The Great North American Stage Directors

VOLUME 7
The Great North American Stage Directors
Series Editor: James Peck

Volume 1
David Belasco, Arthur Hopkins, Margaret Webster
Edited by Cheryl Black

Volume 2
Harold Clurman, Orson Welles, Margo Jones
Edited by Jonathan Chambers

Volume 3
Elia Kazan, Jerome Robbins, Lloyd Richards
Edited by Harvey Young

Volume 4
George Abbott, Vynette Carroll, Harold Prince
Edited by Henry Bial and Chase Bringardner

Volume 5
Richard Schechner, Lee Breuer, Anne Bogart
Edited by Joan Herrington

Volume 6
Meredith Monk, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson
Edited by Ann M. Shanahan

Volume 7
Elizabeth LeCompte, Ping Chong, Robert Lepage
Edited by Claudia Orenstein and James Peck

Volume 8
Jesusa Rodriguez, Peter Sellars, Reza Abdoh
Edited by James Peck

methuen | drama
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY
CONTENTS

List of Figures vii
Series Introduction James Peck ix

Introduction Claudia Orenstein 1

Elizabeth LeCompte
1 The Forty Year Rehearsal: The Wooster Group's Endless Work in Progress David Gordon 23
2 Tele-Performatively Yours: Deformation, Distraction, and Meaning-Making in Three Recorded Works of Elizabeth LeCompte and The Wooster Group Thomas Cartelli 46

Ping Chong
3 Ping Chong: An Artist, Storyteller, and Activist Yuko Kurahashi 85
4 Animated Objects in the Work of Ping Chong Claudia Orenstein 116
2

Tele-Performatively Yours:
Deformation, Distraction,
and Meaning-Making in
Three Recorded Works of
Elizabeth LeCompte and
The Wooster Group

Thomas Cartelli

As I write, some nine months into a pandemic lockdown that has
shut down New York’s theatres as emphatically as early modern
London’s were shut down by periodic eruptions of plague, the way
we interact with theatre performers and performances is exclusively
mediated by our laptop and smartphone screens. Though this
situation may be new-ish to those of us who prefer live encounters
of every kind, face-to-face encounters between talking heads boxed
into TV monitors or between boxed-in talking heads and visibly
present performers has long been the stock-in-trade of Elizabeth
LeCompte and The Wooster Group, nowhere more so than in the
enhanced DVD recording of the 2003 revival of Brace Up! their
already profoundly intermedial spin on Chekhov’s Three Sisters,
which premiered in 1991. One of the more provocative connections

between the newly edited electronic economy of the Brace Up!
recording and the new world of Zoom is what often happens when
one of the Wooster performers commands the microphone to offer
a sustained monologue. As in Zoom when one face among twenty
emerges from the paneled gallery surround and assumes center stage
through the sheer virtue of speaking up, in Brace Up! as mediated
by the wonders of video overlay, a holographic avatar twice the size
of the speaking actor, looms up behind her, effectively doubling the
actor’s image and radically magnifying the actor/character’s spectral
presence. This more often than not occurs while monitors set up
on stage and off, and movable screens set below the level of the
stage, host two or three boxed displays of the same or competing
talking heads. Several of these heads, notably that of the old servant
Anfisa, never emerge onstage attached to the rest of their bodies,
while others, notably Baron Tusenbach’s, remain considerably more
elloquent and engaging as a disembodied chattering head than when
re-attached to an often ill-at-ease but occasionally graceful dancing
body. Maintaining no particular claim about the comparative
liveness of its boxed talking heads, here (both in the recorded and
live versions of the 2003 iteration of Brace Up!) as elsewhere in its
work, The Wooster Group also chooses to include recorded footage
of one of its own deceased actors, whose place in the production
has been reassigned to another (living) member of the company,
such that the dead and living actor co-habit the same (boxed) role.

This last effect may read as an oddly sentimental piece of
stage-business, or as an even odder, arguably regressive gesture
at reproducing the “aura” of the Group’s original production of
Brace Up! But if there’s anything Benjaminsian about Wooster
Group practice—which abhors anything smacking of origin or
essence, much less a vacuum—we would do better to identify it
with the Group’s long-sustained aesthetic of distraction. More is
more. Two heads are better than one, especially if we can watch the
dead head morph into the live head at least once in the course of a
production (as we do in Brace Up!). I cite Benjamin here not only
to supply a theoretical frame to contain what follows but because if
“technological reproducibility” (the most recent translated spin on
“mechanical reproduction”) is your game, The Wooster Group is
your team. Why? Because under the direction of Liz LeCompte they
pioneered, in the most expressly branded manner, the practice of
intermedial theatrical performance at a moment in the development
of experimental theatre when physical presence, the in-your-face liveliness of sweaty human bodies, was de rigueur even in their own earlier incarnation as The Performance Group.2 Appropriating the do-it-yourselfness of 1970s video with both the casualness of children born into the TV world of the 1950s and the intensity of self-taught early adopters, The Wooster Group took the early experiments of European visual projectionists like Josef Svoboda well beyond the generating of “curtains of light” into an aesthetic of colliding distractions spawned on TVs headquartered in American living rooms and inspired by B-movies presented as second features on Saturday afternoons.3

A Brief Excursus on Intermediality

The celebrated Czech scenographer, Svoboda, is the generally agreed upon “godfather” of projection design (Harrington 2009: 88–9). But stage directors like V. E. Meyerhold in Russia and especially Erwin Piscator in Germany began, in the 1920s, to use clips from existing films and slide projections not only to illustrate stage productions but to enter into dialogue with them. As Piscator writes:

The momentary surprise when we changed from live scenes to film was very effective. But the dramatic tension that live scene and film clip derived from one another was even stronger. They interacted and built upon each other’s power, and at intervals the action attained a furioso that I have seldom experienced in theatre.

(Piscator 1980: 97; quoted in Giesekam 2007: 41–2)

However, apart from the deployment of film clips in the political theatre of Piscator, the challenge of Meyerhold’s call to “cinematize” the stage (Meyerhold 1966: 187) was seldom answered prior to the groundbreaking developments in projection design recorded by Svoboda in the 1940s and beyond.4

Svoboda’s own immediate predecessor and model was his fellow Czech scenographer E. F. Burian whose “Theatergraph” system attempted a complete integration of human performer and projected image while attempting to eliminate the screen’s rectilinear borders

in the 1930s (Salter 2010: 149). When “combined with sophisticated lighting techniques,” Burian’s system could make “actors appear and disappear into the foreground and background surfaces, surrounding and immersing them in an expressive choreography of light and image” (Salter 2010: 150–1). A meticulous craftsman with a life-long commitment to rigorous experimentation, Svoboda generated early successes from similar attempts to “dematerialize scenography” (Svoboda 1993: 54), which, among other refinements, led to his projection of veritable curtains of light against “movable black reflective panels” in a production of Hamlet directed by Jaromir Pleskot at the National Theater in Prague in 1959. Svoboda would remain committed to the integration of stage practice with what contemporary technology made available, claiming that “Modern technical progress belongs to the modern theatre just as an elevator or laundromat belongs to a modern building” (quoted in Burian 1971: 23): a declaration that Liz LeCompte would surely endorse.5 But anticipating the misgivings of twenty-first-century critics about multi-tasking, he also worried “whether viewers would even be capable of perceiving several actions, images, or sounds at once” (Burian 1971: 110).6

This, I would submit, is where The Wooster Group enters the picture, transforming what for Svoboda seems a possibly insuperable problem into an opportunity to challenge and expand the existing repertoire of receptivity and responsiveness contemporary audiences could be expected to bring to their viewing/witnessing experiences. By radically revving up, accelerating, and displacing to all corners of a seemingly depthless, rectangular stage a mix of physically immediate and recorded or live-relayed behavior—movement, dialogue, monologue—often drawn from foreign or opposed quarters of the performance/production universe (e.g., the B-film Olga’s House of Shame, Gertrude Stein’s avant-garde Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, the indigenous Canadian film Atanarjuaq, Jerzy Grotowski’s Akropolis, among many others), The Wooster Group has, for over forty years now, effectively made controlled distraction its core aesthetic and, in the process, has relied on intermedial means both to provoke and control the distraction it generates. Never interested in reproducing the visually arresting large-scale backdrop effects favored by Svoboda and his followers, the Group from the start has preferred a much more grounded, propulsive, mediatized aesthetic, rooted more in the implosive,
feedback loops of rock musicians than in the more conventionally aestheticized aims of European art-theatre scenographers. Matthew Causey productively identifies this state and stage of intermedial reproduction—when "The mediated and the live are neither what they were, nor are they only one or the other"—with the "discrete aesthetic form" they have generated: "the tele-performative, which presents performance at a distance, presence at a distance, a digitally malleable time and space," creating "a collision between the aesthetics of dematerialization (the live, the now) and the flow of the televirtual (the reproducible) that challenges the autonomous nature of both" (Causey 2006: 45–6).

To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)

The Wooster Group is, of course, also noted for generating other kinds of collisions in its staged performances, specifically between artifacts of popular and high culture. After their early stagings of predominantly original material—Sakonnet Point, Rumstick Road, Nayatt School, Point Judith (1975–79), autobiographically inspired projects co-authored by Spalding Gray—and beginning with Route 1 & 9 (1981) and L.S.D. ( ... Just the High Points ... ) (1984), LeCompte and company have more often than not built their productions on, against, or around landmark works of the European tradition and twentieth-century American Modernism—including, in addition to Three Sisters, Our Town, The Crucible, Phèdre, Hamlet, Troilus & Cressida, and Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape, among others—effectively disarming such plays of the unassailable prestige of their freestanding canonicity. As in Brace Up!, To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre) (2002) deforms a classic play from the Western canon, from the ground up as it were, both deriving from Paul Schmidt's "American" translations. Whereas Brace Up! in both its stage and enhanced DVD reproduction does a kind of rough justice to Chekhov's much-loved play, however decidedly "postdramatic" its orientation might be, the recording of To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre) reconstitutes a production, which, presented live, was a more abstract, choreographed affair, whose restaging of Racine's play seemed largely parodic in aim and orientation, physically (if not metaphorically) assembled as it was around a badminton court. Even in its recorded form—which adds occasionally swirling jump cuts and variable framings to stage effects generated by sliding plexiglass panels and magnified overlays—Birdie is more committed to conceptual rearrangement and technical execution than to tele-performativity, making less use of colliding or interactive visual media than either of the other two projects under examination here. Indeed, its use of electronically mediated imaging often seems more amusingly deceptive than purposive, starting with the initial entrance of Theramenes and Hippolytus who appear casually groping each other (not always with their own hands) while physically seated half-dressed onstage behind overlays of recorded images of what purport to be their legs and feet but seem to belong to other bodies. In the production's second half, we find at one point the physically present Theseus lying horizontally behind the plexiglass panels for a full-body massage, only to rise and leave the digitally-recorded image of his head behind, effectively separating the iconic head of the hero from that of the aging, still laboring man.

This doubleness in division—the splitting up of the heroically or tragically iconic pose from the deplorably decaying body—is, perhaps, the parodic point of moments like this in Birdie in which all is not as it may ostensibly seem, as Bonnie Marranca suggests when she observes that

In To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre), one actor speaks in an electronically-modified voice on behalf of another actor, the director communicates from her seat in the audience to the actors through their wireless microphones, the actor's body interacts with a video camera to create an image on stage that is part digital, part live [...] As if to further confound performance styles, videos of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham dances are being played for the performers while the stage events transpire.

(Marranca 2003: 14–15)

Of all the production's component parts, its reliance on the laconic, ventriloquistic delivery of Phèdre's dialogue by Scott Shepherd's Theramenes would seem the most salient feature insofar as it contributes both to the doubling and splitting of character remarked above and to the concomitant divorce of emotional content from the
words designed to convey it. As Jennifer Parker-Starbuck remarks, "utterance," in the performance, "is doubly disconnected" (Parker-Starbuck 2004: 225). But what one makes of the production's more visibly (and sonically) arresting central conceit—the badminton court occupying the center of the playing area—is another thing entirely. This conceit finds several of the play's principals, primarily Hippolytus and Theramenes, engaged in remarkably adept but often one-sided bouts of badminton, played with mixed rackets supplemented by an array of recorded (Pop! Crash! Pow!) vaudevillian sounds, as scorekeeper-goddess Venus looks down and on from the vantage point of a raised video monitor. One wonders what is badminton to them or they to it? Do we read the game and its occasionally taut volleys as mere pleasurable distractions or as displacements of the untruly passions and remonstrations of Phèdre herself, a game "impassively" administered by a "virtually present Video Venus" that the emotionally spent Phèdre "is too feeble to play" (Giesekam 2007: 111)?

As reviewer Charles Isherwood has noted, "One form of stylistic rigor stands in for another here: The strict dramaturgy of the original is replaced by the technical precision of the production, in which the movements of the actors are intricately synchronized [...] But LeCompte and her collaborators employ their highly developed techniques in a manner strictly—and cheekily—in opposition to the aims of old Racine." He then adds:

...Left entirely out of the Wooster Group's methodical calculations is what was the focus of Racine's play: passion. The playwright's refined poetry was used not to smother feeling but enhance it. Behind the Wooster Group's aesthetic is a distrust of—even a contempt for—the theater's tendency to naturalistically depict human feeling, and by doing so to evoke emotional responses in the audience. The ability of words and actions to express particular emotional states is always being undercut by the distancing use of amplified, comic sound effects, or video screens, or by the stylized, ultra-unrealistic acting of the performers.

(Isherwood 2002)

Though what Isherwood himself variably censures or condemns may well amount to "contempt" for "the theater's tendency to naturalistically depict human feeling," it also arguably represents the modernist tendency—fully consistent with Wooster Group stage practice—to channel feeling's expression in a differently formatted but no less rigorous manner, so as not to be held accountable to an audience's expectation of emotional engagement, satisfaction or release. The parodically produced impression of Phèdre presented here is no doubt cruelly, even cruelly, condescending. We are, for example, repeatedly made to witness her ingestion of enemas to relieve her painfully frustrated bowel movements as emblematic of her overstuffed emotions and uncontrollable desire for Hippolytus, one of which leaves behind a dainty dollop of shit carefully scooped up by an attentive servant. But this way of manifesting unsatisfied desire in physical terms pales before the permanently distended phallus Scott Shepherd displays in the role of Nightingale throughout the Group's later production of *Vieux Carré* (2011). It also, oddly enough, makes space for Phèdre's despairing feelings to leak out, in the end, to an audience that may not prove as indifferent to her fate as Isherwood suggests. As Greg Giesekam concludes, "While the overall result is not a production that leaves in place the tragic world of Racine's play, neither is it simply a postmodern mockery of Racine's tragedy, as some critics [have] suggested" (2007: 114).

**House/Lights (1)**

Something similarly akin to sympathetic human emotion also leaks out towards the end of the brilliantly remastered recording of *House/Lights* (1998, 2005). LeCompte's frenetic mash-up of the lesbian-porn, bondage-and-discipline film *Olga's House of Shame* (1964) and Gertrude Stein's opera libretto *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1939). But it does so in so deeply ironized and multilayered a fashion that a predictably distracted viewer could be forgiven for failing to notice. Of the many varying responses *House/Lights* has prompted—one claiming "it's sometimes hard to tell whether the result is shit or gold" (Shewy 1999), another that the mass or mess of things "going on here" encourages one "to create your own story" (Obejas 1997)—the former, which also suggests that it is "a dream-like meditation on the Faustian bargain that we have struck with advanced media technology," would seem to indicate the more promising path forward. Or not, given that this choice clearly militates against the Group's long-established attachment to technology as the difference-making
component of their tele-performatively branded mode of theatrical address. *House/Lights* is a piece that often seems to run on parallel tracks, frequently failing either to connect, or draw sparks from colliding, the primarily theatrical material drawn from the Gertrude Stein libretto with the exclusively filmic material drawn from Olga’s *House of Shame*. Associations between Mephisto and the dominatrix Olga, and Faustus and the fugitive Elaine whom Olga, “like a god,” makes over into a double of herself, obviously suggest themselves. But they do so rather too broadly throughout, with the prose of Olga—abetted by the furious running around the stage and physical contortions it inspires in LeCompte’s emulating actors—and the Dr. Seuss-like poetry of Stein expressively (if not physically) resolving in Stein’s favor.

As a Marlovian of long-standing, I may be too bold in my preference for LeCompte’s *Fautings* over and against her own apparent delight in the brutal but crudely presented physical and psychological violations acted out in Olga and parodically emulated in *House/Lights*. For me the incitements of Olga’s physical and aural (re)delivery fail to outpace the unanticipated appeal of the Group’s rehearsal of Stein’s *Doctor Faustus*, which, even in elided form, faithfully reflects Stein’s own faithless dispersion of dramatic conventions in which speech, speech prefixes, and stage directions are conflated and largely delivered by a single univocal voice. Readers new to Stein’s evocative libretto should know that it turns on Faustus’s despairing disappointment with the devil’s gifting him the power to create electric light in exchange for his soul—on the grounds that he would have proudly preferred to have all the honor of light’s invention to himself—and resolve to commit new crimes in order to send himself to hell along with Stein’s hybridized version of Goethe’s Margaret: *a persona or personae* (more than a single *character*) collectively named Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel (hereafter MIHA), whose life Faustus indifferently saves from the fatal bite of a viper. In Stein’s, and LeCompte’s, retelling, MIHA’s “story,” such as it is, dominates the play’s second act in more ways than one as Kate Valk multiplies her physical image in the form of two disembodied talking heads in monitors positioned in front of and behind her to her left. “Their” story also features at the production’s closure, where MIHA (as channeled by Valk while also channeling Faustus) resists Faustus’s invitation to join him in hell only to be caught up in (at least) the (textual) embrace of the mysterious “man from over the seas,” as “he” (also rendered by she, Kate Valk) tenderly repeats his ominously seductive catchphrase:

> Pretty pretty pretty dear I am he and she is she and we
> Are we, pretty pretty dear I am here yes I am here pretty
> Pretty pretty dear.

*(Wooster Group 2000: 58; *Doctor Faustus* 607)*

I note the embrace’s textuality since neither in Stein nor in the Group’s performance is the man from over the seas embodied by a specifically identified actor; indeed, in *House/Lights*, most “parts” except for Suzzy Roche’s Olga and Mephisto are taken and spoken, narrated rather, by Kate Valk who, in an indistinguishable sing-song, offers a similarly stylized reading of the “man’s” earlier (dis)possessive claim:

> I am the only he and you are the only she and we are the only we. Come come do you hear me come come, you must come to me [...] I am not any one I am the only one, you have to have me because I am that one.

*(2000: 44; *DF* 597)*

The suggestion here as elsewhere in the performance, pointedly amplified by the Group’s manic rehearsals of Olga’s sadomasochistic moves, is less a choice of characterization than of role-taking and role-playing in a predatory world that is virtually impossible to shake.

Clearcut narrative has, of course, never been The Wooster Group’s—or Gertrude Stein’s—stock-in-trade. And my synoptic reading of Stein’s threadbare plot is surely at variance with whatever form of meaning-making LeCompte and company is (or, more likely, is not) attempting here. But however split, diffused, or hybridized it may be, the “character” construct of MIHA distinguishes itself, in this almost exclusively female-cast and female-dominant production, by repeatedly cutting against the grain of despair and disappointment alike. In the production’s closing phase, in response to Faustus’s claim, “you know I can go to hell and I can take some one too and that some one will be you” *(2000: 57; *DF* 606)*, MIHA asserts:
Never never, never never, you think you are so clever you think you can deceive, you think you can be old and you are young and old like any one but never never, I am Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and I know no man or devil no viper and no light I can be anything and everything and it is always always alright.

(2000: 57; DF 606)

MIHA’s retort is, as noted above, more confident than prescient as, in the performance’s last moments, she may have avoided hell only to fall “back fainting into the arms of the man from the seas” (2000: 58; DF 606–7), which may suggest a death resembling that of one of her namesakes, Poe’s Annabel Lee. Such moments—and there are more than a few both in Stein’s libretto and what’s made of it in House/Lights—occasionally unsettle the established belief that the detached, often parodic, bordering on contemptuous, way in which The Wooster Group approaches the expression of emotion, is a central component of their theatrical aesthetic, particularly as displayed in the no-holds-barred send-up of Phèdre’s erotic posturings and constipated despair. But the fact that in this instance the Group is channeling a vital piece of its own avant-garde heritage—and that the piece in question comes closer to narrative coherence than most of Stein’s other work—may make a difference that is crucial with respect to the allied art of meaning-making.

I say may because in performance—and particularly for auditors of a single performance—pulling feeling or meaning out of MIHA’s or Faustus’s pronouncements is embattled from the start by the fact that the Wooster actors themselves spend much of their time on stage running furiously toward or in flight from one another or otherwise posturing in direct emulation of the movements of the actors who populate Olga’s House of Shame. (Even in the production’s last moments, as Valk rehearses MIHA’s determination not to follow Faustus to hell, the actor is responsively fondling her breasts as hands are doing the same to a torso framed in a monitor.) Meaning makers (one assumes there are a few in every audience) may, of course, respond from the start by tracking moments of collision and coherence, particularly those generated by character functions and effects. As suggested above, Olga is, for example, to Mephisto as Elaine (initially persecuted, running for her life, then ultimately “reformed” into a partner of Olga’s sadistic practices) is to Faustus (willingly “persecuted” by Mephisto but happy to turn hostile to MIHA and to the dog and the boy he must kill to gain entrance to hell.) But however many such analogies may be marked or glossed, the furioso of the performance itself—its sheer distractedness—arguably makes House/Lights far more of a challenge to audience apprehension (with comprehension often reduced to the status of lost cause.)

**A Brief Excursus on Benjamin’s “Reception in Distraction”**

I’d like to build back now to an early comment of mine regarding what I take to be The Wooster Group’s aesthetic of distraction, which, while seemingly pushed to the breaking point here, has been from the start a prevailing component both of their process and project. I’ll begin by referring to a series of observations on “high-speed vigilance” that Walter Benjamin made towards the end of his “Mechanical Reproducibility” essay, which have much to do with what we can safely call “audience response” or “spectatorship” in our postmodern age. Benjamin’s remarks on “reception in distraction”—which appear toward the end of the second version of the “Mechanical Reproducibility” essay—pointedly derive from his own experience and analysis of film, as the following passage indicates:

The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of appeception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to evade such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is possible to mobilize the masses. It does so currently in film. *Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in appeception—finds in film its true training ground.*

(Benjamin 2008: 40–1)

And this because, Benjamin alleges, “Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception” (41). If Benjamin
believes, as Howard Eiland writes, that “the cinema is the authentic [...] training device, for the sort of reception in distraction which is coming into being in all areas of contemporary art, and which is symptomatic of a new kinetic apperception,” then “[w]hat makes film instrumental in the cultivation of such a decentred reception is [...] the metamorphic mechanism of montage,” which is no longer opposed to distraction, as in [Benjamin’s] essays on Brecht, but is its vehicle” (Eiland 2005: 8–9). There is much to unpack here, starting with the connections I draw later on between Brecht and Benjamin and the much less obviously politically engaged Wooster Group, which Eiland anticipates when he goes on to claim that “The opposition now would seem to be between mere distraction and, shall we say, productive distraction—between distraction as a skewing of attention, or as abandonment to diversion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving. In either case, a certain wandering or dispersion makes itself felt” (Eiland 2005: 9, emphasis mine).

Gertrude Stein would join Benjamin in identifying the cinema as the ground and generator of distraction in her 1934 essay “Plays” (see note 13 below). But for now, I’d like to focus on Eiland’s slightly different emphasis on what Benjamin terms “profound changes in apperception” occurring in the modern viewing/receiving subject. As Eiland writes:

For Benjamin, such high-speed vigilance is as much a defining feature of modern experience as distraction itself is. In other words, when he asserts that reception in distraction is becoming increasingly noticeable in all areas of art today, and is moreover a symptom of profound changes in human “apperception” (such as unsettling the possibility of relaxed contemplation, of mentally “dwelling”), he is offering both a description and a challenge. Reception in distraction is conditioned, first of all, by the dynamics of modern technology, by the technologization of things—the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence, and so on. At the same time, it is a covert measure of the ability to perform new tasks of apperception, for successful reception in distraction presupposes that a mastery of certain tasks has become habitual. What is at stake here, it would seem, is a dialectical mode of reading that effectively

masters the technological apparatus—as the film actor masters the recording devices on the set—with the aid of the apparatus itself. The actor places the apparatus in the service of his triumph over it; this triumph of what appears to the audience to be the actor’s humanity is a product of the use which the actor makes of his own self-alienation in the face of the camera. His mastery therefore presupposes, as well as promotes, an interpenetration of nature and technology, physis and techne.

(Eiland 2005: 6–7)

Critics and reviewers often note (in dismay) not only the overtaxed repertoire of discernments a multitasked auditor is required to develop in response to (often in defense against) a Wooster Group production’s assault on one’s senses and intellectual resources alike. Often less noted is the sheer mastery of the means of theatrical production of the Group as a whole—ranging from the directives buzzed into the ears of actors, the actors’ ability to hit their marks in manic relays across the stage that are synched to the particular (aural and visual) technologies at play, and the work of the programmers, sound-technicians, and videographers who in some cases sit as close to the center of a production (and are as essential to sustaining its beat) as drummers on a rock-concert stage. For a Wooster Group performance to succeed with its target audiences—in stage spaces spread across New York City and the globe—such audiences must be able to absorb, if not entirely decipher, the virtually nonstop acceleration of sounds; movement; vocalization; stylized, often to the point-of-distorted, dialogue deriving from onstage actors and video recordings alike; and the actors’ often manic imitation of the movements of other actors on video monitors that are frequently hidden from audience sightlines. So nuanced, rigorously rehearsed, and executed are all these verbal, audio, and physical moves that it is literally impossible for any viewer to register, much less apprehend in any immediately coherent manner, most of them. 

However apperceptively conditioned by “the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence” a sophisticated Wooster Group playgoer may be, much that might reasonably be expected to be understood is also so cloaked in the Group’s long-sustained gestation of a piece and private understandings that the
Conveyance of message or meaning is often rendered opaque. And if we turn, as one often does in such cases, to the named authors of these entertainments, especially to the first among equals named Liz LeCompte, we often come away no better educated in our search for logic, coherence, or meaning. To what extent, then, can The Wooster Group’s distractions, its entertainments—like those 1930s Berlin revues that inspired Benjamin’s contemporary Siegfried Kracauer with similar thoughts about reception in distraction—be considered productive?

### House/Lights (2)

At this turn, it might prove helpful, as we work our way back to House/Lights, to take a look at a few of the rehearsal notes, journal entries, offhand sketches and more rigorously detailed blocking and technical prompts that led to the production’s initial performances, and to interviews with their lead author and actor, Liz LeCompte and Kate Valk. These are generously supplied in a remarkably compendious resource, The Wooster Group Work Book, compiled by Andrew Quick. The Work Book (Quick 2007) contains a wide variety of materials ranging from copies of hand-written notes, stage-sketches, and blocking directives; annotated text of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights; screen-grabs from Olga’s House of Shame; assistant director’s scores and sound scripts; blocking and directive print-outs; and about a hundred or so rehearsal or performance photo reproductions. (Similar sets of material are also assembled here for four other Wooster Group productions, including To You, the Birdie! and Brace Up!) One of the first documents on offer is a hand-written note dated June 5, 1996 that highlights “Olga” as LeCompte’s resource of first resort, with the following remarks appended below: “parts of Steins plays adapted to ‘Olga’ style” and then “(instead of bringing Olga to Steins, bring Steins to ‘Olga’)” (Quick 2007: 168). Probably most revealing here is LeCompte’s specifically targeted focus on Olga along with the indication that she had not yet fixed on Doctor Faustus as her resource of second resort. A second, undated entry, likely recorded soon after the first, does identify Steins’s Doctor Faustus as the preferred colliding text but also offers the following analogy between the plots of the two pieces under the heading

---

**Real story of Faust**
Mephisto helps faust acquire women... Then takes him to hell at end.
Peyton [that is, Olga] brings Olga girls to Faust/Kate ... Then takes Kate at end to Devil.

(Quick 2007: 171)

Apart from the reduction of Faust to a sex-starved lecher and Mephisto to diabolical bawd, LeCompte’s early concept looks forward more (as noted earlier) to a production running on parallel tracks than to the collision, verging on train-wreck, some think it becomes. As we will see when we turn back to the production, nothing so straight or simple obtains by analogy here. And though the intention of “bring[ing] Stein to ‘Olga’” may seem the counter-conventional, canon-busting thing to do, Stein’s Doctor Faustus will also play a strongly determinative role in shaping this production, as Stein’s early emergence in another slightly earlier page of journal entries (dated December 21, 1996) indicates (Quick 2007: 170).

Drawing directly on Stein’s well-known remarks on “emotional syncopation” in her 1934 lecture “Plays,” LeCompte appropriates here a remarkably pertinent piece of what we today would call “reception theory,” to wit, “your emotion is either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking” (Quick 2007: 170), which prompts Bonnie Marranca to remark that “Stein’s words read like a Wooster Group manifesto” (Marranca 2003: 15). However, rather than pursuing, with Stein, the implications this claim might have for questions like “Does the thing heard replace the thing seen does it help it or does it interfere with it. Does the thing seen replace the thing heard or does it help or does it interfere with it” (Stein [1934] 1998: 250-1), LeCompte transnutes it from a problem of audience reception into a model or template for receptive or imitative performance. As we see in the journal entry in Figure 2.1, LeCompte’s arrow points directly to “performers watch video & react to moves—always a little behind the move OR anticipating the coming move.” This swerve from Stein’s statement about reception to LeCompte’s performative directive is doubly arresting for LeCompte’s failure to note that Stein is not just describing a component of reception but lamenting its existence. For Stein, the sense that what’s depicted onstage “is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience” is “what
makes one endlessly troubled about a play, because not only is there a thing to as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so” (Stein [1934] 1998: 244–5, my emphasis). As Adam Frank rehearses Stein’s further musings on the subject, we find the earlier “endlessly troubled” feeling morphing into a more kinetic response when “the thing seen and the thing felt about the thing seen not going on at the same tempo […] makes the being at the theatre something that makes anybody nervous’ (Stein 1998: 245): a nervousness, which Stein defines as “needing to go faster or to go slower so as to get together” (Frank 2012: 451). Particularly revealing in this exchange is the extent to which LeCompte, whose self-styling occasionally identifies her as anti-textual, even anti-intellectual, opportunistically misreads Stein, and in the process turns what apparently makes Stein so nervous a playgoer into the possible cause of “trouble” or “nervousness” of auditors of the very production LeCompte is assembling—in which performative syncopation will (hypothetically) help render Stein’s longed-for closure of the gap between performance and receiver increasingly postponed. In my terms, what’s apparent in the move amounts to the syncopation of distraction for an audience that may or may not prove sufficiently adept to keep pace with the Group’s aural and visual beat.⁴

Another way in which LeCompte could be said to strategically misread or misappropriate Stein’s concern about emotional distraction is the generally unemotional manner in which LeCompte both accelerates and moderates the Group’s assault on its audience’s senses. The affectless delivery of Stein’s text combines with the already flat, verging on self-parodic, delivery of Olga dialogue to generate a very different kind of nervousness in its audience, one likely more concerned with preserving presence of mind in the course of the theatrical equivalent of scorekeeping. “Who is Valk channeling now? Is Suzzy Roche standing in for Olga while wearing her Mephisto get-up?” are only two kinds of tracking questions even an experienced Wooster Group audience—which could hardly contain more than three or four individuals conversant with Stein’s Doctor Faustus or Olga—might be asking themselves.

What I present here, after Stein, as nervousness could, of course, also be understood as thrill, excitement, surprise, pleased bewilderment, or even Brechtian spass, that is, pure fun. Approaching their material more in the vein of camp than kitsch and seeming

---

**FIGURE 2.1** Elizabeth LeCompte, journal entry for *House/Lights* (1996).
to have great fun themselves in performing and presenting it, the chances of the Wooster Group being taken too seriously—especially in this particular production—are very slim. This is particularly true of their choice of, and cartoonish manner of displaying, the varying same-sex and heterosexual soft-porn and sadomasochistic moves on display in Olga’s House of Shame, including having Elaine’s victim-successor Nadja whipped and giving her a spin in an electric chair. (All of this is represented with the same level of seriousness that informs Tim Burton’s send-up of mid-twentieth-century B-grade filmmaking in Ed Wood [1994].) While the choice of Olga could have supplied (as noted above) an ominous doubling or exacerbation of the power dynamics of the Doctor Faustus “plot,” as presented thirty-four years later in a decidedly post-transgressive 1998, nothing could seem more immune to serious effect than the Group’s affectless display of early 1960s-style transgressive desire and sadomasochistic abuse. Rather, Olga appears to have been appropriated more for supplying Doctor Faustus with a sustaining ground-bass of frenetic physical movement, often excitedly scored to the fourth movement of Brahms’s Third Symphony, as well as supplying the actors and audience something to watch on TV while the high points of Doctor Faustus play out.

Although LeCompte will insist throughout on sequences of doubling in those odd moments when the parallel tracks cross and the works collide, the last, often moving pages of Stein’s text survive the collision clearly enough to remain resonant. This, I would submit, is where the discursively productive work of the piece is done—though, again, that is not to dismiss the felt productivity of spass, which enters the fray in many guises, ranging from inspired clips from Young Frankenstein (1974) and I Love Lucy (1951–7), superimpositions of Busby Berkeley choreography, and a shared performance of “Ring of Fire” (1963) by Mephisto, Faust, and Johnny Cash. Indeed, as Greg Giesekam has pointedly challenged, “What’s wrong with funny? Why is it always an afterthought?” In answering his not entirely rhetorical questions, Giesekam argues that resistance to taking pleasure as seriously as meaning-making is “symptomatic of a tendency, even in the most sympathetic discussion, to bracket off the comedy in Wooster Group performances.” And this, he finds, is especially true of the bracketing off of the “felt experience produced by the frequent dances found in the Woosters’ work” (2004: 86).16

A Brief Excursus on Brecht and Benjamin

These interruptions of the more sustained collidings of Olga and Doctor Faustus need have no source other than the promiscuously intuitive decisions of Liz LeCompte to take pleasure where she finds it. But the interruptive style itself is so consistent a component in the Wooster Group theatrical battery that it deserves a brief culling out for commentary. As Howard Eiland notes, and as Benjamin writes “in the first of two essays entitled ‘What is Epic Theatre?’ (dating from 1931), ‘The discovery of situations is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences’” (Eiland 2005: 4). Eiland continues:

Benjamin lays emphasis [here] on the principle of interruption, which, with its “retarding character” [...] makes for the distinctively punctuated, intermittent rhythm of Brechtian drama. Whether by means of the sudden intervention of song, the use of captions, or what Brecht calls the gestic conventions of the actors, this interruption of sequences creates gaps which undermine the audience’s illusion of a “world” on the stage and make room for critical reflection, including the possibility of imagining, as Brecht says, “a different set of political and economic conditions” [...] under which the actions on the stage might take place.

(Richard Wolin pointedly adds that “The strategy of interruption common to both procedures [aims] at disseminating an effect of distraction, an effect diametrically opposed to the immersion of the recipient in traditional aesthetic or—to use the terminology developed by Benjamin [...] aural works of art” (Wolin 1994: 152). I have no doubt that the Wooster Group has long been drawing on the precedent and template of Brechtian interruption and that for them interruption also functions to distract audiences from the possibility of getting caught up in any developing linear continuity or momentum. But the distraction effected by interruption also serves the Group as a way of presenting themselves to the audience as eager-to-share collectors and curators displaying items culled from a cabinet of contemporary curiosities that draws
on the full panoply of American popular culture and the Group’s more abstruse investigations of material ranging from Inuit myth traditions to Southern Pacific stick dances to Japanese theatre and film conventions to Shaker song and dances to the B-sides of 45-rpm records.

What Eiland calls the “principle of interruption” has, for LeCompte and company, little to do with either the pedagogic or political function it served for Benjamin and Brecht. For the latter, interruption “brings the action to a halt, occasioning surprise, and hence compels the spectator to adopt an attitude towards the situation in question, and the actor towards his or her role” (Eiland 2005: 4). But in a Wooster Group production, as, for example, in The Wooster Group Hamlet, the sudden displacement onscreen of the 1964 Electronovision Hamlet by a clip featuring Bill Murray “performing” Polonius in his flat, affectless Chicago accent in Michael Almereyda’s 2000 Hamlet updating or another of Charlotte Heston over-emoting as the Player King in Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 Hamlet film has the Wooster group actors themselves becoming fellow onlookers with their audience, seemingly as delighted by the surprising incursion of this material as their more knowing audiences are. Indeed, when Mephisto and Faustus happily collaborate on singing “Ring of Fire” with Johnny Cash in House/Lights—a moment after the climactic “birthing” scene from Young Frankenstein (1974) takes charge of the stage’s central video monitor—the tempting to sing along is hard to resist. We can, if we like, make more discursively productive connections between Gene Wilder’s Dr. Frankenstein and Peter Boyle’s monster, Mephisto and Faust, and Olga and Elaine. But doing that instead of sharing the pleasure of surprised recognition just about any auditor could be expected to feel would surely identify us as void of taste, humor, and imagination.

Brace Up!

A different kind of irony obtains when we consider that among Wooster Group productions that have been revived and re-performed after a significant lapse of time, fully recorded on DVD platforms, or retained in their repertory for an unusually extended duration, Brace Up!—a comparatively “faithful” if characteristically reformulated take on the ultra-canonical Three Sisters—should, along with House/Lights, Hamlet (2007, 2012), and The Emperor Jones (1993, 2006), hold pride of place.

A prominent concern besetting twentieth-century (and beyond) performances of Chekhov’s plays has been how seriously to take their author’s characterization of them as comedies. From their first performances at the Moscow Art Theatre under Stanislavski’s direction, and in direct contravention of Chekhov’s wishes, a sustained pathos has set the prevailing tone of most Three Sisters productions. Many of these have veered closer to tragedy than comedy, with the gunshot that ends Tusekhab’s life and Irina’s hopes effectively transforming the imagined lives of the surviving characters into virtual afterlives. That gunshot still sounds under LeCompte’s direction, but only as one among many competing sounds as the performance distractedly rushes to conclusion—and while Scott Shepherd’s Tusekhab, enjoying one of his comparatively rare, fully embodied moments on stage, dances along with the others to a laconic rendition of “Beautiful Dreamer.” Coldly summarizing what happens in, and what’s edited out of, the radically abbreviated fourth act—compressing Solony’s challenge, Tusekhab’s death, and the sisters’ future into “He shoots and kills him. Nobody gets to Moscow”—Kate Valk (alternating in the role of emcee/presenter and sister Masha) also speed-dials past the sisters’ closing evocations in a manner that anticipates Shepherd’s fast-forwarding his way through the slow patches of the Electronovision Hamlet in the later Wooster Group Hamlet. Rather than allow the evocation of dashed hopes to resonate, Valk literally sends everyone packing with the words, “That’s all we have time for this evening. Thank you for coming. Good night,” without a glance back at the concluded proceedings.

Deforming conventions that have made pathos its ground-note—starting with her casting of the 72-year-old Beatrice Roth as Irina in 1991 and again when she was eighty-four in 2003—LeCompte, abetted by the predictably protean Valk, effectively transforms the play into a social comedy of diminishing returns: one that is not at all void of thought and feeling but which casts a caustic eye on sentimental presumptions of all kinds. The distractions on offer in Brace Up!—primarily its dances—are served up at very different levels of aim and intensity than they are in Birdie or House/Lights, and help bridge the considerable gaps of tone and temperament of the characters. Despite being the most insistently intermedial of the
three works in question here—particularly in its recently recorded reproduction—*Brace Up!* is far away the most inviting and engaging. It is also, in its digitally enhanced iteration, possibly the most elaborately conceived recording of a Wooster Group production made thus far, expressly made to be visually arresting, even beautiful: one that also makes space on its DVD platform for a reconstructed recording of the original 1991 production, allowing us insight into the early stages of development of this work-in-progress.

In an instructive piece focused on LeCompte’s rehearsal process that takes us back to its 1991 staging, Euridice Arratia offers the following description of the production’s minimalist set design:

The main props are three standing lamps and a long-stem candelabra, two wooden coffee tables, three movable screens, several microphones (two on stands), three TV monitors (two of which are fixed on parallel tracks attached to the floor of the stage allowing them to be rolled up- and downstage), and two monitors hanging above the audience which casts the performance. On the left and right edges of the stage are two vertical panels of fluorescent light approximately two feet wide.

(Arratia 1992: 124)

In some of their other more intermedia-oriented productions, the images that find their way into the ubiquitous monitors can often seem randomly or whimsically chosen. Whimsy undoubtedly obtains in some of the electronic imagery circulated in *Brace Up!*—particularly with respect to material that survived the culling of LeCompte’s early interest in Japanese filmic and theatrical conventions, and relatedly in the substitution of a roaring Godzilla monster for an occasionally absent, abusive Solyony.21 But as Phaedra Bell has persuasively argued, decisions regarding whose boxed-in face/character appears exclusively in the monitors, and who manages to (literally) move out of the box and make a physically present appearance onstage, are carefully meted out and have a definite association with a given character’s dramatic status. Even more impressive, however, is how LeCompte manages to choreograph interactions between the boxed-in and more freely moving characters. As Bell observes:

In dialogic media productions such as *Brace Up!* [...] the video images appear both to perceive and to act. Although the audience mostly knows better, the body in the monitor images acts as though it were present on stage with the live performer, as it seemingly listens to her and/or follows her with its eyes. Furthermore, the recorded body reacts to the live performer by appearing to chat with its live equivalent. The on-screen images function as instruments of choice in dialogic media. The stage space takes the monitors’ illusion of depth away, and the live performers give it back.

(Bell 2005: 573)

Although their connection is dialogic, the interactivity between, say, the boxed-in Tusenbach (who is “really” speaking via live-relay at the far upstage end of the playing space) and Vershinin’s physically immediate character, or, at other points, between the boxed-in Anfisa (performed by Steve Buscemi’s pre-recorded grandmother) and Irina, is never staged naturalistically but always in the face-forward presentational manner favored by LeCompte, thereby dissolving any formal difference between more or less mediatized encounters. As Bell writes:

As usual, the Wooster Group eschews naturalist acting styles in *Brace Up!* Rarely does any performer look at any other performer, especially when addressing him or her. The performers most often seem as though they are reading their lines in the style of the Brechtian quotation. In keeping with that style, the illusory quality of this intermedia exchange does not attempt seamlessness to the extent that some dialogic media productions do, but even so, the video still carries the meaning it carries in part because of the timing of the live performers’ actions around it. Synchronization in a Wooster Group production won’t look the same as in a Moscow Art Theatre production, but the Wooster Group style still defines limits within which meanings produce themselves.

(2005: 574)

Key to the production’s presentational style is the way Valk—in her multiple roles—and Willem Dafoe (performing Vershinin in the
2003 production and subsequent recording) deploy the two stand-up microphones that become, especially for Vershinin, their preferred medium of address. Dafoe’s performance is particularly compelling for his way of channeling Vershinin’s vanity and seductiveness less through the words the character is assigned than in the soothingly seductive manner in which those words are presented, often to supportively atmospheric musical accompaniment. Leaning into his stand, his right foot planted on what (if this were a rock concert) would be a vibrato pedal, Dafoe effectively makes love to his self-pitying story of sentimental fatherhood and marital discord, pitching his utopian dream of the future happiness of mankind with all the tenderness a quiet-spoken televangelist might lavish on the promise of heaven. (In the recording of the 2003 production, Vershinin’s appeal is enhanced by the projection of an outsize holographic double hovering above and behind him [see Figure 2.2].) Parlaying his Moscow roots and remembrance of the Prozorov’s father into the three sisters’ good graces, Dafoe never jettisons the self-serving sanctimony that clings to the character even when mundane insisting on getting a cup of tea.

The stand-up miked solo that Ari Fliakos delivers in the role of Andrei in the production’s third act operates to differently powerful effect, particularly in the DVD recording, which also adds enlarged video overlays to its intermedial mix. The act begins in a flurry of activity centered around the fire in town that has consumed an entire block of houses, then moves, distractedly, from Natasha’s increasingly imperious (boxed-in) demands on the sisters to the departures of hangers-on who have heretofore made a second home of the Prozorov household. But the culminating move here is made by Fliakos’s Andrei, who, after a slow, quietly spoken, typically self-deluding start, builds to an expressive pitch of near-hysterical lamentation and complaint in which subtext takes complete possession of text. Andrei’s heightened pitch and volume are seconded (in the visually-enhanced recording) by the projected doubling of Fliakos’s upstage-facing body-image, suggesting an outsize despair that literally dwarfs the yammerings about Moscow that are the emotional stock-in-trade of his three sisters.

Andrei’s expressive outburst is the exception that proves the rule of a production that is generally more slowly paced and deliberative than either Birdie or House/Lights. Even when she plays fast and loose with Chekhov’s script, as she does at the start of the second act, LeCompte has her emcee Kate Valk carefully walk us through what’s missing, soliciting actor Joel Bassin—substituting for the deceased translator Paul Schmidt—to fill in any remaining gaps (as Bassin and Schmidt’s speaking faces appear and disappear into one another in the monitors). Such moments—and there are many in this production—find the Group operating at a level of engagement and address well outside the range of their more aggressive assaults on prevailing aesthetic conventions. Indeed, possibly the most compelling move on display in this recorded production—one that harps back to the original appeal of Melies’ cinema of attractions—is when it fills and activates the space above as well as the space below the front of the stage (which is already equipped with movable screens) with holographic overlays or projections not only of speaking characters but of others simply moving through their delegated paces (Figure 2.2). These overlays were designed both to show the faces of the actors more clearly on a screen and to mimic the effects the TV monitors had in the theatre. However pragmatically intentioned, the collage-like effect generated—as in
the Group’s practice of digitally integrating deceased with living actors—is positively spectral. As in the later Wooster Group Hamlet, the most cutting-edge technical means at the Group’s disposal are deployed to convey the most haunting, theatre-historical effects. When we include the boxed-in characters who appear mainly or exclusively within the monitors, or those who appear on any of the three movable screens, to this ensemble of embodied and disembodied performers, a cross-section of stage and screen histories-reaching back to a moment in time (ca. 1900) when the paths of early silent cinema and the great leap forward into theatrical modernity of the Moscow Art Theatre crossed—takes possession of the tele-performative playspace itself. Moments like these are carefully delegated in a re-performance that is notable for its brilliantly orchestrated timing and pacing. But as in the case of the production’s dances, in those instances when they do emerge, LeCompte’s response to interviewer Susie Mee’s query—“What else can you say about your adaptation of Chekhov?”—seems less like a boast than a truth claim: “I don’t think of Brace Up! as an adaptation of Chekhov. I think of it as a double portrait of Chekhov and the Wooster Group. We’re not interpreting him. We’re putting him on. We’re inhabiting him” (Mee 1992: 147).

**Tele-Performatively Yours**

Boast or truth claim, LeCompte’s boldly ambiguous (or ambiguously bold) comment—is she saying, we’re putting him on, meaning *messing* with him, or simply staging him, that is, mounting a Chekhov production?—rhymes with translator Paul Schmidt’s contention that although “LeCompte claims she has never read the play, and she did not in fact ‘read’ it in rehearsal […] she certainly heard it” (Schmidt 1992: 155). LeCompte herself makes no bones about her aversion to directly consulting established texts, particularly when she can rely on stalwarts like Kate Valk or Scott Shepherd to memorize entire plays. And as her many interviews suggest, her resistance to interpretation rises when asked to unpack whatever meanings may (or may not) be harbored in their work. But on the ground of sheer devotion to the work itself, there can be no ambiguity at all, as shown in David Gordon’s contribution to this volume, aptly titled “The Forty Year Rehearsal.” Here’s a slice of rehearsal footage drawn from Gordon’s witnessing of the process playing out:

There are times when it is excruciating just to watch. A tape or recorded bit of sound is played, the actor starts to recite the words or mime the action, and almost immediately Liz interrupts, corrects, and the whole thing is rewound and reset. Other times she is whispering notes, or signaling David to adjust the lights, or asking Eric to add music or noises, humming what she wants while he improvises on a keyboard or searches online. Still lithe and graceful at seventy-five, she bounds up and down the risers, jumps and runs and demonstrates the dances, and fixes her performers with a fierce, intense energy that seems both utterly focused and instantly distractable. She laughs at the same joke over and over and snaps at the slightest flaw. At one point, a character played by Erin drinks a glass of water, and Liz fidgets, tormented by having to wait for Erin to accomplish this task. She considers cutting it. She considers speeding it up. Then she realizes that the sound of Erin drinking has been inadvertently picked up by her mic and is playing at volume throughout the theater. She is entranced. This is the lucky accident she spends so much time waiting and preparing for. Despite the fixation on exactitude and the constant corrections, she is paradoxically delighted by errors, and nothing seems to make her happier than when the cast messes up; laughing and slapping her thighs, she declares, “That was a good mistake!”

(Gordon, this volume, p. 29)

However flattering passages like these may be in identifying the variably rigorous, exploratory, and deeply intuitive nature of LeCompte’s creative process, they fail to convey the incisiveness of her critical intelligence in the way David Savran does when he claims that “more than anyone else, Liz LeCompte pioneered what has since become the *modus operandi* of what is now called cultural studies: reading against the grain” (Savran 2004: 68). Bonnie Marranca elaborates on Savran’s claim in the following:

LeCompte descends from a tradition of subversive or anti-pedagogy that began with a critique of the Enlightenment. In her theatre, she undermines the role of art as the articulation of moral
values or as a statement of “truths” about the human condition. Refusing the role of director as critic because she is more interested in amplifying modes of perception than in any singular meaning, she plays with the very notion of “interpretation.” In their own way, however, in the pedagogical forms of the “lesson,” “examination of text,” and “rules” that wind their way through the productions, the Wooster Group has been educating audiences in a new understanding of theatrical experience joined to mediated experience that is closer to reality than the realistic theatrical style inherently criticized.

(Marranca 2003: 12, emphases mine)

Marranca’s assertion that LeCompte “is more interested in amplifying modes of perception than in any singular meaning” confirms her responsiveness to the “profound changes in human perception” that continue to generate what Benjamin called “reception in distraction.” That she performs this function as both a “materialist [and] an iconoclast, spreading confusion and skepticism” (Marranca 2003: 17) within an artistic and cultural milieu increasingly inimical to departures from a puritanically blinkered consensus may not bode well for The Wooster Group’s future prospects. But LeCompte’s legacy and theirs as the planet’s most risk-taking and enduring theatre company is no doubt secure and is being made secure still thanks to the growing archive of remastered recorded performances they are in the process of assembling. Taking Meyerhold’s summons to “cinematify” the stage to heart, LeCompte and company—in recordings of productions ranging as far back as Rumstick Road—continue to use all the means at their disposal to dissolve the distance/difference between theatre and film, repurposing work of the past to develop and thrive on newly-evolving platforms of the present and beyond.

Notes

1 All discussions of productions of House/Lights, Brace Up! and To You, the Birdiel refer to their recorded performances, which are available on DVD formats and streaming on Kanopy. Liz LeCompte served as director for all three recordings in question, abetted by Ken

Kobland, director of photography, with Geoff Abbas doing the audio mix. Kobland was also the primary editor for the Brace Up! video and To You, the Birdiel recording, with Kimberley Hassett responsible for the editing of House/Lights.

2 No discussion of liveness is possible without sustained reference to Philip Auslander’s groundbreaking Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (1999).

3 In his invaluable chapter on The Wooster Group in Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre (2007), Greg Giesekam notes that “the dominant place of television within contemporary culture is reflected in the Group’s persistent use of the television monitor rather than video projection” (2007: 81).

4 For a more informed and comprehensive review of Svoboda’s work, see “Polyscenicness: Josef Svoboda and Laterna Magika,” the second chapter of Giesekam’s Staging the Screen (2007: 51-71).

5 Indeed, as Giesekam observes, “LeCompte is very much a fact when discussing her use of video, suggesting she sees it as just something that comes out of the contemporary cultural context in which she works, which, therefore, should be available as a tool for her work” (2007: 115).

6 Svoboda also anticipated the losses his theater-work might incur were he to remain reliant on the creation and orchestration of a complex array of electronically-generated effects: “It means that Laterna Magika is to a certain extent deprived of that which is beautiful about theatre: that each performance can have a completely different rhythm, that the quality of a performance can be better or worse, that a production can expand its limits” (Svoboda n.d.). This is a concern that would apply equally to the rigorously blocked choreography and synchronized electronic effects of Wooster Group productions were it not for Liz LeCompte’s penchant for courting imperfection. But see Phaedra Bell: “When Beatrice Roth, the live performer playing Irina (in Brace Up!) talks with the performer recorded on video playing Anfisa, she must subject her own personal sense of duration to the constraints of recorded media. For the video to function as Anfisa, Roth must correlate each of her actions with the correct moment in the video. She loses some of her functionality as a center of choice, given that the video dictates her actions. Of course, she may choose not to follow it, but then the media would function as such—even in a Wooster Group production. [...] If Irina’s performance, stylized though it may be, does not ‘synch’ with the video according to these conventions, the exchange doesn’t function as an exchange” (Bell 2005: 574).
7 David Savran suggests that the "Group's habit [...] of returning to classic texts [...] as an example of what Bourdieu calls 'the strategy par excellence' of all aesthetic revolutions,' the return to sources [...] because it enables the insurgents to turn against the establishment the arm's which they use to justify their domination.” (Savran 1988: 67).

8 Ida undoubtedly derives from the fiction *Ida*, which Stein was at work on before and after completing *Doctor Faustus*, Helena from Marlowe’s Helen of Troy, with Annabel possibly summoning up the spectral American presence of Poe’s Annabel Lee, who loses her life at the side of the sea.

9 In an interview with Liz LeCompte focused on the *Brace Up!* rehearsal process, Euridice Arratia quotes LeCompte to the following effect: “Everybody has to be aware I don’t want anyone to fill any section with emotion. I want to fill it with your presence in the space. I want you to be who you are. I want physical actions, not emotions. The emotions would be given by the overall picture. Crying is an action not an emotion; don’t manipulate your voice or feelings. If the play is boring let it be boring.” (Arratia 1992: 133).

10 Cf. Marranca: “The Wooster Group invites you into their house but you are always a stranger, a witness to the inbred eccentricity and suspicion. There is no sense of intimacy, no comfort, no hint of what may occur from one moment to the next. Something reclusive and self-contained, something very private, even secretive about this theatre/family encourages a theatricality of narcissism” (2003: 17-18).

11 LeCompte’s resistance to meaning-making is no better instanced than in an interview with Andrew Quick, where, after noting that Stein’s “dialogue” was “hard to listen to” and “Often, we would make meaning out of it and I heard it as music,” she comes to the seemingly counter-intuitive conclusion, “So, it was very hard to find a style of performing that would let the language be free of meaning” (Quick 2007: 217, emphases mine).

12 Krakauer argues that “what the audience encounters in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions” is its own fragmented reality. In their motley parade of externalities, these shows convey a momentary sense, at least, of the disorder of society” (Eiland 2005: 8-9).

13 In her own pursuit of this question, Stein thoughtfully fastens on the recent evolution of sound in film: “I suppose one might have gotten to know a good deal about these things from the cinema and how it changed from sight to sound, and how much before there was real sound how much of the sight was sound or how much it was not. In other words the cinema undoubtedly had a new way of understanding sight and sound in relation to emotion and time” (Stein [1934] 1998: 251).

14 In an intriguingly apposite blog post inspired by Stein’s lecture, James Harriman Smith wonders “whether the actor is as syncopated as the audience member. If the spectator is always trying to catch up, isn’t the actor (if they are not totally lost in the emotions of performance) always trying to prepare for the next line, the next move? Of course, this kind of syncopation, on the modern stage, can be extremely productive; “total theatre” may try and drown out such syncopation on the part of the actors, while Brechtian performance will draw our attention to such tensions as part of its *verfremdungseffekt*. I just imagine now the ideal version of a play [as far as such a thing is possible] as a line, a wave moving through time, and with the audience a little behind and the actors a little ahead. Yet the beat is and must be, I guess, always evident” (Smith 2014). Smith doesn’t appear to be familiar with Wooster Group house-style, in which text is being spoken into actors’ ear-buds a syncopated step or two before the actors themselves speak the lines aloud, but he may well have already anticipated it here.

15 Cf. Marranca: “Dance is an essential activity for the company, not only to relieve the dramatic tension but also to cover over the lack of resolution of cultural problems. The ‘social dances’ performed create a sphere of freedom, bracketed off from the world, carnivalesque in spirit” (2003: 10).

16 Giesekam goes on to offer a telling critique of the critical habit of privileging the avowedly “productive” over the merely pleasurable in the work of the Wooster Group and other avant-gardists, which may be directly applied to the present essay as well: “I am not arguing that there are no discursive meanings to be generated from [Wooster Group] productions [...] Such meanings are there to be made or sometimes found—even if sometimes they emerge almost by accident [...] But I would argue that a mode of criticism which primarily focuses on these and brackets off the obtuse elements, the pyrotechnics, does a disservice to the performers in the nightly creation of Wooster Group productions” (2004: 94).

17 If, as Eiland remarks, “epic theatre is distinguished by ‘montage’, ‘curves’, ‘breaks’ (Sprunge), and by the fact that ‘each scene [is] for itself’” (Eiland 2005: 5), then Wooster Group stage practice would seem to operate in similar opposition to the principles of linearity and continuity that inform more conventional theatre practice—with the crucial difference that any political aims or intents would be far more often implied than directly expressed. That said, Bonnie Marranca
claims a different, satirical educative function for the work of the Wooster Group: "What energizes this pedagogical mode is not the wisdom of books. Rather, it is the manner in which texts and tropes are cataloged in the Wooster Group's own library and treated in its satirical dictionary of received ideas. Their works are satyr plays to be set alongside the classics of the dramatic repertoire" (Marranca 2003: 13).

For more sustained analysis of The Wooster Group Hamlet, see Chapter 6 of my recently published Reenacting Shakespeare in the Shakespeare Aftermath (2019). The book also offers sustained commentary on the Group's controversial collaborative production of Shakespeare's Troilus & Cressida with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012 (Cartelli 2019: 63–78).

In addition to To You, the Birdie! a reconstructed version of the seminal Rumstick Road (1977–80) has been recorded and archived (2011–13) and made available on DVD. The reconstruction of this piece is insistently compelling, especially for the emotional nakedness with which Spalding Gray revisits the scenes and circumstances of his mother's suicide and the rigorous manner in which Liz LeCompte objectifies them. David Savran writes brilliantly about this and other foundational Wooster Group productions in Breaking the Rules (1998).

Cf. Susie Mee: "In April 1991 [...] I went to see a Wooster Group production called Brace Up!, based on a new translation of Three Sisters by Paul Schmidt. Gone was the leader atmosphere, the Method-inspired clichés that have stuck to this play like barnacles. It turned out to be funny [...] surprising, moving, exhilarating. Like a newly cleaned canvas that has been covered with years of grime, there was a decided luminous quality about it" (1992: 144). Mee also includes Liz LeCompte's take on the subject: "Some of the humor of the performance is in the translation. It's very droll. But the Wooster Group is very attracted to certain paradoxes and ironies that we like to bring out. We like to think that most of our pieces verge on the edge of comedy" (1992: 147).

Commenting on LeCompte's "ruthless attempt to root out 'acting' in the traditional Stanislavskian sense through the use of Japanese theatre techniques," the play's American translator Paul Schmidt notes that "For over a year, all rehearsals began with readings on Japanese theatre history and conventions, and discussions of various Noh theatre techniques," many of which were incorporated into Brace Up! [including] the narrator who sets the scene, introduces the actors, and prompts them as needed; the stage assistant who dresses the stage and shifts furniture for scene changes; the prop master present at the side of the stage, handing up props as needed" (Schmidt 1992: 155).

Giesekam associates The Wooster Group with a theatre of attractions in his following assessment of House/Lights: "The technical ingenuity and the sheer bravura with which the performers play out the intersections between the various materials produce a theatre of attractions writ large: watching it, one could sense the audience thrilling to the roller-coaster ride of the performance" (2007: 106).

Works Cited


Bell, Phaedra (2005), "Fixing the TV: Televisual Geography in the Wooster Group's Brace Up!" Modern Drama, 48 (3): 565–84.


Cartelli, Thomas (2019), Reenacting Shakespeare in the Shakespeare Aftermath: The Intermedial Turn & Turn to Embodiment, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.


Giesekam, Greg (2007), Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre, Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Mawra, Joseph P., dir. (1964), Olga’s House of Shame, USA. American Film Distributing. Sound, b/w, 70 mins.