

EMERGENCY

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ZERO ART

In November of 2000 I took a vow not to do theater for one year. I felt like somehow I had been taking theater for granted and had become unwary of its power—particularly the power of theater spaces themselves. My vow was specific: not to enter a theater space for one year, unless it was to see a show. This meant that writing a play was not breaking the vow, while painting the walls of a rehearsal room would have been breaking the vow.

I had come to the conclusion—and this “theory” evolved over the course of my absence from the theater—that all spaces in which theater takes place, even the living room in which one might rehearse for a week or two, all theater spaces are haunted by a kind of theater ghost, or theater god. This presence hovers between performance and audience, and all those engaged in the performance are tied to this invisible presence, whether they like it or not. The theater god demands certain kinds of sacrifice—repetition, emotion, flesh—and these sacrifices can be carried out in various ways, but the presence itself is continuous throughout all theater spaces. The same god is pleased by an exciting new dance piece at BAM that is pleased by a deeply felt production of *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* in Nebraska. Like theater, the theater god is whimsical, ruthless, prejudiced, and just.

I left the theater in order to regain perspective. The power of theater, not only over an audience, but over my own “theater person” personality horrified me. No wonder we are loud, oversexed, well-dressed monsters, we theater folk. This is demanded of us by our god. The next time you see a theater person launch into a story they have told a hundred times, refining it yet again for better effect, remember that in another context this behavior is not just charming, but holy.

As soon as I had sworn off theater, its god appeared to me everywhere: at parties, on buses, in restaurants, on television soundstages, in office spaces, in therapy, in my bathroom. I had not gone a year without some kind of theatrical activity (worship) since I was about ten years old—the change was sudden and intense. A friend at a party asks me, “How is your theater vow going?” and I reply, “It’s weird. Sometimes I feel like everything I do and say all the time is insincere, like I’m acting all the time. But maybe it’s always been like this,

REGARDING MATTERS OF A PRACTICAL NATURE

Readers:

It has been quite a while – months – since the last EMERGENCY Gazette was printed. Though there have been technical complications with its production, the EMERGENCY Gazette languished in a state of non-emergency, while the editors' sense of urgency slipped elsewhere, pressing up from other ports.

For a while we couldn't remember what writing was like, what it meant to write about the theater and why it ever felt good. The first blush of necessity had faded, and our attempts to catch a second wind felt forced and tired in the blurred months of the past Fall.

Now, we are restless and irritated, inundated with propaganda in the guise of news, fact or entertainment. What is not being sold to us – on stages and airwaves, in storefronts and magazines – is being forced hard down our throats.

In the past, the EMERGENCY Gazette has been a refuge for thinking about performance. Instead of a consumer-based response to American theater, we created a Gazette that could accommodate subjective analyses and subversive proposals, a publication to keep up with rapid art in real time, plays that never see the gloss of “culture” mags, performative politics fallen between the cracks of CNN and the Entertainment Machine.

The EMERGENCY Gazette returns, now appearing monthly. We welcome your letters, proposals and submissions. We are interested in the audience, the theater-haters, the anthropologists, the indifferent and the unknowns. Operating on a shoe-string budget, with assistance from chashama theater and a freshly picked editorial staff, EMERGENCY is small enough for the simplest (and cheapest) of printing methods, big enough for the complexity of modernity, and ugly enough to be free, relevant, and real.

We seek rigorous writing and your engagement. Find our archives and detailed information at www.emergencygazette.com, our website-in-progress.

Gentle reader, EMERGENCY is yours. Stick it in the bathroom of your local performance space, shove it in your pocket and read it on the train. Or write it.

Your humble servants,

The Brothers Lumiere, Editors

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and I just haven't noticed until now. And then there are moments when suddenly I feel like I'm being more sincere than I possibly could have imagined.” And as I'm saying it, it's happening, and I know this is not the opposite of the theater—this is what theater is supposed to carry inside it. As if in order to make theater one must have a life outside the theater—could it be true? I knew that when I returned to the stage, the experience would be more rewarding than ever, not only for me but also for the god I feared.

My vow ended in November of 2001, and just before that I took a six-week trip up the west coast visiting friends & family, taking drugs, and variously amusing myself without doing theater. While I was on the west coast, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, killing thousands of people and leveling the twin towers. About two months after I returned to New York, I began rehearsals for a play. My theater vow was over, and my consciousness of theater as a kind of worship spread into a consciousness of art itself as something, if not very much like religion, at least necessary to human life in the same way religion has been for thousands of years.

My first reaction to the attack was a need to make something, to say something about it, and to hear about it, to receive response. It seemed everyone was thinking about it anyway, all the time. Talking about anything else tasted like frosting. Even as I began to weary of the endless “I was in my kitchen when it happened” articles, I wanted more. The necessity seemed almost as if to dilute poison; the terrorists had demonstrated some-

thing, as it were, had made an act which for them had meaning—and now, as artists, we were called to arms to respond, a counterattack of expression. And yet everyone, without exception, seemed in some way to have been left speechless.

I know I am not alone in my belief that September 11, 2001 is not only the date of an event that took place in our history, it is also the date by which we will know the end of the one age of our history and the beginning of the next. No one knows what that means yet, but I believe the new era will require, artistically, a difference not only in subject matter but in how that subject matter is treated. A difference in style as profound as the difference between George Eliot and Gertrude Stein, for example. The difference between Racine and Jarry. Nor do I mean to imply a reinvention of the avant-garde—perhaps the possibility of an “avant-garde” has itself become obsolete, I don't know. What I know is that, as theater companies struggle to maintain audiences and secure funding, there is a line hours long in all kinds of weather to stand on an observation deck and look out over the site we all refer to as “Ground Zero.” What kind of theater god draws that audience there? What kind of sacrifice do we make to remember the dead?

And yet, after all this, we are still the same theater folk, worshipping in the same theatrical ways. What has changed is contextual, not only in terms of the political climate of America, but in terms of a much deeper change in American culture, a change which affects even those whose personal beliefs remain consistent, even if only by suddenly repositioning those beliefs in relationship to the rest of the population.

Nothing can be taken for granted anymore: what is the value of art in this new context? Why make art at all? What does this “new age” require of us? The only understanding I have come to emerges from this idea, this presence, this site named Zero, and the possibility of taking ourselves to that place in the context of our own self-expression. All of this sounds like a call for very somber art, apocalyptic in subject matter and minimalist in style—but I don't expect that at all. True Zero art would emerge from a place of pure freedom, from which as much whimsy as mourning would be available. Perhaps this is not so much a style I imagine as it is an ideal, a perfected state of artistic rigor from which each gesture would be powerful enough to mean something even performed in the spiritual, artistic, intellectual, or actual site known as Ground Zero.

Eli Rarey

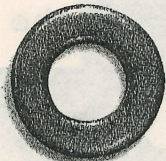
WALKABOUT: FRESH AIR FOR THEATER

FOLLOW THE LEADER



The lesson of the GARDEN.

On Spring Street north of Chinatown there is a garden packed with statues, fountains, and other garden fixtures. These icons are for sale. Eventually they will be displayed individually, each one sovereign over a different patch of land. Here, in this pandemonium, they are crammed together like gods in a carnival. There are many such factories, where the stuff of our daily surreality is stocked wholesale. Visit them to see your own dreams in context.



Flat Washer

YOUR MADNESS.

Highway to Tomorrow.
Elevator Repair Service.
HERE. January. Closed.



Art has always been the last refuge for madness, the one place where really fucked up things can happen and (on a good day) no one is arrested. But art can also be a place where madness is diluted, made harmless. Indeed there is a blossoming theatrical trend that portrays madness as a kind of safe fun, a kind of new vaudeville that lacks the transgression and danger of the old. Like Chaplin or Keaton minus the ironic commentary, or the Marx Brothers without their proletarian consciousness.

Watching Elevator Repair Service for five minutes might lead you to believe that they are part of this watered-down renaissance of safe fun. After all, in their version of THE BACCHAE, the godhead of Dionysus is played by a googly-eyed thermos. And what is more safe than a thermos? But in fact, ERS pushes the boundaries of safe fun into something potentially real and disturbing. For example, the part where Terry the Seer tries to elicit a response from King Karl—played by a metal post—starts out purely comical. But three minutes later, when Terry is still talking to the post in that same plaintive, sincere voice, the same scene begins to feel truly sad, and eventually it becomes quite embarrassing, like watching a drunk yelling at nothing on the subway. Similarly, when Dionysus in the end explains his astonishingly cruel punishments by explaining flippantly that "I was blasphemed against," we catch a glimpse of the "real" Dionysus behind the charming playboy exterior. Behind the thermos is, after all, a god: uncontrollable, undomesticated, and as carelessly violent as the ocean.

I once saw a play in which an insane man smeared ice cream all over a woman's face. In some ways this was more painful to watch than a rape scene, because we could see that the ice cream was real, and we realized that the actress herself felt its sticky cold mess on her skin. ERS does not go this far. ERS seems to be searching for a balance between tame silliness and genuine breach of conduct, between safe and unsafe play, like a child who occasionally makes a mad dash out of the playground and into the street. Indeed, what is most powerful about ERS is exactly the palpable tension between safety and danger. After all, the moment where Holly realizes that she has murdered her son is no less tragic because his head is lolling in a bright red plastic picnic cooler. Actually, the suburban domestic imagery makes it even more disturbing, because it reminds us that no development of civilization can banish the wildness within, the places in our own hearts that we do not understand: our own capabilities for orgiastic violence, bestiality, cannibalism, and the murder of what we love most. We can try to bury these darker impulses beneath mountains of income tax files, televisions, and neatly packaged toys, but we can never escape our own shadow. And Columbine is not the only recent event to illustrate that no amount of bright red plastic lunch boxes can enforce peace and control anger.

Ben Spatz

The lesson of the TRAINS.

There are weird trains that move through the tunnels at night carrying no passengers. Perhaps they carry garbage, or poison, or the followers of a hidden subway cult. The trains are painted yellow and black. It is the yellow of dumpsters, of nuclear fallout shelters, of sickness and decay. Every color has a thousand facets, depending on where it is placed. To teach our children that yellow is the color of the sun, of canaries, and of corn, is to comfort them with lies.

BRAINWASHED EMBARRASSMENT

Midnight Brainwash Revival.
Inverse Theater.
Clemente Soto Velez.
Dec '01 - Jan '02. Closed.

"...brimming with holiday spirit..."
—Playbill



For an embarrassing time in the theater, little rivals Inverse Theater's recent verse play, MIDNIGHT BRAINWASH REVIVAL. This 'revival' takes the proverbial cake and eats it—twice. "This reviewer," as they say in the Times, could stand pie-in-face only once: After the first one-hour act, fearing more pie-to-come, I left concealing my blush.

It should be said that Kirk Wood Bromley has spent perhaps his best years rewriting Shakespeare into contemporary American: the lingo of critical theory, pop-psychology and urban slang. This bade well, at least so it seemed five years ago, with LOST LABOUR'S LOVES and WANT'S UNWISHED WORK at NADA (a totally unpretentious space we all miss, where 15-person casts impressed).

Unfortunately, as MIDNIGHT makes evident, the playwright has learned myriad tricks—in plot and tongue twisting—from the old bard. He rehashes the baroque plots and trademark characters of Shakespeare's comedies to create a convoluted story of mismatched love, pranks pulled on prudes, rivalry, ribaldry, revenge, and Puckish tricksterism. Though well cast, KWB's characters never lift off the bulldozed runway of common stereotypes and movie tropes. The plots seem like mere excuses to jabber in faux-Shakespearean wordplay.

Furthermore, Good (nature, lovers and weed-smoking loafers) and Evil (corporations, genetic engineers, slightly dark-skinned terrorists, urban sprawl, Mormons) clash in a manner resembling mismatched socks—not as subtle, but just as harmless. Where is the issue, the *problema*? Where is Shakespeare's deep sense of paradox? Wouldn't even the old, cold naturalism be more rewarding than baroque comedy with sophomoric puns on the word "come"?

The above criticisms could be taken constructively, or not. The real problem remains to be addressed. Why do the (progressively less rugged) downtown audiences gobble up such poorly conceived humor and trite parables of good and evil, and laugh, even? Do we actually believe that there are no more good jokes to be made, and therefore we must laugh at the bad ones because they're meant to be bad? This kind of ironic (and yet a-critical!) viewing makes of theater an old mare beaten past death to the point of amusement. Is the DEEP idea of our high postmodern culture really that everything's been done before, and better? Imitation, in the end, is a misleading mastery.

Finally, my question is of the worth of generic theater in our days. Can the old forms save us, can they be renewed, and how? (See the Wooster Group's new PHEDRE with this in mind.) Is it enough to repeat, reword, and regurgitate the rules of theater (and of life) as they have been passed down to us in the canon? To act as a vanity mirror for entrenched ideas? Whether it speaks in verse or prose, for theater to say nothing is contemptible.

Matvei Yankelevich

OUR GARBAGE

Wurst! (Take it and eat it...)
Radiohole.
Collapsible Hole, Wmsbrg.
Nov. '01 to Jan. '02. Closed.



New York City throws out more than 13,000 tons of garbage every day. Radiohole picks some of it up and throws it back in our faces.

Their junk aesthetic is built from old furniture and scrapped-together costumes, and laced through with funky bits of reconstructed technology. Their garage performance space resembles the warehouse of a renegade culture hacker. And like kids putting on a show in a junkyard, they run all the tech themselves in a frenzy of mic-stand choreography and floor-mounted, toe-activated switches. Meanwhile, the text of the show is built from a kind of cultural detritus: scraps from the ancient NIBELUNGENLIED mixed with the home shopping channel, talk shows, and the deep, booming voices of nameless "announcers."

Perhaps Radiohole is on to something. If we continue to produce garbage at the current rate, pretty soon we will all be kids playing in junkyards, reenacting the epic tales of ancient times with puppets built from the scraps of our own era. What remains unclear, though, both in Radiohole's work and in the future of post-industrial society, is the role of the human being. What place can an actual person have in such an object landscape? Radiohole's actors illustrate this dilemma, precisely because they are not themselves wandering junk-heaps, nomadic anarchist schizos, or tripped-out renegade prophets. They are almost too normal, too human, and they seem a bit out of place. Even when they are playing stereotypes, their humanity is obvious. The 3D performer is visible behind the 2D parody. Watching them makes it clear that people, so far, are not really trash yet. We are toying with the idea of becoming-trash, but so far we are still in love with "authentic" experience and genuine humanity, just as Radiohole is still interested in a good story well told.

The most sublime and eerie moments in WURST come when the line between actor and prop is blurred. A vocoder is switched on and off repeatedly to alter a performer's voice. Costume exchanges signify the trading of roles. The actors toss back and forth a television set which is really a human head—or is it the other way around? And then there is the final "hunt" sequence, with all of them running frantically in place, sporting shiny new sneakers, accompanied by a cheesy techno action-movie soundtrack. Running and running and running until finally, for a mere instant, they stop being people and become something. For a fraction of a second, they are hooked up to enough junk to deserve to be called cyborgs. Of course, this is a very different kind of cyborg from what we have been taught to expect. These cyborgs are half human and half trash. Rather than being part machine or part robot, they are part glossy magazine, part late-late show, part holiday special, part "America Fights Back," part bargain sale blow-out. These cyborgs are not built from the new technology you just bought, but from the old technology you threw out last year now languishing in a landfill upstate, buried somewhere in a huge garbage heap steadily growing larger, edging closer to your home, coming soon to a theater near you. Consider yourself warned.

Ben Spatz

The lesson of the SWORDSMAN.

In Washington Square Park there is a man looking for students to train in the art of the sword. His disciples, he says, will be able to wield their blades both in battle and on stage. To him there is no difference. The craft of the actor is the craft of the warrior. But a teacher demands to be questioned, while a general wants only to be obeyed, and the actor, like the warrior, must serve questions before answers—or else become a soldier.

Ben Spatz

Capitalism: Now and Forever

This issue of the Gazette would be incomplete without a brief review of the huge theater festival that took place in mid-town just over a month ago. The festival, which ran January 31 through February 3 in and around the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan, reached its zenith on Saturday, February 2nd, when three large shows ran simultaneously for several hours. The centerpiece of the festival was, of course, the WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, which took place indoors. This production was reported to be spectacular, replete with flashy lights and expensive whores—and as one commentator said: "Better than Miss Saigon!" Unfortunately, no one on the EMERGENCY staff was able to witness the production, due to the steep ticket price of \$16,500 per seat. Meanwhile, outdoors, two vast street performances were staged, each with a cast of thousands. LAW & ORDER, produced and performed by the New York Police Department, was almost cinematic in its scope and intent, with directorial homage paid to filmmakers from Riefenstahl to Verhoven. For the most part, the acting was cliched and wooden, although some performers (notably Officers Mendez and Johnson) were able to transcend their roles and show signs of real humanity. Playing opposite this work was a piece called F2, by a group known as The Protesters. In contrast to much of their recent work, this piece was fairly restrained, almost understated, leaving the fourth wall essentially intact. As a result, it is likely to be more positively received by some critics, who have in the past accused The Protesters of going too far in their attempts to transcend the boundaries of theater. However, it is precisely this past willingness to break the rules that has won The Protesters a solid international following and a great deal of media attention for such shows as N30, which was staged in Seattle in 1999.

Ben Spatz

LISTINGS37

THE BOMB

Dropped by Josh Fox.
Feb. 28 - Mar. 17 Wed-Sun 8pm & Sat 3pm
The Flamboyant Theater CSV, 107 Suffolk St.
www.internationalwow.org \$15.

THE SHORT CENTURY

Presented by Museum Village Stuck
Landmark exhibition explores African cultures through art, film, photography, graphics, architecture, music, literature, and theater.
Feb. 10 - May 5 at PS1 in Queens
www.ps1.org

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