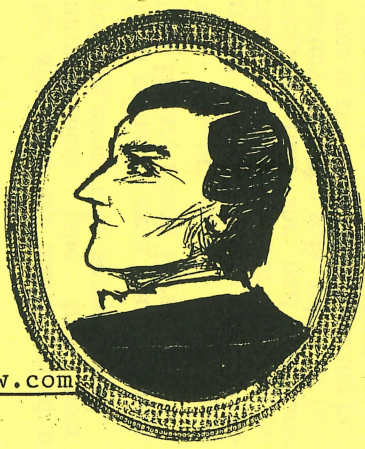


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March 15, 2000

THE 13th GAZETTE

EMERGENCY

LeCompte on Acting

Elizabeth LeCompte

has been directing plays at the Wooster Group for 25 years, and is currently working on Racine's PHEDRE, translated by Paul Schmidt. The following are excerpts from a talk she gave to MFA students at Columbia University's Theater Division on February 15, 2000. Part One of this talk appeared in EMERGENCY #12.



ON ACTING

FROM THE AUDIENCE: I want to ask you about the acting style I've seen in your pieces. I have a quote here about the Wooster Group "...the defictionalization of Wooster Group acting in which the self is more theatricalized than the character." I want to ask you about that, especially in terms of Kate Valk's acting. I found that I couldn't stop watching her on stage.

ANSWER: Well I don't think that's her acting, I think that's something deeper. The quality of the acting can be really bad if you can't stop watching somebody on stage. But besides that, Kate is a special case, as are a number of other people I've worked with. But generally I think what happens with the way we work is that I really see all the people on stage—because I'm the main eye outside—and I see all the people on stage as these incredible characters themselves. So I tend to like to work with people that I don't know much about or there's something funny about them, or they make a world, they help to make a whole world.

And I'm interested in a writer, but I'm not a character person; I see a writer, even with Chekhov. I saw Chekhov through every single character. I didn't see all these different characters out there; I saw Chekhov and us. So I tend to try to find out who the person is on the stage rather than who the character is and tell the person to play that. And then I try to find ways that the two things come together, that the ideas in the writing that Chekhov has given, I try to find ways that join the two, or sometimes the ways in which they split apart and you see the two things next to each other, where they don't come together.

For instance something like BRACE UP! where Irina was played by a 75-year old woman. There's a place where, ah, things came together so beautifully about her personality (I know her so well for many years) and about that character Irina. The thing that didn't come together was that she was supposed to be a young girl. But in that paradox, she was Irina and it didn't matter that she was old, and it mattered, and it didn't matter.

But I tend to do that kind of thing. I wouldn't hunt for somebody who looked like what people say the play is supposed to be. I look for something else in people that I know where I want to see a conversation happening between people that I

know. And it's not a perversity. In Germany, something like this would be a huge treatise: "She does not type-cast!" But I type cast as much as I don't type cast. It's just some particular thing with the company and with me.

ON VAUDEVILLE

I think that's a running thing in our company, this idea of vaudeville performance and old-style theatrical performance which comes up against very realistic, filmic realism and new technology that can make the tiniest gestures something. I like to contrast things that are extremely different, like vaudeville performing (like the Yiddish theater performance) against a kind-of '70's or '80's naturalism.

ON SPEED

I have a habit of going fast to avoid what I call actor pitfalls, which are these things when actors start to enjoy their moments. And it's a lovely thing to see. But what happens then is, for me, I lose the way in the overall structure. And the overall structure is so interesting to me that I tend to try to get an actor to touch that moment but move on before they experience it, because to me that's more natural, that's more what you see in life. It's the same thing you see with movement. I try to never have a person fit in the moment long enough to feel the moment. So it's like a habit. You have to break a lot of habits performing.

ON PHEDRE, SOAP OPERAS, THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

We got a gig with the BBC to do it [PHEDRE], and she [Kate Valk] took it over. It took us a while to develop the radio style, the oral style, but we did it.

Working on it, I brought my thing to it. Her interest was some sort of psychological interest; what I don't know, I don't care. She wanted a big role, could be that. No, I don't know.

In listening to it and trying to find a style for it, I got interested (again) in soap operas. I think it's our grand theater. It's the only thing that has a really large, emotional theater style in America that really works, that people can watch, that is not obsolete. So we used a lot of soap operas. The people working on the thing listened to soap operas as they performed the text. So if they had a soap opera in their ear, they would perform Paul's [Schmidt's] text listening to the soap opera and give it the same... which is hard to do. I'm interested in that and combining that with some Yiddish performing that we started out with working with Stein that didn't work, that we didn't use.

[...] I'll be working on the set, so that the performers will come into a set where I have some ideas of how they're going to move. I don't know what they'll be saying or why. But I

have these ideas of how they're going to move. So when they come in, they'll start moving like that, and I'll say I don't like that, and then we're off. It's very ad hoc. Sometimes it doesn't work. Even with something like HOUSE/LIGHTS, twice I said "I quit". We were going to dump the whole project. But since we have the space, 'cuz everybody's sitting there, saying, "well, if we quit, what are we going to do, get on the Staten Island Ferry?" I mean, there's no place to go so you come back the next day and something else happens. It's not a neat process.

ON THE MEETING

There's a certain vocabulary, both a directorial vocabulary and a design vocabulary that's kind of consistent through all the pieces. So we do have a kind of mark. It's like our aesthetic always meets the text in some way. The text, for me, I always feel like the text is the first thing I go for. But when people look at the work they always say they see us in the work. So I think it's a kind of meeting that's a little different. We don't hire out; we don't say "Oh look at this text, it needs a designer like this and it needs this kind of music and it needs these kinds of costumes." We take a text and we say "We like this. This suits us." And we try to bring the text toward us as well as move toward it. So there's some kind of a meeting. I think it's at a little different place than most conventional or unconventional theaters.

ON STRUCTURE AND STORY

I always find a story. I have an innate feeling for structure, so I think I grasp that almost immediately but I don't put it to words. I think that's a good director, when you don't have to know. If you have that innate sense of "Ah, this structure will work with this," you don't have to explain it sometimes. It can be a danger sometimes. If you have that innate feeling and then you start to second-guess yourself, then you're in trouble. For me, as a director, the most important thing is to make that initial feeling of the overall, what is the overall feeling of this piece.

ON READING THE TEXT

I don't know what the story of PHEDRE is. I don't think I like the story. I think it's something I don't like. But I'm going to find out about the story, because I'm going to put the story on the stage so that the actors tell me the story. And then as I discover it I begin to shape things that I like and move in ways that interest me.

But I don't like to read the story before hand, I never read PHEDRE, I haven't even read the script. I've heard it. I guess almost every piece we've done I might have read once, or not read—had somebody read it

to me once. I've never ever read anything we've done myself.

ON WORKING WITH OTHER ACTORS

Recently, we had to hire some actors to put into NORTH ATLANTIC to cover some people who had to go out on tour. And I noticed that the [new] performers were constantly looking at me, and asking me, "Am I doing ok?" And they'd come up afterwards and ask, "Is this what you want?" I didn't know what was going on. It's the first time I had this. And I just said, "I don't care, whatever you want to do, I mean I'll just tell you where to go. I don't care." I do care, but what I care about is that the person shows him or herself and then I'll know where to tell her to go. So this thing about trying to please me was very, very uncomfortable. And I think there's a sense of that at the Garage. That you can come and do something and it doesn't necessarily have to please me. Which opens up all kinds of possibilities in my company. Now, that doesn't mean you don't have to please me at the end. At the end, I'm the only person outside. So it's not a free-floating thing. But there's this place where I think people don't feel quite so vulnerable about whether they're succeeding in the beginning or not. Because most of the time I'm failing, and I'm pretty open about it. So it leaves a lot of room for fucking around.

ON FUNDRAISING AND THE WOOSTER GROUP MISSION

Well, we have a mission statement that we have to send out to the NEA. And our mission keeps changing with every grant because I try to adjust the grant to what they want for the mission. So our mission is always evolving; I don't know what it is from one moment to the next. All I know is that every day, I go down into my studio and work on something and that takes me somewhere, and that's my way of breathing. And I make these things at the end; they're never finished because—They'll be finished when I die. Because they're one continual stream of thought put into different contexts and different arrangements and so when people say, "Do you have a mission?" I have to say, "Yes. To entertain myself." Which is again very problematic. So we make up a lot of stuff.

We have a mission to keep a company together, to make great theater for the future... you know, all that kind of stuff. I really don't care. It's very personal; it's my own pleasure. And somewhere deep down, I'm very competitive. So somewhere on top of that I have to say, "Yes, I'd like to be the best theater-maker in the world." But for no reason other than that I guess I inherited competitive genes.



Gazette REVIEWS

Two Serious Ladies

Dir. Ken Schmoll, based on the novel by Jane Bowles. Horace Mann Theater Feb 16-19, 2000. Closed.



The author of this review was (is) a somewhat reserved person with undistinguished features, no limp in her gait, and an inner life that was active to a debatable degree. A sometime resident of Brooklyn, she became rather attached to Ms. Jane Bowles in the last few years. They rarely ever quarreled.

One afternoon she made a sudden announcement (she had been brooding about it for several days).

"I am going to see a play, uptown, at the Horace Mann Theater."

"You should spend more time around the apartment," said the sofa, "its dangerous out there." (She imagined that she had complete mastery over the sofa, when in fact it was in the habit of influencing her decisions in subtle, unnoticeable ways).

But on this occasion, feeling rather headstrong, she said, "No, I must go now. Although I love you," she addressed Jane Bowles—collected works, expanded edition—"there is something I expect to work out for myself by making this little excursion."

"You should leave the apartment," said Jane Bowles.

"Don't go crazy," said the sofa.

When she arrived at the theater, she was (unfortunately) too late to see the brief prologue, and walked in on Act One, which began in a somewhat dim, yellowy room in Miss Christina Goering's home. The play (adapted and directed by Mr. Ken Schmoll) was remarkably true to the novel both in narrative and in spirit, in its dry thorny wit and in the claustrophobic obsessiveness of the characters. The play managed to highlight the obsessive quality (a typically Jane Bowlesian element) with the dim lighting, the actors' tendency to speak in strangled bursts, and loud, sudden, source-less sounds. When Miss Goering asks

her house-mate and newfound companion, Miss Lucy Gamelon, "Do you like our little life?" that one question, in the play as in the novel, carries a world (a Jane Bowlesian world) of meaning.

As usual in the works of Jane Bowles, someone, or perhaps several people, make miniature excursions into the world in order to effect some change in themselves, to come to a realization about themselves or the world, or... Well, sometimes it seems impossible to figure out WHY they do what they do, because it seems so insignificant and arbitrary. The home assumes a giant significance that it could hold only for someone who is severely timid, severely obsessive, or possessed of such a substantial inner life that the meaning of being in one's home, or of leaving it, swells to mutant proportions.

The cast of TWO SERIOUS LADIES managed to embody this paradox of the insignificant yet vitally important. For example, Ken Schmoll's casting of a young red-haired actress (Kate Benson) to play a spinster with the personality of a religious fanatic (Miss Christina Goering) was a bit surprising, but really worked. Efsun Alper, as a prostitute named Pacifica exuded a skewed sexuality, and Jerusha Klemperer, as Mrs. Frieda Copperfield, was an awkward outsider dragged to Panama by her husband. However, Jenny Schwartz might have stolen the whole show as a prattling and self-possessed teenager, especially in the stunning final moment of Act Two, as she's being dragged out of a room yelling, suddenly, "My mother is dead."

She came back, more in love than ever with Jane Bowles as a result of what she'd seen and heard. The sofa was relieved at her return. "Please don't do that again," it said, "I have a weak personality." And unfortunately there would be no more excursions to see TWO SERIOUS LADIES since the play opened and closed in four days. Otherwise, she would most certainly have gone to see it again.

Jane Rose

Ferdydurke

Teatr Provisorium; Kompania Teatr; Liminality Productions at Raw Space; March 8-12, 2000. Closed.



We're so accustomed to Stanislavski/Strasberg acting that we're not aware of it—we hardly see a style on stage.

So it's refreshing—no, jolting—that the four actors in FERDYDURKE (from Poland's Teatr Provisorium and Kompania Teatr) throw themselves into performances that would have pleased Meyerhold. There's no motivation here—no internal life at all. They have the physical life of puppets, and an extraordinarily deft acting technique that lets the four of them—always in a tight playing area—move like one quartered organism.

The two companies from Poland are touring with their adaptation of Witold Gombrowicz' novel FERDYDURKE. Whatever the novel is like, this production's genealogy goes back through Sternheim's expressionism straight to Alfred Jarry's adolescent fantasy, UBU ROI.

In fact, the production is about a thirty-year-old as schoolboy (he tells us that the man apes the boy and the boy apes the man) and his age-mates. Its concern, as with any pup-

pet show, is with the mask—and with our adolescent need to be coarse. The schoolboy mugging contest (that's what they call the facial dual) degenerates into a gross-out contest, with faux flatulence. Throughout there's the concern with macho homoeroticism and its place in the larger sense of belongingness. It's all delightfully obscene.

Watching grown men playing boys creates a great "verfremdungseffekt", as does listening to the Polish accents (half the performances were in Polish). And there's a bit of narrative thrown in (presumably taken from the novel) to increase the distance between us and them.

However the Polish may read, the English translation is brilliant in its own right. We're told so often that the boy/man only wants to "fraternize" with the stable boy that the word takes on the weight of a delusion. And what an understanding of idiom: "Hit me in the chops" he tells the man. He's in a lower class frenzy.

Europeans are accustomed to their governments' funding tours of foreign companies. Our own government is so stingy in this regard that productions like this one are "events"—even aside from the quality of the art, which in this case is four-star.

Steve Capra

an exercise in impossible theater NATURE TABLE

(for 10-15 players, the same number of natural objects, the same number of cards, and a rectangular grid with boxes large enough and numerous enough to hold most of the objects.)

1. Make a stock of the natural objects.
2. One at a time, in any order, the players
 - a) place an object on the grid, or
 - b) move an object from one place in the grid to another place in the grid, or
 - c) write a name for an object already in the grid on a card and place the card near the object, or
 - d) move a card from one place in the grid to another place in the grid.
3. A player may not make two moves in succession.
4. When objects and cards have been arranged to the players' satisfaction, the exercise is over.

These instructions may be used. Courtesy of Jon Barlow.

LISTINGS

REVEREND BILLY

The Good Reverend will hold Sunday night revival meetings at The Salon Theater. If you haven't seen Rev. Billy's anti-Disney plea, you're in for surprising and perhaps delightful political theater. Sundays at 9pm. Salon, 358-5181.

LOVESPHERE V: EURYDICE

Presented in 5 days at 4 venues, this Gesamtkunstwerk includes over a hundred artists, including musicians, sculptors, actors, directors, costume designers, dancers, and weirdos. Each day: a different stage in the goings-wrong of the Eurydice-Orpheus relationship. The finale includes the dismemberment of Orpheus by a mob of female impersonators. Mar 17-21. For specifics, www.wrybread.com/lovesphere.

WOYZECK

Axis Theatre throws 2 tons of dirt on Buchner. Thru Apr 1, Thu-Sat at 8pm. Axis, One Sheridan Square, 807-9300. \$10.

SAD CLOWNS ON VELVET

Three Chekhov vaudevilles performed by Peter Brown, Ian Hill, and Peter Swander. Mar 16, 17 at 10pm, Mar 23-Apr 1 (Thu & Fri) at 8pm. NADA, 167 Ludlow St., 420-1466. \$10.

BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS

45 Bleeker St. 307-4100 for info.

THE ALCHEMIST

Classic Stage Company. Closed.



Every once in a while I ask my friends, "What do you think Shakespeare would be doing now were he alive and well and living in NYC 2000?" Some people I've asked think he'd be getting grants from the German Government to do theater in Europe a la Robert Wilson. Other people I've asked say film and others have said music.

Since seeing BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS, a contemporary version of Shakespeare's COMEDY OF ERRORS written and performed by a group of four recent NYU graduates, I am indeed convinced that, were Shakespeare to appear live and well and in the year 2000, his chosen medium might well have been rap.

BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS, directed and developed by Andy Goldberg, gave me that kind of rush that comes all too rarely in theater. Watching it in total amazement and exhilaration and all the time thinking, "I can't believe they're doing

AGAMEMNON VS. LIBERACE

Agamemnon comes home, with a Cassandra-like Liberace in his harem. Wri by Aaron Mack Schloff, dir by Samuel Bugeln. Mar 3-25, Fri&Sat at 10:30. HERE, 145 6th Ave, 647-0202. \$12.

MARAT/SADE

Peter Weiss vs. Fred Newman. Thru Mar 26, Thu-Sat at 8pm, Sat & Sun at 2. Castillo Theater, 500 Greenwich St., 941-1234. \$25.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR ON SEX, ART & FEMINISM

Written and performed by Emily Blake. Mar 24 - Apr 23, Fri & Sat at 8pm, Sun at 3pm. St. Marks Theater, 94 St. Marks Place, 726-8524.

SEVEN LEARS

Maestro playwright Howard Barker's contortion of Shakespeare. Dir by Rod McLucas. Mar 17-Apr 8, Thu-Sat at 8, Sun at 7. Metro Playhouse, 220 E.4th St, 462-9279. \$12.

METAMORPHOSES

A new adaptation of the Kafka story. Bug out. Mar 23-Apr 9 at 10pm. LaMama, 74 E.4th St., 475-7710. \$12.

OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

The indefatigable Steve Bird. Mar 10-Apr 1, Fri & Sat at 10pm. Collective: Unconscious. 145 Ludlow St. 561-9740. \$5.

THE BALLADEER

Big Art Group. High school surrealism. Feb 25-Apr 15, Fri and Sat at 10:30. Kraine Theater, 85 E.4th Street, 777-6088. \$12.

this" layered with "this is totally how it's supposed to be." Astonished and thrilled by the character transformations, the cleverness of the language and the sheer talent of the d.j., I hung on to their every line wondering, "How did they do that?" It's been a long time since I've enjoyed something so directly and immediately.

That same weekend I saw another modernization of a classic using present day NYC characters. Ben Johnson's THE ALCHEMIST, directed by Barry Edelstein, was fun to watch: Good physical slapstick and the acting was superb. Yet, it was only being made relevant to the present day—as opposed to being something of the present day. In other words, the gap was bridged, but it was still there, offsetting the direct thrill of the piece, unlike BOMB-ITTY, which was pure and direct, living the language and singing through it.

Susanna Speier

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F I L M

CONSPIRACIES

Program of experimental film from Europe and US, featuring works in multiple projection format. Curated by Mark McElhatten and Bradley Eros. Sunday, March 19, at 7pm. Exit Art/The First World, 548 Broadway, 212-966-7745. \$8.

YIDDISH FILM FESTIVAL

PROGRAM THREE - MARCH 20 LONG IS THE ROAD (U.S.-occupied Germany, 1948, 77 min., in Yiddish, German, Polish with new English subtitles.) First feature film to represent the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective. PROGRAM FOUR - MARCH 27 ISAAC SINGER'S NIGHTMARE AND MRS. PUPKO'S BEARD (Bruce Davidson, USA, 1974, color, 20 min., English.) Plus a surprise screening. TONIC, 107 Norfolk St. Contact Zachary Thacher, 212-610-5132 \$7 per program.

FILMS AT ANTHOLOGY

MADE IN USA, Godard, 1966. March 16 at 7 & 9. HAVANA FILM FEST: Mar 18-26. ESSENTIAL CINEMA: Robert Breer, March 30 at 7. James Broughton, March 30 at 8:45. Anthology Film Archives, 2nd & 2nd, 505-5110 \$8 / *\$7 Essential Cinema / \$5 Students