin. The boundary between shows is porous, as one show bleeds into the rehearsals of another. The performance schedule for 2009, for example, included a tour of *Hamlet* in Gdansk, Poland in June, while *Vieux Carré* was in rehearsal; followed by a tour of *Vieux Carré* in France in November. When the cast returned, several went to London to perform *Emperor Jones*, while others remained in New York to prepare for the 2010 revival of *North Atlantic* in March. Rehearsals for *Vieux Carré* probably won't resume until after *North Atlantic*'s run in New York. For such a small company, this kind of revolving-door performance schedule

must be daunting. But the Performing Garage allows the Wooster Group the stability to pick up one show and leave another, without losing consistency.

The Wooster Group also likes to recycle sets, costumes and props as much as possible. This is both for economical and aesthetic reasons. When the Wooster Group was a fledgling company in the 80s, it just made logical sense to reuse set pieces to save money. The house that appeared in *Point Judith* found its way in *Route 1 & 9* (1981), just like the set for *Frank Dell's Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1987) was adopted from *L.S.D.* (1984), and later adapted into the hydraulic set featured in *The Hairy Ape* (1995). After a while, however, this recycling, this featuring of old material, really fit in with the Wooster Group's *oeuvre*.<sup>5</sup> It creates the sensation that each show belongs into a collective, a body of work, in the Wooster Group's repertoire. One show never "ends," but evolves into the next. These recycled pieces become traces of the previous shows and enter all of the Wooster Group's past productions into the conversation. As both a performing space and storage center, the Performing Garage affords the company this fluidity. Actors are encouraged to use anything they find in the room. With traces from past productions found in every corner, it's almost impossible for the cast and crew to avoid recycling old props and materials.

### ***New Naturalism***

While the physical Performing Garage is integral to the Wooster Group's development process, it is merely the shell for what happens inside. A common joke amongst the company is that they make works of "New Naturalism;" in other words, performances that are empty of deceit or affectation. The joke is, of course, that the word "Naturalism" is generally associated with works that meticulously resemble "real life." Naturalism as a movement was opposed to the highly symbolic, idealized and supernatural subjects presented in Romanticism, and instead opted towards a more gritty and literal portrayal of man. In a dramaturgical sense, plays by Émile Zola and Anton Chekhov fall into the category of Naturalism for their extreme fidelity to the rhythm and pace of daily conversation. This type of dramaturgy led to acting styles developed by Constantin Stanislavsky who emphasized a psychological approach for character development. A Wooster Group performance, however, has very little aesthetically to do with 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalism. Actors generally engage in a highly stilted acting style, absent of psychology and memory recall; scenes lack exposition and coherent dialogue; and the sets are mechanical, hollow and anti-illusionistic.

LeCompte says she and the Wooster Group first started referencing their work as New Naturalism after Peter Sellars remarked that their performances evoked an *extreme* form of naturalism (Yablonsky 55). Even though they often regard the term ironically in interviews, it has stuck with the Wooster Group because it hones towards the central effect of their work. LeCompte wants her work to blur the boundaries between naturalism

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<sup>5</sup> As an intern for the Wooster Group, one of my last duties was to help ship a bench to France for the Wooster Group's showing of *Vieux Carré*. The shipping cost was exorbitant, so much so that it made little sense to me why LeCompte would insist on having *that* bench when she could have easily purchased another in France and saved hundreds of dollars. Later that day, I was watching a taping of *To You, the Birdie* and lo and behold, that bench, that particular bench was on stage staring me in the face. Though I still do not see the economical logic behind LeCompte's insistence, I understand that that bench was infused with meaning beyond my discerning eye.

and illusion. She wants to inhibit the audience from reconciling between a rehearsed structure and an impulsive choice made by the actors. The space between naturalism and illusion places the audience in a temporal field where all reality is put in terms of this enigma. How can we distinguish the abstract from the concrete and vice versa?

LeCompte would argue that conventional theatre -- that is drama which features all the hallmarks of Aristotelian tragedy (plot, unity of action, etc) -- reinforces illusionary qualities. The actors on stage are not meant to be seen as actors. They are meant to be seen as the characters they portray. A flat panel painted like a house is not meant to be seen as such, but actually taken as a house in itself. This type of theatre takes advantage of the audience's willing suspension of disbelief to create a fantasy that is taken for the given time of performance as a complete reality. The consequence is theatre that is highly affecting and emotionally persuasive.

However, LeCompte's goal is to blur the space formed between naturalism and illusion to create a tension in the audience where the perceiver grows increasingly alienated by the incongruity of fiction and reality. Where the unities in drama are meant to bolster the false reality on stage, every illusion in a Wooster Group piece is undermined to continually remind the audience they are watching a performance. In his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann attempts to define what he believes are the characteristics of this type of theatre that has moved "beyond drama." He says one of the primary qualities of the postdramatic is its abnegation of "abstraction" to create theatre that is more literal than the type driven by Aristotelian elements:

In what is often called "abstract" theatre, in the sense of a theatre without action/plot, or "theatrical" theatre, the preponderance of formal structures is so radical that a reference to reality can hardly be spotted as such any more. One should speak here of *concrete theatre*. Just as Theo van Doesburg and Kandinsky preferred the term "concrete painting" or "concrete art" over the commonly used term "abstract art" because it positively emphasized the immediately perceivable concreteness of colour, line and surface instead of (negatively) referring to its non-representational nature, in the same way the non-mimetic but formal structure or formalist aspects of postdramatic theater are to be interpreted as "concrete theatre." For *theatre exposes itself* as an art in space, in time, with human bodies and in general with all the means included in the entire art work. (98)

Though they call it New Naturalism, LeCompte and her company are aiming for this characteristic of postdramatic theatre that Lehmann calls "concreteness." Much like its naturalistic counterpart, this theatre is not heavily involved in symbolism. It aims for "presences that resist being folded back into meaning" (Quick 270). In other words,

everything on stage is meant to embody its own materiality. Allegory and symbolism are not intended, specifically, but manifest only in the eye of the beholder.

The Wooster Group borrows from the performance art tradition, such as Happenings or Fluxus, where the artist is more interested in forming a “shared experience” between performer and audience (Lehmann 134). This means that actors in the Wooster Group try to cut down on the aesthetic boundary by “offering his/her presence . . . for contemplation” (Lehmann 135). The actors are not meant to be taken as characters, as personas, but as the performers themselves. In a talk-back after a showing of *Rumstick Road*, Gray makes this point very clear to the audience when he states that “we are not actors, we are performers” (Handman). The man Ron Vawter is not trying to be someone else. He is Ron Vawter. This is part and parcel of what LeCompte means when she calls her work New Naturalism, for she takes naturalism one step further: the performers cannot be any more natural because they are simply being themselves.

Furthermore, the Wooster Group can be considered *extreme* naturalists in that they maintain the unity of time in their performances. However, they are not adapting the notion of time from an Aristotelian point of view but again from performance art. Theatre theorist and structuralist Michael Kirby, who worked with the Wooster Group and performed in *L.S.D.* (. . . *Just the High Points.* . . ), categorizes theatre time in terms of “matrixed” and “nonmatrixed.” Matrixed time does not follow a plane shared by the temporal world, but rather is fixed by the rules set by the playwright in the world of the play. Non-matrixed time, however, is not stretched beyond the limits of physical reality (15-18). Kirby’s distinction between these two notions is imperative to understand how the Wooster Group structures their work in regards to time. While the action of a two-hour play may give the illusion that months have passed, a seventy-minute performance of a Wooster Group piece is just that: seventy-minutes. There is no illusion created between the performer and audience. Even though the Wooster Group may produce a play that transgresses the unities of time and space (such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), the Wooster Group does not bolster that illusion in their performance. Primarily they execute this by eschewing traditional expositional techniques. At the beginning of The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, for instance, Scott Shepherd starts the performance simply by saying, “Play the tape.” This introduction sets up the production as a performance, and the passage of time felt by the audience is not the one created in Shakespeare’s text, but the literal passage of time in the physical world.

Every technique or mode of development LeCompte uses is to create a culture of New Naturalism. Rehearsals turn the Performing Garage into an arena for the actors to develop what she calls a *reactive impulse*, a sixth sense that keeps the performer conscious in the moment of performance. LeCompte tries to develop the reactive impulse in her actors because she feels most contemporary acting is narcissistic. The performer is always anticipating what happens next. She claims this puts the performer one step ahead of the audience at all times. LeCompte makes it explicitly clear that she is opposed to this kind of theatre:

I think the problem with a lot of stage acting is that it’s so often concerned with the actor’s desire to make sure that he or she is connecting with the audience. So there’s always

this little thing, this patronizing thing, that they are always one little second ahead of the audience, telling them what they should feel and what's coming next. I don't want performers to be responsible for this. This should be the responsibility of the piece as a whole. (qtd. in Quick 266)

LeCompte's rhetoric suggests that she feels stage acting is manipulative and that her goal is to break down the time gap between audience and performer so that each experiences the "happening nows," as Andrew Quick terms it (270). Her fears echo Gertrude Stein's words on the dynamic of theatre, which is likely why the Wooster Group quoted Stein in the supplementary libretto sold during performances of *House/Lights*: "Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play" (Bussman 7). By quoting Stein the Wooster Group acknowledges their goal to create immediacy in the performance, and in turn make the performer and audience hyper-aware of the moment.

This is why LeCompte employs games like badminton or has actors improvise large portions of a performance. With such elements, the actor cannot fully anticipate what is going to happen any given night and, therefore, cannot affect their reactions to what is occurring on stage. Consequently, the audience experiences a performance that has never happened before and will never happen again. The Wooster Group has developed several modes to hone the actor's reactive impulse. These include, but are not exclusive to, the company's use of televisions, in-ear devices, and games.

The Wooster Group's use of televisions is one of their most recognizable trademarks. They began using televisions on stage in pieces as early as *Route 1 & 9*, and as time went on, television screens have become even more integral to the Wooster Group's performances. Not only is the television a way to incorporate outside material (like a clip from a filmed version of *Our Town* in *Route 1 & 9*) but its presence evokes intriguing questions on the nature of live performance. During the performance run of *L.S.D.*, Michael Kirby couldn't originally tour with the group; therefore, a television set was used to replace Kirby, showing him acting his part. However, LeCompte decided to keep the television in the performance even when Kirby returned, creating a fascinating double image of the actor. This technique was later expanded in *Brace Up!* where the role Solyony was entirely performed by Mike Stumm on television. While this solves the pragmatic issue of casting, it also poses questions about presence and the performer. What does it mean if the live performer can be displaced or replicated by a televised one?

When the flat panel television became available, the troupe's interaction with television screens expanded exponentially. Because this was new technology, the Wooster Group was discovering its potential alongside many other performance artists. For example, during the 2000 MTV Music Video Awards, the pop band 'N Sync innovatively employed these new flat screen televisions to perform their song "Bye, Bye, Bye." During the performance each singer placed themselves behind a television which stood about shoulder high. So while the audience could see the singers' bodies, their faces were obstructed by the television screens. During the song, images of their faces

flashed on the televisions while the singers adapted the position of their bodies to match the facial expression shown on screen. The performance is a dazzling display of choreography and timing as the singers slide in and out frame, perfectly in tune with the prerecorded image of their faces.

Two years later in *To You, the Birdie* the Wooster Group adapted this technique for the stage. The company could not previously perform such actions as convincingly with a box-style television, which is too large and obtrusive. But with the advent of the flat panel the actor could now align their body more seamlessly with the image on the screen. In one instance during the performance, Kate Valk as Phèdre tries on several pairs of shoes and stands with her legs and feet behind a television screen, which completes the image of her legs with an animated image of them moving in and out of numerous shoes. This actor/television interaction has been used prominently by the group ever since and creates a bold, aesthetic look that again draws an intriguing tension between the live actor and the recorded performance.

The television screen opens up unlimited scenographic possibilities, but it also serves a pragmatic purpose as a performance tool for the actors. Often times the actors are required to either imitate or interact with the image they see on the screen. Sometimes these screens are visible to the audience and sometimes they are strategically placed out of view. This technique is used prominently in the second half of *Poor Theatre*. While Scott Shepherd addresses the audience using a Forsythe interview as text, Ari Fliakos and Kate Valk dance behind him using Forsythe's techniques. Their movements are not spontaneous, however, but rather dictated by what they see on television screens placed above the audience. While the actors try and imitate what they see on the screen, the technicians can change the clip – either by rewinding, fast-forwarding, or cutting – at any given moment. The actors are meant to adapt at all costs. They cannot anticipate what they will see on the screen and each performance is different as a consequence. This takes a great deal of training, for the actors have to literally relinquish control to the television screens. The reactive impulse keeps them attuned to chance differences in their dances and keeps the work fresh and invigorating every night.

Another technique used prevalently by the Wooster Group is the in-ear device. Like the television, the in-ear device relinquishes the actor of control and dictates what they hear, speak, and do on stage. The device was first used in *L.S.D.* when Nancy Reily had to listen to and speak a recording of Timothy Leary's babysitter. Kate Valk used the in-ear device prominently in *House/Lights* as she spoke "not ahead, not behind" but with a recording of Gertrude Stein's text. Valk said this "was the only way we could get Stein to feel more effervescent in the space and not purely dredged up from some memory" (Quick 216). In *To You, the Birdie*, LeCompte put herself in the in-ear device, as she would call-in suggestions for the actors during the performance. All the actors wore the in-ear device sans one: newcomer Frances McDormand, who refused to listen to the director's voice during the performance. The irony is that, though all the other actor's gave up some control to LeCompte by having her in their ear, McDormand too lost control as she became the only member of the cast who wasn't in the loop (Quick 266).

The device is often used when the action on stage is too chaotic for an actor to keep up with the score of the text. In *House/Lights* in particular, the complexity of the score is so dense that it would be a near marvel for an actor to keep up without the in-ear device. However, Valk says the device does provide clarity, but also creates a sense of

anxiety that puts the performer in a “state of awareness” (Quick 216). I witnessed an actor experience this anxiety during a rehearsal of *Vieux Carré*. Ellen Mills, Elizabeth LeCompte’s sister, was brought into the production to perform the role of Mrs. Wire. During one part of the performance, Ellen was fed dialogue from an Andy Warhol film via an in-ear device and found it difficult to incorporate the dialogue in her head with that spoken by the other actors on stage. Kaneza Schaal, a newcomer to the acting ensemble, told Ellen that she needed to develop a “third ear:” an awareness about the actors, the words, and the recorded subjects. It’s the performer task to incorporate all three as if they exist in the same world.

This technique is extremely difficult to master and takes a great deal of practice and frustration to execute competently. The state of awareness Valk speaks of is exactly what LeCompte means by reactive impulse. By developing the focus to be aware, not only of the other actors, the movement on stage, and the dialogue, but of the voices fed into their ears, the actors are put into a heightened state of awareness that makes it almost impossible to react psychologically to the action on stage. The actors’ actions are driven with a desire to “keep up” to execute multiple things at one time. It is almost akin to a feral, animalistic desire to survive – another common thread between the Wooster Group and the Darwinism found in 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalism.

Finally, LeCompte keeps her actors focused on the moment by including games in almost every performance. In *To You, the Birdie*, LeCompte frames Racine’s *Phèdre* in a literal game of badminton, and this game forms a fine example of the reactive impulse she wishes to see in her actors. While the players must move at lightning speed to hit and return the birdie to the opponent, they must also anticipate the birdie’s course of action. The birdie, however, could end up anywhere and the player has to act accordingly. While a game like badminton has not been used as heavily in other performances, LeCompte creates rules or limits which turn the performance into a game. In *Brace Up!* the stage was divided in three areas -- background, middle ground, and foreground -- that dictated how the actors were allowed to move. Each section limited the actors to certain kinds of movements they could do as long as they were standing in that section (Quick 110). In *Fish Story*, LeCompte bound the actor’s legs to their feet with strings as a means to help the cast mimic the highly stylized dance-movement found in the *Geinin* documentary, a film about the Japanese troupe Ichikawa Sentaro. In the upcoming *Vieux Carré*, she toyed with the idea of using the movement vocabulary of basketball to inform her actors’ physicality.

While games play an important role in the Wooster Group’s pieces, it’s telling that LeCompte describes her process as a sort of game in itself: “I call it chance work, like throwing a handful of beans up in the air. And when they come down on the floor, I must use that pattern as one pole against which I work my dialectic. I cannot alter it unless, somehow, another structure, another bunch of beans that I throw up in the air, comes into conflict with the first” (Savran, *Breaking the Rules* 51). Like any game, LeCompte’s process is dictated by very specific rules, rules that she is reluctant to break. She too submits to the laws of reactive impulse, where her actions as director are dictated by the actors’s actions, whether they are deliberate or accidental. By letting her actors’ inform the content of the piece, LeCompte limits her own power over the process.

In a way it is a controlled chaos; a suitable analogy for the human condition: We can control the flow of our daily actions to a certain extent until some incident, some



accident throws us widely off-course. When this happens, we pick up where we left off and try to salvage what little bit of control we have left. This is what keeps the Wooster Group's work fresh, exciting, and unpredictable.

## THEORY AND PRACTICE: MISREADING DECONSTRUCTION

Critics have been quick to call the Wooster Group “deconstructionists,” mostly because, over the past three decades, they have undermined, devalued, and restructured many canonical texts such as Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, O’Neil’s *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*, and Stein’s *Dr. Faustus, the Lights the Lights*, from a heavily layered, refracted perspective. While the term deconstruction is apropos to the Group to some extent, it is slightly misused as well. Frequently, the term is given to *any* production that takes a conventional play and performs it in any unconventional way. Or, as John H. Lutterbie has noticed, the term deconstruction is often used to justify any “concept production” where a director has replaced “rigorous analysis” with a “facile relocation of the story in another milieu” (226). However, to deconstruct a text is not simply to undermine or distort it; rather, deconstruction is the process of unraveling hierarchical positions in the text and, if possible, destabilizing the hierarchy.

### *Signs and Binaries*

According to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs, oral and written. There are two aspects to each sign: the signifier (the sign itself) and the signified. Take the word “tree,” for example. In English this word signifies an object which grows out of the ground, typically has leaves, and provides shade on a warm summer day. Yet, Saussure says what is signified does not have a natural relationship to its sign; the sign is arbitrary. What is known as “tree” could just as easily be known as “squirrel” or “box” if circumstances had deemed it so. In fact, tree does have different signs in other languages: *un arbre* in French, *ein baum* in German, and 木 *mù* in Chinese.

We are able to distinguish these “trees” from other things observed in nature because of difference. In his lucid reading of Jacques Derrida’s theories, *On Deconstruction*, Jonathon Culler describes this in terms of the Einstein’s theory of relativity: “Motion can be present that is to say, only if the present instant is not something given but a product of the relations between past and future. Something can be happening at a given instant only if the instant is already divided within itself, inhabited by the nonpresent” (94). Similarly, we know what a tree is because it is not ground, as it is also not grass, nor squirrel. Having just learned the word “tree,” a child may have difficulty differentiating a tree from a flower or bush because they both grow out of the ground. So each sign is imbued with intricate levels of signification that helps distinguish it from other signs. A tree has bark, sap, grows tall. Flowers grow on trees, not the other way around. Therefore, our power to communicate is dependent on our ability to think *via negativa*.

What Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction, is most concerned with in this play of signs are *binary oppositions*, terms that signify contradictory notions. Beauty/Ugly, Good/Evil, and Freedom/Slavery all signify what the other is through difference. Yet, according to Derrida, “in a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other . . . occupies the commanding position” (qtd. in Culler 85). Culturally, we process these terms subjectively in favor of one over the other. While the above examples may illustrate an obvious, even harmless hierarchy, the issue becomes

much more complicated when dealing with oppositions such as Black/White, Religion/Science, Freedom/Terrorism, and Liberal/Conservative. In fact, the consequences latent in the hierarchy between these terms can incur disastrous results. Take this binary, for example: Christian/Muslim.

Therefore, Derrida says deconstruction's aim is "to deconstruct the opposition" and "to reverse the hierarchy" (qtd. in Culler 85). In other words, deconstruction is the process of revealing hierarchies found in any given text, unraveling and exploring how the hierarchy contradicts itself. This is why, for example, Derrida criticizes Saussure for privileging speech over writing as a form of communication that has a more direct and natural relationship with meaning. In fact, Saussure treats writing as a representation of speech. In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida draws umbrage with Saussure's interpretation on the matter:

One must therefore challenge, in the very name of the arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurian definition of writing as "image" – hence as natural symbol – of language. Not to mention the fact that the phoneme is the *unimaginable* itself, and no visibility can *resemble* it, it suffices to take into account what Saussure says about the difference between the symbol and the sign in order to be completely baffled as to how he can at the same time say of writing that is an "image" or "figuration" of language and define language and writing elsewhere as "two distinct systems of signs." (45)

Here, Derrida shows that Saussure's argument, his privileging of spoken language, actually undermines itself, and ultimately illustrates that the hierarchy between written and spoken language is arbitrary, that speech is in fact a form of *writing*. He unravels the hierarchy in Saussure's study and reveals the fascinating difference/interdependence between speech and writing.

It is rare to see the Wooster Group play with oppositions and hierarchies in this manner. In fact, their productions generally seem motiveless, unguided by a propensity for one cause or another. This is part of the reason *Route 1 & 9* first caused such controversy because the audience could not identify a critical stance in the Wooster Group's use of blackface. Even Peter Sellers remarks that he was originally appalled by the production because he couldn't see any real reason behind the Group's offensive exploitation of blackface. Sellers initially found it confusing and racially appalling. "It had total disregard for the audience," remarks Sellers. "It left one in a state of nausea mixed with catatonia" (*The South Bank Show*). Combine the Pigmeat Markham routines with a "soap operatic" presentation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and the audience is literally left hoodwinked: "What are we supposed to think?"

Yet, out of all their productions, *Route 1 & 9* seems to be the work most involved with undermining hierarchies in binary oppositions. The title, named for two highways in New Jersey, may suggest the piece is a play on binaries, confronting the space between

the numbers one and nine, and the content of the show only bolsters that further. The performance begins with a televised lecture, performed by Ron Vawter, who illustrates the intricacies of the playwriting found in Wilder's *Our Town*. Then the audience is greeted by a cast of white actors completely painted in black face. Harkening the days of minstrel shows, these actors perform bits from Pigmear Markham routines coupled by wild dances to popular music. Finally, as the party winds down, the cast slowly rumbles around the set as the audience is confronted with a performance of *Our Town* on the television screens. The video has been edited, however, and all the images of *Our Town* are in extreme close-up, giving the video a tone similar to that of a weekday afternoon soap opera.

Here the Group plays with the notion of black vs. white, *Our Town* (an unequivocally white, rural presentation of America) vs. Pigmear Markham, live theatre vs. television, and sentimentality vs. presentational theatricality. Each binary is put in communication with its opposite by being present on stage. By juxtaposing each, the Wooster Group reveals that a binary exists, and because each element is privileged equally, the audience is forced to reconcile what these binaries mean in terms of the performance and in terms of their own lives.

### *Différance*

Since the early 1990s the Wooster Group has largely strayed from an emphasis on binary oppositions and begun using classic dramas as the fulcrum of their work. Their work is now called deconstructivist mostly in a semiotic sense. Their process removes the sign (the play) from its signified (the literary history) and reconnects it with other sources that give the sign new meaning. It is here that a deconstructive reading behooves the Wooster Group's work, and Derrida's operation of *différance* can help provide a useful vocabulary to explain how the Wooster Group reposition their sources to make each strange and imponderable.

In coining the term *différance*, Derrida puns the French *différer*, which means both to differ and to defer. In other words, signs both draw difference between one signifier and another, and at the same time *defer* the presence of the signified. The sign replaces the presence of the term it is referring to. Furthermore, Derrida says, "The substitution of the sign with the thing itself is both secondary and provisional: it is second in order after an original and lost presence, a presence from which the sign would be derived" ("Différance" 284). Thus, while the sign has replaced the presence of its signified, it can also be replaced, changed, and adapted.

The space formed between the signifier and its signified in the play of *différance* is what Derrida has termed trace: the unnameable, unutterable structure behind language, what allows words to differ from one another and, therefore, mean anything at all. Derrida says this play of differences prevents any one element from simply referring to itself: "Whether in written or in spoke discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. . . This linkage, this weaving, is the *text*, which is produced only through the transformation of another text" (qtd. in Culler 99). It is in this act of weaving, the play of difference, that the Wooster Group refracts its texts and imbues its performances with limitless and almost unutterable resonances.

The Wooster Group plays with *différance* by putting seemingly disparate signs in contact with each other. They create provocative resonances by combining unrelated signs, compelling the audience to make provisional meanings for them. And this is what makes their work so perplexing at first. In that interplay of signs, we seek to unravel the trace between the elements presented on stage. Both *Our Town* and blackface have cultural and historical implications that we as an American audience expect to see invoked. But when we are confronted with these signs in a context we do not expect, all our prior notions of these signs are deferred and replaced with the new experience given on stage.

Take the Group's production of *To You, the Birdie (Phèdre)*. This production created an amalgamation of Racine's text, adapted by ensemble member Paul Schmidt, layered with badminton, dance routines by Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, and placed it on a set, inspired by the glass California houses designed by Joseph Eichler and Rudolf Schindler, laced with sliding glass panels and large LCD screens. While the heart of Racine's masterpiece remained, the Group's production of *Phèdre* was a beast entirely original. Because Kate Valk's choreography demanded so much of the actress physically, Shepherd had to speak for her through a microphone at the back of the stage. In fact, Shepherd performed this task for almost all the actors at one point or another, even ad-libbing here and there for comedic effect. This performance technique not only served a pragmatic purpose, but further destabilized the performance from the central text. Just as Valk's body was inhabited by Shepherd's voice, Racine's text filled a world quite foreign unto itself. Because of this and the complex system of layering, Racine's *Phèdre* was not diminished but put into conversation with all other source material. Badminton, Cunningham and Graham, Eichler and Schindler held an equally privileged position on stage. Each element elevated the rest into something entirely new and spectacularly vivid, rejuvenating the work in a fresh, aesthetic environment.

This work is similar to Robert Wilson's own system of destabilization, a process which he says makes each image or sign more vivid than before. In Mark Obenhaus' documentary, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of the Opera*, Wilson says, "If you take a baroque candelabra and you put it on a baroque table, that's one thing. But if you take a baroque candelabra and you place it on a giant rock, that's something else. And maybe it's easier to see the candelabra when it's on a rock than if it's on the table." As the rock in Wilson's axiom resituates our interpretation of the candelabra, so too does the badminton game in *Phèdre* refract our original vision of the play. Inevitably connections arise. The game of badminton certainly mimics the power struggle, the back and forth repartee of Greek stichomythia, the almost helpless fatalism, all evident in Racine's text. But badminton is just one layer added onto Racine in *To You, the Birdie*, and these associations with badminton are just one narrative, through the interpretation of just one audience member. The other layers interact and reframe the central piece in other, more complex and limitless ways.

LeCompte, however, has always treated the term deconstruction with a sort of coy irony. In a *Time Out* interview, David Cote asks LeCompte if she uses the terms "postmodern" and "deconstruction" in rehearsal. To which LeCompte laughs and promptly quips, "No, of course not. But every art form has a different way of thinking. And writing is so different. I enjoy reading about us as deconstructionists. But it has nothing to do with the way we work." LeCompte's response to Cote is hardly unique. She

generally maintains an incredulous attitude towards such theoretical interpretations, even if Derrida's theories are at the very least latent in her work. For LeCompte, though, language and text inhabit only one fraction of her *mis-en-scene*,<sup>6</sup> and the ideas espoused by deconstructionists are only useful in response to that portion of any given performance.

### ***LeCompte vs. Miller***

Mike Vanden Heuval claims it was around 1984 when books, reviews, and journals increasingly started linking deconstruction to the Group's "*modus operandi*" mostly in part because of the debate "surrounding issues of textual authority made public by Arthur Miller's intervention in the Group's adaptation of *The Crucible* into *L.S.D.*" (76). In *L.S.D.*, LeCompte used *The Crucible* as one 25-minute part in a four chapter theatrical performance, juxtaposing it with (among other things) the drug debate between Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy. True to form, this was no conventional presentation of the play. The cast performed the text in a rapid pace, Danforth was performed by a sixteen-year-old boy, and the actress who played Tituba (because of the pragmatics behind costuming) had to later portray white characters in blackface. After Mel Gussow gave *L.S.D.* a poor review in the *New York Times*, calling it a "send-up" of *The Crucible* (C28), Miller's attorneys sent an order to the Group to "cease and desist" their use of the play.

This ignited a back-and-forth battle of words between Miller and LeCompte that essentially epitomized the conflict in contemporary theatre between the playwright's vision over a director's interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Miller simply did not want his play produced "except in total agreement with the way I wrote it," and LeCompte was undermining those wishes by cutting, fragmenting, and distorting the text to fit the world of her production. In a letter to Miller, postmarked November 30, 1983, LeCompte defended her use of *The Crucible*, explaining that she was not trying to mangle his script; rather, she was attempting to explore its associations with an American audience:

I want to use irony and distancing techniques to cut through to the intellectual and political heart of *The Crucible*, as well as its emotional heart. I want to put the audience in a position of examining their own relation to this material as "witnesses" – witnesses to the play itself, as well as witness to the "story" of the play. Our own experience has been that many, many of our audience have strong associations with the play, having either studied it in school, performed in it in a community theatre production, or seen it as a college

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<sup>6</sup> In a conversation with between Richard Foreman and LeCompte, Foreman began "I want to use language to escape language." And LeCompte replied, "Yeah, but I've already escaped language . . . language to me is like what for a child the color red is. I don't have any association of its power. . . I don't look to it for anything but entertainment" (Marranca 111).

<sup>7</sup> Around the same time, JoAnne Akalaitis and the American Repertory Theatre experienced a similar situation when Samuel Beckett denounced their production of *Endgame*, in which Akalaitis disregarded Beckett's stage directions for a "bare interior," and instead set her production in a derelict subway tunnel.

play. And the associations with the play are important to my *mise-en-scène*. It is a theatrical experience which has cut across to generations, a literary and political icon. (qtd. in Savran, "The Wooster Group, Arthur Miller and *The Crucible*" 102)

The following embroiled battle between Miller and LeCompte, where LeCompte insisted to Miller that she was simply attempting to heighten the hysteria manifest in *The Crucible*, veritably staged what Barthes called the "death of the author."<sup>8</sup> The primary issue, though, especially for LeCompte, was that Miller was quite alive and had the letter of the law on his side. "I'm still around," Miller admonished, "and I should have a say about how the play is done as long as I am" (qtd. in Rabkin, "Is there a Text on this Stage" 152). If LeCompte did not "cease and desist" with her adaptation of *The Crucible*, the inevitable legal battle would have most certainly bankrupted the company. Because of Miller's stature and the Group's relative obscurity, LeCompte and company simply did not have the leverage to pursue the debate. Ironically, the attention garnered from this controversy is part in parcel to the Wooster Group's proliferated reputation as one of America's most daring avant-garde companies.

Even though LeCompte acknowledges that Miller had the legal right to call-off any production of *The Crucible* he was not happy with, that does not forego that Miller had the artistic right to intercede with the Wooster Group's interpretation of his play. Directly or indirectly, LeCompte's attitude towards authorship finds its lineage in the modern and post-modern thinkers whose writing formed the foundation of post-structuralism. Take Antonin Artaud's proclamation that "no one has the right to call himself author, that is to say creator, except the person who controls the direct handling of the stage" (117). While LeCompte's diction is never filled with such fervor, her attitude and treatment of dramatic texts echoes Artaud explicitly. To limit the play to the playwright's intentions make the written text far too restricted for LeCompte's likings. Barthes writes, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (128-129). Thus, as Barthes wishes to free the reader from the tyranny of the author, whose authority limits the potential signified of a work, LeCompte wants to achieve the same for her audience: "I don't want one meaning. I want always at least two and, hopefully, many, many more meanings to coalesce at the same point" (qtd. in Savran, "The Wooster Group, Arthur Miller, and *The Crucible*" 108).

This is precisely why she chooses dramatic texts as raw material, much like she would video footage, costuming, and props and scenery from past productions. Each item, each source, is a text unto itself, filled with its own associations. The written text of *The Crucible* meant little to LeCompte. In fact, she had the cast speak gibberish in place of words in an attempt to pacify Miller's legal team (it didn't work). All LeCompte

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<sup>8</sup> He concludes his preminent essay "The Death of the Author" with a more utopian declaration of freedom: "We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (130).

wanted to arouse were the aesthetic and cultural associations interlaced with *The Crucible*. But ultimately, the battle was not worth fighting, even in principle. Her “deconstruction” of Miller’s text caused a rabble that potentially could have shut down her company, and in the commercial and economic climate of New York City, pragmatics rule even the avant-garde.

As the Wooster Group’s conflict with Miller exemplifies the contemporary problem with authorship in the theatre, the dichotomy is also transferred to the application of “deconstruction” in LeCompte’s work. In his book *American Avant-garde Theatre*, Arnold Arnoldson clearly outlines the main problems with the issue: “Deconstructive analysis can be fruitfully applied to an essentially static work of art such as the novel,” where the text is more rigid and guided by one mind, one history. But deconstruction “began to encounter complications when applied to a . . . complex and modulating form such as theatre, with its multiple layers of ‘text,’ interwoven and sometimes conflicting sign systems, multiple ‘authors’ . . . multiple simultaneous ‘readers’ and the fluid and virtually ungraspable object known as performance” (201). This is perhaps why LeCompte refuses to call her process deconstruction. Because in her performances (or any performance for that matter), the deconstruction does not happen on stage or in rehearsal; it occurs in the audience, where the witnesses desperately untangle the knots between unrelated and conflicting associations. The audience amasses the “multiple meanings” to be found in LeCompte’s *mise-en-scène* and imbues those meanings with their own socio-political make-up.

### **“The Play of Misreading”**

It is interesting to note that the very transaction between playwright/director, director/actor, and actor/audience can be called a form of deconstruction in itself. Gerald Rabkin calls this interplay “the play of misreading.” Even in the traditional twentieth-century theatre model, where the director was responsible for coordinating the playwright’s text with actors, designers, and technicians, the production of any play is dependent on the director’s interpretation of the playwright’s work. According to Rabkin, because of the gap (or what Derrida would call *différance*) between director and text, even the director’s most faithful interpretation will inherently be a misreading of the text. The director’s misreading is then passed to the actors who then transmit it to an audience who then develop their own misreading of the performance. This journey forms a veritable child’s game of telephone where the original message is inevitably distorted and lost through the transference of signals. Rabin, who echoes Derrida, says, “All then is misreading” (“The Play of Misreading” 60). The text becomes ephemeral and gets imbued with a multiplicity of interpretations that exist simultaneously, and the author’s original purpose, the play’s signified, becomes lost in the process.

The Wooster Group relishes this system of misreading. It plays a central role in the assembly of their work and shapes their attitude towards the audience. After a showing of *Rumstick Road*, one of the Group’s earliest productions, at the American Players Theatre, Spalding Gray spoke at a talk-back held after the performance. The audience responded very warmly to the piece, and each member was unabashed in sharing their interpretation of the performance. However, as they began asking Gray questions, probing him for answers, he sustained a state of patient discretion as he informed the audience that each interpretation was valid, each built upon the previous,



and that neither he nor the Group had any outward goal or message to send out to the audience. At one moment, Gray says, “I think you have to take responsibility and should take responsibility . . . for this particular piece, your ‘going out to it.’ So that I’m receiving from you now. . . . We’re asking you, instead of being all receivers, to find a center in yourself and come out and also affect the piece by having your own opinions about it.” He then goes on and says its “impossible to misunderstand [*Rumstick Road*]” because it’s not structured in any linear or literal way. Gray believes the audience’s act of “misreading,” their ignorance of the authors’ intentions, are necessary for *Rumstick Road*. However, this philosophy can be extended to the Wooster Group’s entire body of work. Though seemingly cluttered with signs and imagery, their performances are designed to create a veritable blank canvass, where the audience’s interplay with the signs feeds the work with meaning and substance.

So, though LeCompte tends to de-emphasize the presence of the “text’s” author, and while she enjoys playing with and mismatching “signs,” she is reticent to call her approach “deconstruction” because her process is not lead by any sort of analytical or critical reading of any given text. She is a formalist, more interested in the aesthetic relationship between the audience, the company, and the raw source material. In an interview with Nick Caye, LeCompte suggests connections between theme and content mean little to her: “When I started working on *Route 1 & 9* I didn’t have any idea that these routines from Pigmeat Markham would have anything to do with *Our Town*. I had no idea whatsoever that these two would go together. I was working on Pigmeat Markham material because I was interested in it formally” (271).

LeCompte maintains that she treats all her source material this way, that she could pick anything in the room and make a complete piece out of it (Savran 50). Perhaps this is why a deconstructive reading works so well in conjunction with the Wooster Group’s body of work. Because LeCompte emphasizes the structure over the noise of “meaning,” the gaps and spaces between her sources become glaringly clear, and the audience, the receptor of these signs is able to confront these gaps in a unique, aesthetic environment.

**THE LATEST VENTURE:  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *VIEUX CARRÉ***

Now after touring works from Shakespeare, Grotowski, and Italian filmmaker Mario Bava, the Group has returned its eye once again toward modernist American drama. This time LeCompte has decided to tackle Tennessee Williams and one of his last and perhaps most autobiographical plays, *Vieux Carré*. LeCompte says her first impulse to explore the work of Tennessee Williams was inspired by a program brochure printed in Hong Kong where they were performing *The Emperor Jones* at the time. The brochure credited Eugene O'Neill as America's premier dramatist. LeCompte found this to be a very intriguing statement and deigned to consider who else could claim such a title. Company member Scott Shepherd suggested Tennessee Williams, and from there the Group contacted their dramaturg Dennis Dermody for productions of film versions of Williams work. While *Vieux Carré* was never made into a film, Dermody recommended the play to LeCompte because he thought it would be a good fit for the group (Fišera).

I began working for the Wooster Group as an intern in early May, 2009, a few months before the company was to present *Vieux Carré* in Strasbourg and Paris. As an intern my primary duties consisted of answering phones, filing paperwork, running errands, and cleaning the facility. In return, however, I had free access to most of the company's archival material and permission to sit through rehearsals, which afforded me the opportunity to document what I saw while the company was rehearsing *Vieux Carré*. While generally I sat in the back of the Performing Garage and watched quietly, sometimes the company needed me to operate a videorecorder to document the "accident tapes." This involved a careful annotation of all that went on during rehearsal, so that later –if needed – the cast and crew could review the tapes to see if there were any moments from previous rehearsals that could be recreated and used in performance.

The company used these tapes heavily for *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*. when, one day, they decided to take the drug L.S.D. during one of the rehearsals and record their work while under the influence so that they could later meticulously recreate what they saw on the tape and perform it in front of an audience (*The South Bank Show*). While in this instance the Wooster Group had the explicit intention of using the tapes to harvest material, the accident tapes usually serve as an insurance policy just in case something unintentional and memorable happens that could be used later in performance.

As an intern who watched and annotated many rehearsals, I became greatly familiar with the development process of *Vieux Carré*. I watched the performance for a period of four months before the company toured it in France. However, because I had other responsibilities, I was only able to watch rehearsals for two to three hours at a time, and in that time I would only see a five to ten minute segment of the play rehearsed repeatedly. That is illustrative of how meticulous the company is. Each beat is thoroughly processed, over and over, before the company can move on to the next.

The first time I saw the play in its entirety (or at least, as much as the Wooster Group had finished at that time) was when the company returned from France. Since they film all of their work, I was able to watch a filmed version of one of their final performances in France. Naturally, this is not ideal. Perhaps more than any other theatre

director alive, LeCompte creates a subjective ecology<sup>9</sup> on stage where an audience member is required to process a multitude of things at once – be they loud, jarring sounds; images on multiple television screens; or frenzied movements from the actors. The audience member cannot cognitively process all that LeCompte places on stage, only what they subjectively and emotionally experience in the moment. The environment of LeCompte’s *mise en scène* is muted by a filming because too much distance and objectivity is created by the camera’s lens. Nonetheless, I was able to see an uninterrupted version of the last performance of *Vieux Carré* before it was put on hold for in lieu of a revival of their *North Atlantic*. Most of the following is a review of that taped performance with a few references to key moments in rehearsal that I witnessed.

### **Williams’s Text**

Williams’s *Vieux Carré* takes place at a boarding house at 722 Toulouse Street in New Orleans where Williams lived in the late 1930s. It is a dream play of sorts centered around the Writer (who Williams acknowledges as a younger version of himself) as he experiences the story and character of the play “through the lighter areas of my memory” (5). As one of the last published plays from this storied playwright, *Vieux Carré* is a confessional on how Williams learned his craft through living with and observing the dilapidated and seedy denizens of New Orleans.

Though the Writer is the centerpiece of the play, he is more the glue that holds the piece together rather than the fulcrum of the story. Clive Barnes wrote in his review of the 1977 Broadway performance that *Vieux Carré* is “a series of vignettes, based on fact, falsified by art, transformed into short stories, and woven into a play. . . the play has no structures other than the interweaving of caricatured characters” (70). Essentially, as Barnes put it, *Vieux Carré* is not a narrative play but, rather, an episodic one, devoted to showing a series of interrelated events highlighting the personalities and individual stories of its inhabitants. In the course of the play, we become intimately acquainted with several off-beat characters– all of whom seem to be on the end of their journey, all of whom seek the Writer’s attention for some selfish means. Their stories practically exist independently of one another. The only threads that string them all together are the Writer and the house that binds them.

Mrs. Wire is the landlord, a bitter old woman who curses, condemns, and consigns her tenants to a life of perpetual misery. Even though she admonishes the Writer for his homosexuality, she does her best to trap him in the house seeking in him a relationship like the one she lost with her own son. There is the Writer’s roommate, Nightingale, who Williams calls a “terribly wasted man, dying of tuberculosis” (4). He is the first to welcome the writer to the house on Toulouse Street, comforting him and confiding in him a gentleman’s trust. He intimates to the writer, “You are alone in the world, and I am, too” (25), but his hospitality is tainted by perverse, sexual desire for the Writer.

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<sup>9</sup> As termed by Bonnie Marranca who, in her book *Ecologies of Theatre: Essays at the Century Turning* (1996), discovers “how essential landscape, field, and geography are in the conceptual vocabulary of American performance and the extent to which the idea of nature (or the real) was transposed into a description of performance space by avant-garde artists” (xiii). I like the word ecology because it highlights what is central in the craft of theatre: the arrangement of words, objects, and actions in a three-dimensional space. LeCompte creates a multivalent landscape on stage through her complex system of layering texts, media, and set pieces.

Finally there is the romantic couple, Tye and Jane, who exhibit all the characteristic hallmarks of heterosexual relationships in Williams's work. Their physical desire for each other is taut, but so too is their dependence and abuse. Much like Stanley with Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tye dominates Jane verbally and physically. Even though Jane understands the worth of her own pride and humanity, like Stella, she too stays with Tye, wrapped in a hex drawn by his raw masculinity. While Tye pays the Writer little credence, Jane sees him as a confidant, a "serious person" that she can talk to (33). All the residents of 722 Toulouse Street seek hope in him, but the Writer is the only one who has hopes for a way out. At the end of the play he takes his leave with a young vagabond named Sky and abandons the house's inhabitants to turn to "ghosts; their voices . . . echoes, fading but remembered" (116).

Though *Vieux Carré* is one of Williams's minor works, it is very well suited to the Wooster Group for several reasons. First, its loose structure and lack of story arc give the company a great deal of space to play with its order and content. Second, the play is maudlin and over-dramatic in tone. As the characters wax poetic about their desires, it reaches a level of feverish melancholy that is easy to explore and exploit. Third, the play is thematically rich. Not only is Tennessee Williams one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century, whose name alone provides a myriad of resonances, but this play in particular brings up many issues that are ripe in the American conscious. *Vieux Carré* brings forward subjects such as New Orleans, abandonment, sexuality, guilt, illusion, and deception. Ultimately, what the Wooster Group has is a play weak in structure but strong in character and theme – a magic combination of elements that compliment their body of work.

Much like the Wooster Group performances of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* or *The Emperor Jones*, their production of *Vieux Carré* maintains a remarkable fidelity to Williams's text. This has been an ever growing trend with the Wooster Group and should be of note. In the 80s, the company generally presented only fragments of plays or texts combined with other sources to create a patchwork collage on stage. After the company performed a version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in the early 90s, however, they have been increasingly focused on adapting dramatic texts as the center piece of their performances. With the O'Neill pieces, *Phèdre*, *Hamlet*, and now *Vieux Carré*, the Wooster Group has developed a growing repertoire of performances that are by and large faithful to the playwright's text and structure. The company now seems more geared towards creating refracted performances of classical texts and far less concerned with creating collage.

However, especially in regards to *Vieux Carré*, this trend should be noted with some specific caveats. The Wooster Group maintains the order and sequence of words in *Vieux Carré*, but an audience member unfamiliar with Williams's play might have difficulty following its story or action. Of course, conveying a coherent narrative is usually the least of the Wooster Group's priorities, so the fact that a story is hard to glean from the performance should come as no shock. The Wooster Group may remain faithful to a text, but their presentation of that text can rarely be described as conventional or straightforward.

### **Warhol and Trecartin**

Like all Wooster Group performances, *Vieux Carré* is layered with several subtexts that influence and alter the shape of its original source. To name all of the traces that have made their way into the performance would prove ambitious and exhausting. Yet two distinctly stand out above the rest, both because of their emphasis in performance and their relationship to Williams's play: the Andy Warhol produced and Paul Morrissey directed trilogy *Flesh, Trash, and Heat*, alongside vestiges of the postmodern video art by Ryan Trecartin.

Naturally, it is difficult – perhaps futile -- to interpret the role of any given subtext in a Wooster Group production; however, thematically and aesthetically the Warhol trilogy has a striking relationship with LeCompte's vision of *Vieux Carré*. Though produced by Warhol, the trilogy's creative force comes from its director Paul Morrissey, who became a denizen of Warhol's Factory in the mid-60s. After Warhol was nearly killed by Valerie Solanis's assassination attempt, he gave full creative control to Morrissey who wrote and directed each film but still credited Warhol as producer.

Each film centers around Joe Dallesandro, whose physique and charm have since made him an icon of masculine sexuality. In all the movies, but in *Flesh* (1968) particularly, he epitomizes the essence of a modern Adonis, becoming the object of desire for both men and women. In *Flesh* Joe (as his character is called) is a hustler, a man who gets paid to get laid and who will take business from any customer, male or female. The film documents his actions as he tries to raise \$200 to pay for his lesbian wife's girlfriend's abortion. In *Trash* (1970) we encounter Joe again (not the same Joe in *Flesh*, but perhaps another version of him), but this time he is an impotent heroin addict who feebly tries to score drugs for his common law wife (played by drag superstar Holly Woodlawn). Then in *Heat* (1973), a quasi-spoof of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, Dallesandro plays Joey Davis, a former child star who uses his sexual appeal to gain favor with an old-time Hollywood actress Sally Todd (Sylvia Miles). Dallesandro's characters' place in the trilogy is not so different from the Writer's function in *Vieux Carré*. All of his housemates look to the Writer for some selfish need, all long to have a piece of him to satisfy their cravings, but none look to the Writer for anything beyond the superficial. This is why the Writer is able to leave so freely with Sky. Like Joe/Joey, he feels no human attachment to anyone or anything because he himself has been objectified.

In addition to Warhol, Morrissey, and Williams, the Wooster Group has set its eye on a much more recent artist, Ryan Trecartin, whose anarchic film *I-BE AREA* (2007) presents a fragmented and psychedelic world of teenage girls engendered by an "instant action," multimedia-driven age. Like most postmodern performance art, *I-BE AREA* is heavily motivated by parody and irony. Whereas *Vieux Carré* and the Warhol trilogy focus primarily on plastic characters driven by their own respective times (the late 30s in *Vieux Carré*, the late 60s in the Warhol trilogy), the characters in Trecartin's video are over-the-top, loud, shallow teenage girls whose "virtual identities" are representative of the internet age. Some, including Trecartin (who plays a girl named Pasta), are covered in bright, smeared makeup and wear loud, incongruous wigs. The video is filled with jump cuts, noisy music, and surrealistic imagery, which create an uncomfortable experience both humorous and frightening to the viewer.

Warhol and Trecartin, along with many other subtle references to Pink Floyd, Peking opera, and jazz composer Alex North (known among many things for his work on *Streetcar Named Desire*), blanket the Wooster Group's staging of *Vieux Carré*. Their placement in performance is often befuddling or so brief you would hardly notice. Nonetheless, they create a cacophony of sounds, images, tones, and expressions that give the performance a disquieting vigor that stretches the Wooster Group performance far beyond Williams's text.

### ***In Performance***

The scenic design behind the Wooster Group's *Vieux Carré* is very similar to many of their previous productions, architecture characterized by its simplistic, cold and industrial tone. LeCompte generally creates distance between the audience and the performance through the set design, giving a physical obstruction between the stage and the house. In *To You, the Birdie*, glass panels often slid in front of the action to serve as a barrier in this manner. In *Vieux Carré*, the job is done by four metallic totem poles which enclose the action in a cube-like shape.

Mounted on each totem are small flat panel television screens (no more than fifteen to twenty inches in size) that are placed facing towards the stage. Therefore, the audience can see the image on the screens in the back two corners but not on the front two. There are three much larger television screens placed within the space, each held about three feet off the ground by metallic totems. The two smaller screens (around 40 inches) drape the scenery somewhat with black and white footage of curtains blowing in the wind, while the largest screen (over 50 inches), placed up-center, can rotate from a horizontal position in one moment to vertical in another and is used as the predominant canvas to show both live and pre-recorded images to the audience. There are also televisions placed strategically out of view from the audience, several at the foot of the stage and one placed above the audience at the back of the house. These hidden screens often inform the actor's movements much like they did during the William Forsythe section of *Poor Theatre*.

Given that the play takes place in a flophouse, the set is appropriately a mess. Unlike the sleek and silver scenery in the Wooster Group's last performance, *La Didone*, the set of *Vieux Carré* is much sloppier, unfinished, resembling more closely the scenery found in the company's older performances. Two platforms define much of the space, but these are literally covered with pillows, sheets, wooden stools, buckets, and metallic bed posts. The seeming disarray of the set certainly evokes a post-Katrina New Orleans and adds to the chaos in the performance's opening moments.

The opening sequence in the Wooster Group's performance carries on like a masque of madness. The Writer (Ari Fliakos) walks out on stage with no blackout or introduction, simply sits on the edge of a platform and with keyboard in hand types away to begin the performance. A few taps on the keyboard initiate several television sequences, featuring the Writer's opening speech and the first dozen or so lines of the play. Lines are overlapped. And company member Kaneza Schaal speaks with a shrill California Valley Girl accent in honor of Trecartin's character in *I-BE AREA*. This is combined with loud music -- a feature of any Wooster Group production -- that has been pulled from Alex North's repertoire to give the opening sequence a mawkish, overdramatic flare. As Jane (Kate Valk) enters, she begins shouting a diatribe to Mrs.

Wire (Ellen Mills), but Jane's words are frequently interrupted or dubbed by the Writer who has been watching this whole sequence from his seat at the edge of the stage. Frequently the writer taps his keyboard, and the image on the television screens change. Sometimes he types key words from the dialogue which appear on the central television, notably "sky" and "tye."

Amidst this chaos the audience can barely keep up with what is happening or who is speaking. There is a discomfiting myriad of sounds, images, words, and movements, evocative of the tone and pace of Trecartin's video. By introducing the play in an arena of controlled chaos, the Wooster Group has essentially spoiled all the necessary exposition provided by Williams. Consequently, the audience has to pick up the pieces and draw connections on its own or, at the very least, do their best to keep up.

The way some characters look is also disorienting and would confuse an audience as to what world this play belongs, namely Nightingale (Scott Shepherd) and Nursie. Nightingale enters ensnared in a tattered Oriental silk robe. He has long, scraggly white hair, circular glasses, and dons an east-Asian fan. Nursie, on the other hand, has streaked, psychedelic makeup (again inspired by Trecartin) resembling a nightmarish mask that might be worn during the heat of Mardi Gras. She is hidden behind the stage for much of the performance and allows her image to be seen primarily on the TV screens.

But amidst this chaos and rabble, the performance does slow down, and though the actors deliver the dialogue through an unconventional cadence (sometimes stilted and monotone, other times over-the-top; always speedy), the words and action are Williams's. If it were not for the disorienting introduction to the play, the audience would be able to follow the action with ease. Sometimes unexpected things happen. The actors may move like men possessed – their gestures usually dictated by what they see on television screens not visible to the audience. Footage from the Warhol's trilogy plays unacknowledged on television screens in the background. And there are moments when LeCompte has deferred the audience's attention entirely to the television screens (at one moment to a cartoon), but after the initial pandemonium, the performance slackens, and the audience is allowed to experience the action of the play with a great deal of coherence.

### ***The Writer as Conjuror***

Perhaps the key innovation to LeCompte's delivery of *Vieux Carré* is through the Writer. Fliakos performs the character of the Writer as more than just narrator. He actually conducts much of the performance, cueing entrances, reading lines, typing scenes as they are being performed, almost conjuring the landscape of play *à la* Prospero in *The Tempest*. Some of this is actually dictated by the play itself. In *Vieux Carré* the Writer narrates throughout the text, giving poetic interludes to introduce or cap a scene. Much of it provides necessary information, but most of the Writer's narration is to provide an effect. It creates a somber, maudlin tone. Furthermore, the Writer's narration bolsters the "dream" motif of the play: all that occurs on stage is being conjured by the Writer's memory, all the characters are elusive ghosts willed into existence by the Writer's somber thoughts.

At the beginning of Williams's second act, the Writer is seen at his typewriter, and as he types, he dictates these words to himself: "Instinct it must have been directed me here, to the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, down country as a – river flows no plan."

Almost immediately he cuts himself off and curses, “Exposition! Shit!” (69). In rehearsal LeCompte drew contention with this line, mostly because she found it ironic that Williams himself wrote far too much exposition in the second act. In their initial read through of the second act, LeCompte instructed the actors to jump most of the exposition. If they caught themselves reading a line that was dictating too much, that was not progressing the action, they were encouraged to mumble over it or skip it entirely. What they found in this exercise is that Williams’s text is littered with exposition. Suddenly the play became a riddle for LeCompte to solve. How were they to overcome all this exposition, all of this bad writing (as the company saw it) to keep the play dynamic, vibrant. Initially LeCompte’s inclination was to restructure the play entirely – perhaps by playing the scenes in a less episodic way or even keeping focus on one character at a time. Neither of these thoughts bore much fruit further than conception, however.

In the coming weeks the Wooster Group solved the problem by driving into the storm and delivering the exposition as unapologetically as possible through the Writer. The Writer in Fliakos’s hands became a sort master of ceremonies for the production. It is not far different from Scott Shepherd’s role in *Hamlet*. With his little keyboard, Fliakos begins the show with the Writer’s line: “Once this house was alive, it was occupied once. In my recollection, it still is but by shadowy occupants like ghosts. Now they enter the lighter areas of my memory” (5). The Writer commands his memory through his keyboard. When an image of Nursie crying “Mizz Wire!” flashes on a television screen, it is produced by the Writer’s will (and fingers) to see it. Sometimes the Writer even interrupts a character and finishes their lines for them. It is as if everything around him is conjured by his memory.

The Writer’s function is expanded much more deeply in the second portion of the Wooster Group’s performance. Once the character Sky (Raimondo Skeryte) is introduced at the beginning of the second act, the Writer is suddenly inspired. He has found his muse, and he spends a majority of the second act typing away on his keyboard as Sky watches nearby. As he types, the action of the play occurs around him. Suddenly it’s as if the Writer does not exist in the same world as the play. He cues the actors as to who should speak and when, and when his writing meets a feverish pitch of intensity he begins screaming the dialogue in excitement. As he types faster, the characters talk faster. And when he is required to be part of the dialogue, he speaks his dialogue along with the other characters as he is typing.

The more the Writer is structuring the scenes happening around him, the more Fliakos begins to play the Writer as if he is in some unstable stupor. It creates an eeriness at the end of the performance as the Writer giggles to himself, “They’re disappearing behind me. Going. People you’ve known in places do that: they go when you go. . . their voices are echoes, fading but remembered” (116). At this point in the performance, Fliakos is accompanied only by Valk, who portrays Jane as a battered woman, strung out on life, glaring at the audience in hideous consternation. But as Fliakos speaks the final line of the play, she too is gone: “This house is empty now” (116). Then the Writer stumbles off stage, half-mad by what he’s created. All of this is underscored by an unsettling cry made by a clarinet, played hauntingly in the distance.

The effect of the Writer as narrator is two-fold. First, it helps LeCompte solve the issue of an over-written piece that does not necessarily build to a climax so much as it drowns in its own sorrow. Fliakos’s portrayal of the Writer gives the second-half a great



deal of energy and momentum. The narration and exposition play as fanciful remembrances or details from a Writer's mind, and create a play-within-a-play atmosphere where Fliakos's Writer is overlord of the characters in the flophouse at 722 Toulouse Street.

Second, it further bolsters Williams's notion that "writers are shameless spies" (95). The Writer (both the character and Williams) are essentially recreating a past that they once lived. The characters are real people whose identities and words were stolen for the sake of the play. The Writer cannot empathize with these characters because he is too busy studying them, learning from them. At one point he declares to Mrs. Wire that he ought to pay her tuition for all things he's learned from her run down boarding house (66). With Fliakos lording over all the characters, watching them shamelessly as they bawl, fight, and suffer, this theme within Williams's play is heightened. The Writer is not just a figurative spy but a literal one. The same could be said about the audience who watch everything happen with an almost voyeuristic intrigue.

### ***Eroticism in Performance***

Another theme that is drawn out specifically by LeCompte is the blatant and overt sexuality inherent in Williams's play. Much like the exposition problem, LeCompte opted to dive head first into the rampant sexuality of *Vieux Carré*. Similar to Dallesandro in the Warhol trilogy, Fliakos, Shepherd, and Valk are practically naked for much of the performance. Fliakos and Shepherd walk around in nothing but jock straps, while Valk is topless in several scenes. And, like the Warhol trilogy, at first the prevalent nudity may be unsettling. But once an audience has adjusted -- due to the persistence and unapologetic display of the nudity -- the taboos surrounding it break down and are inoculated. While it is at times shocking and uncomfortable, at others humorous and playful, as the performance carries on the nudity becomes a part of the world of *Vieux Carré*. It subtly stops being a licentious act and becomes an occurrence both natural and common.

According to a standard clause in the Williams estate, no performance of any of his plays may include nudity unless specifically called for by the playwright. In the case of *Vieux Carré*, however, nudity is certainly supported by Williams's text. Jane and Tye engage sexually throughout the play. At some moments, the couple's sexuality is romantic and at others violent. Tye virtually rapes Jane in the second act as she cries "Plee-ase! I'm not a thing, I'm not -- a -- thing!" (86). The Writer also has many sexual moments, namely one where he is seduced by Nightingale. While the script calls for a blackout before the two have sex, LeCompte does not shy away from the moment and shows Nightingale masturbating the Writer. Sometimes during these sexual exchanges, actor Judson Williams (who operates a 1940s vintage film camera throughout the performance) steps forward and zooms closer with his lens as if he is filming an amateur pornographic movie. As we watch Williams film Tye and Jane having sex, it's impossible to disregard the issue of voyeurism explicit in LeCompte's production.

LeCompte chooses to enhance the sexual overtones by accenting them in several creative ways. First, the character Nightingale walks around with a clearly visible dildo protruding from his pants. This dildo is hardly referred to, nor is it essential in every scene. Nonetheless, Nightingale wears it with pride throughout the show. Even though the dildo is comical in appearance, exaggerated in both length and shape, it is not

acknowledged or shown humorously. It simply becomes an object of masculine sexuality, Nightingale's badge of honor, much like the Greeks wore in Dionysian Festivals.

The televisions serve to accent the sexuality in the play even further. For much of the performance, the television screens exhibit what is inside the Writer's mind. For example, when the Writer meets Tye for the first time, his mind wanders into a sexual fantasy. He strips his clothes down to a jock strap and positions himself with his back towards the audience. The front side of the Writer is then shown on the television screen as he begins to masturbate. An image of two men engaging in oral sex is then superimposed over the Writer's reflection on the TV almost seamlessly, and we can imagine the image on screen is a vision of his primal desire to connect with Tye sexually, though it never happens in reality.

Furthermore, clips from the Warhol trilogy are evident throughout. Many of the segments shown to the audience on the television screens are sexual in nature. During one sequence between the Writer and Nightingale, the two become possessed by the film *Heat*, now clearly shown on the television screens, where Joey (Dallesandro) presses his foot forcefully on Jessica Todd's (Andrea Feldman) privates. She writhes in sexual pleasure, pulling Joey's boot hard on her crotch as he sits calmly in domination. The Writer takes the place of Joey on stage as he presses his foot firmly on Nightingale's crotch. This juxtaposition of a heterosexual couple with a homosexual one is fascinating. At that moment in the performance, LeCompte has shown a reversal between the Writer and Nightingale, where the Writer now exhibits himself in control of the aging old painter. Yet in either case, *Heat* or between the Writer and Nightingale, there is always a dominant partner, one who controls the submissive member through sexual hegemony. The interaction here is of a primeval conquest, not of love or compassion.

Ultimately, LeCompte's staging has forcefully confronted the audience with the sexuality explicit in *Vieux Carré* and the Warhol films. She takes pains to show the many forms sex may take: romantic, violent, queer, straight, private, public, pure, and pornographic. But generally sex in these pieces, whatever the form, rarely appears satisfying or pleasant. Rather, it seems as if sex usually happens to fill a void in the characters' lives where love and companionship should belong. Consequently, the sexual acts are presented in such an unglamorous and clumsy fashion that they hardly resemble anything fanciful or pornographic.

### ***Ghosts***

This moment where Fliakos and Shepherd mimic the scene from *Heat* is perhaps the most overt connection the Warhol films have with the action on stage; otherwise, they do not play a prominent role beyond their constant presence on the miniature television screens that frame the set. The films merely shadow the performance, remaining in the air like a distant echo. While the actors mimic the characters in the trilogy from time to time, it is generally unbeknownst by the audience. We can rarely tell when the actors are motivated by the films or not because the images are being fed to the actors from televisions unperceivable to the audience. While in *La Didone* the libretto by Francesco Busenello and the movie *Terrore nello spazio* are equally privileged, during the performance of *Vieux Carré*, *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Heat* act more like ghosts in the room: an influence that at times intervenes with the play but rarely takes center stage. The same

can be said about the references to other sources, such as Trecartin, Pink Floyd or Alex North. They exist in the performance, but their presence is at best evasive and fleeting.

Yet it is fitting that these texts inhabit the space like ghosts, for that is a key theme in *Vieux Carré*. Like Barnes said of the play, it is a “laying of ghosts” (70), a processional for Williams to put to rest any memories he had from the flophouse on Toulouse Street. The Writer experiences all of the characters as if they were “ghosts; their voices . . . echoes, fading but remembered” (116). He imagines them as if they are people who live and exist around himself, perhaps in order to relive the memory of them, to learn from them, to find in them something lost or hidden. Yet the memories don’t exist, or at least, they are not tangible. He can only experience them as the faded vestiges they are. They are no more real than the ghosts haunting him every day.

The layers and sources evident in the Wooster Group production are likewise vaguely recognizable. Yet they evoke something in us, a message, a tone, or a memory, as if we heard it like an echo. Their presence is too intangible to nail down to a specific theme or purpose, yet we recognize and find something in them. The Wooster Group’s *Vieux Carré* seems to aim for this effect highlighting both the ephemeral themes in Williams’s work and the imponderable experience of acknowledging the ghosts found in the performance.

## CONCLUSION: PRECISION, TEETH, AND THE IMPONDERABLE

The Wooster Group has developed performances for about 30 years and become an American institution, with LeCompte heralded alongside Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman as a triad of avant-garde theatre auteurs. While the group was once derided as a company who performs “mash-ups,” who shamelessly deconstruct texts for their own purposes, time has transformed their image. Now they are regarded as visionaries, artists who redefine theatre and reinvigorate the classics. It is rare to see an avant-garde theatre company endure in a volatile New York City climate, but because of its company members’ private success (notably Willem Dafoe and Spalding Gray), the stability of their performing space, and the controversy and quality of their work, the Wooster Group has become a global theatrical tradition. Thanks to grants and donations, their operating budget now lingers around three million dollars. They continually sell-out large performing spaces such as St. Ann’s Warehouse and Joe Papp’s Public Theatre. This once fringe company has become established.

How does a company with experimental tendencies react in the face of such success? To remain relevant both to their audiences and to their craft, the Wooster Group must keep evolving to find new areas to explore and new ways to explore them. Yet they do so with aplomb. In the last ten years, the company’s repertoire has spanned across French Neoclassicism, Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, Shakespeare, ballet, opera, and b-grade science fiction film. Time and time again LeCompte displays that she can work through almost any medium regardless of content. I believe the three pieces of inspiration LeCompte shared on my first day – the clip from *Farewell My Concubine*, the review of Akalaitis’s *Bacchae*, and the appreciation of Richard Poirer -- is at the heart of the Wooster Group’s ability to remain fresh and innovative. They attack every production with precision, teeth, and a desire for the imponderable.

To achieve the effect the company desires, they must approach every work with the utmost precision. When I entered the company as an intern and became privy to watch several of the *Vieux Carré* rehearsals, I found the Wooster Group to be a well-oiled machine. For whatever reason, I imagined rehearsals from an experimental company would have a chaotic, “anything goes” kind of atmosphere. Reading LeCompte’s thoughts on her own process, “throwing a bunch of beans in the air,” made me think that each day would be dynamically different, that one would walk into the space not knowing what to expect. Some part of that assumption is accurate. The Wooster Group rehearsal room is full of potential and literally anything can happen. But all that occurs in the Performing Garage functions under a highly structured system. I would compare the rehearsal process more akin to a film shooting than rehearsals for a stage play.

For one, the technicians are highly involved in every moment of rehearsal. The sound, lights, and video technicians are very much actors in the performance taking shape. They change, adapt, and experiment right alongside the actors. Frequently, LeCompte will be struck with an idea and the sound or video technicians will be asked to “splice something up” at a moment’s notice. This sometimes demands complex, on-the-spot editing which the crew executes without hesitation. And because so much of what LeCompte wants creates an environment for the piece, the cast and crew must synchronize to avoid any hazard or missed cues. The stage manager, Teresa Hartmann,

has the momentous task of coordinating this complex system which requires extreme patience and vigilance. Before every scene, rather every “take,” she calls out specific numbers to both video and sound technicians and then warns the entire company, “Everyone ready? Everyone ready? Ok, go!” If one piece of the puzzle is missing, if one actor or one crew person misses the mark, Hartmann stops the scene immediately, and the entire company reassembles to recreate the moment.

Even when a scene is performed to LeCompte’s liking, she rarely lets the actors continue for more than three to four minutes at a time. This is another aspect that makes the Wooster Group rehearsals more comparable to a film shooting. Once the moment is perfect, LeCompte may ask the company to perform it again two to three more times. Every minutiae is analyzed, dissected, and once everything is set, the cast and crew move on to the next moment. A three to four minute segment of the performance might take an entire day to master. The Wooster Group’s process is so meticulous that traditional “run-throughs” rarely happen. They would rather spend their time perfecting specific actions or gestures than finding cohesion through running the entire show.

I credit this to LeCompte’s extreme devotion to the moment. Each action must be specific and honed with precision. Accidents can and do happen. The Wooster Group even encourages them. That is why one of the main tasks for an intern is to document the “accident tapes.” Every rehearsal is filmed in case something new, wild, or strange happens. The cast and crew will sometimes use the accident tapes to mimic these moments of inspiration calculatingly, so that even the accidents can be perfected into a performable gesture.

It is somewhat perplexing that the Wooster Group would be so attentive to precision, when LeCompte seems to undermine that at all costs. Many of the elements LeCompte adds -- the in-ear device, the televisions, the anarchic and fast pace of performance -- are there to deliberately throw the actor off course. And when the actors do get the moments “just right,” LeCompte seems to complain that they lose energy or verve. One day during rehearsal, LeCompte admonished the actors who seemed to perform any of their directions better the first time they were told. In repeating the action, they needed to perfect it “like it’s the first time,” she said. “We need to beat the film.” Part of beating the film requires teeth, the sense of risk and adventure missing in Akalaitis’s *Bacchae*. If an actor appears “too rehearsed” in performance, it is probably because the actor has settled into safe, predictable gestures. Somehow the actor must remain alive and alert on stage.

This element of risk and adventure is akin to what Japanese theatre director Tadashi Suzuki demands of his actors. He believes the actors should acquire an “animal energy” – the need for the actor to “survive on stage rather than die” (Allain 5). Suzuki creates this environment through a physical, demanding, and often frustrating training method. If the actor cannot cope under this immense pressure in training, then they will not be able to survive in front of an audience. LeCompte shares this sentiment and believes that when an actor is in danger they are at their most productive. She instills this principle to her cast daily. During rehearsal on October 6, 2009, LeCompte assured her cast that the stress and pressure they feel during rehearsal engenders some of their best work: “When you’re confronted with something that you don’t know how to react to, you are forced to make choices. And the choices you make in those moments are amazing. Even when they are stymied, those moments are your most creative.” Encumbered by the

multitude of tasks thrown at them at one time, the cast and crew arrive at risky and innovative choices because they have to in the moment of performance.

Finally, the Wooster Group strives to make each text, each source they encounter imponderable. But this goal is an ends that cannot be achieved through any deliberate means. Rather, it is an ethos that pervades their body of work. Regardless if it is *The Rhode Island Trilogy*, *House/Lights*, or *Vieux Carré*, the troupe wishes to create a subjective experience for their audience. Part of their method is designed to aid in this approach. They inundate an audience with a cacophony of sensual materials: visual, oral, and kinetic. By bombarding they hope to break the audience from an experience that can be talked about rationally. Ultimately, they want something more.

They aim instead for the visceral experience, one that rouses something in the viewer's unconscious. The traces and references in their work are there to stir up associations within the viewer, no matter how slight or obscure. In *Vieux Carré*, for example, Kaneza Schaal, who plays Nursie, walks on stage with a dress that could have been worn by the cartoon character Minnie Mouse. Some audience members may identify the dress immediately, while others may not recognize it at all. But even if a person can acknowledge the reference, they may not be able to consciously describe why it appears on stage at that moment. Regardless, the mere "being there" of the dress will evoke some sort of sensation, be it nostalgia, humor, or even confusion. All associations are justified, and through connecting as many signifiers through as many signs as possible, the Wooster Group can create a complex tapestry for the viewer, who draws so many lines of association, it is almost impossible to utter. My analysis of *Vieux Carré*, for instance, is the result of my subjective experience of the performance no more valid or invalid than anyone else's.

All of these associations, however, could take shape in a variety of forms. Duchamp, Rauschenberg, and Warhol were all able to execute the same effects in their art, but the Wooster Group's method is fundamentally theatrical. They harness the basic energy of the theatre – the actor and the space – and exploit it for its full worth. It is the manner in which the company generates an ecology with all these references that create this effect. The cast and crew, through the use of new naturalism, are also subject to the moment, and their act of survival creates an energy and relationship with the audience that is impossible to articulate.

*Vieux Carré* is the latest chapter in the company's repertoire and its honest approach towards the imponderable is a testament of the Wooster Group's effort to cultivate and grow their practice even after three decades of operation. As I write this paper, the production has only been performed in Strasbourg and Paris, France. While I have given a record of what rehearsals for those performances looked like, *Vieux Carré* has since been put on hold for a revival of *North Atlantic* to be performed in Los Angeles and New York. Before *Vieux Carré* performs in the United States, it will undergo another year's worth of rehearsal and in that time the company may adapt and revise their performance of Williams's text completely. The later version may resemble my account here only slightly. Because the Wooster Group develops their performances over a long period of time, and because they alter and adjust their work from day to day, it's difficult to imagine what *that* production of *Vieux Carré* may look like. The fluidity of their performances is just one more aspect that makes the Wooster Group both strange and imponderable.

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