Performance Texts

In his essay "Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène," Antonin Artaud famously argued to make theatrical staging predominant over dramatic writing when he wrote that "What is essential ... is to determine what this physical language consists of, this solidified, materialized language by means of which theatre is able to differentiate itself from speech" (38). And he goes on to assert that "it is the *mise en scène* that is the theater much more than the written and spoken play" (41). Although the director Edward Gordon Craig had proposed something similar at the turn into the twentieth century, Artaud's argument for *mise en scène*—that the overall conception and staging of a piece of theatre is an art with its own autonomy—has had the most lasting impact on experimental work in the theatre. In the United States, since the translation of Artaud's text in 1958, one can follow both his direct and oblique influence on artists like Judith Malina and Julian Beck of the Living Theatre, Rachel Rosenthal, and other early proponents of performance art; on through the New York "Theatre of Images" of the 1970s and 1980s; to the work of director-writers like Reza Abdoh in the 1990s, as well as collective creation groups like Elevator Repair Service, GAle GAtes, and others.

Artaud's critique of the overweening use of language in theatre at the expense of other forms of expression poses more than a technical challenge to artists. Such critiques of "logocentrism" – to borrow a term made popular in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s with the rise of philosophical deconstruction and the writings of Jacques Derrida, himself influenced by Artaud – also constitute an assault on history in the sense that the practice of documenting history almost always entails writing. So when creators of theatre begin

to forego the use of dramatic scripts in an attempt to create beyond language, what remains to document the performance? As Richard Schechner lamented in a 1981 essay announcing the decline of the American theatrical avant-garde, "But as performance itself—ways of staging, performers creating their own 'performance texts'—becomes the main focus there needs to be a way of directly transmitting these scores from one generation to another. ... It's hard to see how this work will be transmitted if not either by developing an actual repertory or by passing on the techniques of workshop" (56).

Fortunately, a number of theatre artists—many combining the position of director/choreographer with that of writer/performer/designer—began in the late 1960s and afterwards to create documents, or "performance texts," to record a kind of theatrical work that resisted traditional dramatic conventions while it still used language. In some cases, it can be argued that these performance texts are so period- and person-specific that they cannot be recreated by other performers. Although this claim has validity, a number of the texts about to be discussed can be restaged. Often by the nature of these works, they beg to be re-created with more respect to textual "spirit" than "letter." Moreover, late avant-garde theatre practices still linger in the sense that they have inspired dramatists who think of themselves primarily as dramatists. As Mac Wellman notes in his introduction to the anthology of experimental plays *Theatre of Wonders*, "The idea [of wonder] was suggested by critic Bonnie Marranca's excellent notion of a theatre of images, which she developed to discuss the seminal works of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Lee Breuer. Indeed, much of the work contained here reveals a debt to these three notable members of the New York avant-garde" (ix).

These three artists provide a good place to begin a discussion of how notions about *mise en scène* have contributed to new forms of dramatic and performance-based writing. Foreman began his career in the theatre as a set designer, studied playwriting at Yale, and then became widely known as a writer-director-designer of his own works in the NYC off-off- scene of the early 1970s. Influenced by Brecht's alienation techniques, by Jack Smith's proto-camp, quasi-durational performances, with their unusual mix of the intensely mundane and the highly theatricalist, and by Gertrude Stein's writing of a continuous present, Foreman's scripts invoke figures that pass for characters while their dialogue is actually a staging of the phenomenology of consciousness. Foreman, in fact, often writes textual fragments and only assigns those fragments an order and an actor once he is in rehearsal. In terms of staging practice, Foreman keeps turning and altering an audience's perception of the possible context for any given stage utterance, teasing out continuity here, upsetting expectation there. In an echo of Beckett's comments on Joyce, Foreman writes succinctly, "The plays are about what they do" (*Reverberation Machines* 209). Foreman's output is copious, and it is difficult to single out a text from his oeuvre. *Film is Evil Radio is Good* (1987, in *Unbalancing Acts*) and *The Mind King* (1992, in *My Head Was a Sledgehammer*), with their relatively clear themes, might be two places to approach his work for the first time. Foreman's essays are also as significant as the writings of Strindberg, Shaw, Stein, and other major playwright/theoreticians.

Robert Wilson's work, like Foreman's, is frequently a self-reflexive examination of the act of observation. However, while Foreman's design aesthetic is self-consciously ugly and anti-art-ish, Wilson's is clean, beautiful, and often eerily sublime. Moreover, Wilson's staging of performers' bodies differs fundamentally from Foreman's. Wilson's

performers strike more hieratic poses, and their gestures are frequently, but not always, slowed. His movement vocabulary bears traces of the geometric extensions of form found in Martha Graham's dance, while Foreman's figures are often contorted, turned back in on themselves, stooped. Regarding texts, in the 1970s, Wilson sometimes used non-linear, declarative works written by the autistic child actor Christopher Knowles as a way to explore what alternative forms of perception might be like. Wilson has said of Knowles' writing that "he would write something both for the sound and for the way it looked on the page. The words looked the way they sounded" (*Theatre of Images* 48). In the 1980s and 1990s, Wilson increasingly staged classical texts, but he also engaged a number of dramatic and non-dramatic writers to create performance texts. Examples include Darryl Pinckney's text for *Orlando* (1989), a monologue adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel; William Burroughs' libretto for the musical *The Black Rider*, music by Tom Waits (1990); and Paul Schmidt's libretto for *Alice*, music also by Waits (1992). Each is worthy of being staged by others. Regardless of the type of text he uses, however, Wilson does not recreate a text's semantics as much as he creates a frame to offset the text, counter-pointing the text and its materiality rather than highlighting any transparency in signification. In a favorite metaphor, Wilson describes his staging as a kind of silent film layered over and against the radio play of a text. In that sense, Wilson continues the avant-garde practice of artists like Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg who created music, movement, and sets together without any preliminary agreement about how to unify their competing sign-systems.

Third in this trio is Lee Breuer, one of the founders of the New York City experimental company Mabou Mines, along with a number of other writer-director-

performers including director JoAnne Akalitis (see her *Dressed Like an Egg* in *Word Plays 4*). Breuer's writing methods can vary from work to work, although they often share a slight tone of punk intellectualism. His 1970s' works like the *Animations* trilogy are alternately lyrical and parodic in their self-reflexive look at the act of storytelling. A series of 1980s texts, based around the figure of a warrior ant, intercut and mix an exoticized pseudo-lyricism of the "Orient" with an ironic allegory about the proletariat. These texts are also significant because Breuer attempts to synthesize Asian puppetry forms, like Japanese Bunraku and Balinese Wayang Kulit, with Western avant-garde alienation techniques. Breuer will probably be most remembered for his adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* into the musical *The Gospel at Colonus* (1983). With music by Bob Telson and a choir that included several of America's finest gospel groups, the work makes a stunning analogy between the choral odes of Greek tragedy and styles of worship in the Black church. Like much experimental art of the period, *Gospel* depends upon a basic intercultural pastiche of normally different idioms and also plays with the idea of art as a form of ritual. Unlike some avant-garde work, however, *The Gospel at Colonus* does not veer away from powerful emotionality. It is rapturous, affirmative, proud, and dignified.

Other artists whose work extends from the 1970s to the 1990s include Meredith Monk and Ping Chong, who have worked together on several occasions. Monk's work is difficult to classify in numerous ways. She is both a creator and a performer, and has been trained as a singer, composer, dancer, and visual artist. Her tone is precise, seemingly dispassionate, and yet lightly comic. Like much experimental theatre, Monk's work is set intentionally at the boundary between disciplines. As she puts it in a

"Mission Statement," she wants an art that is "inclusive, rather than exclusive"; "that cleanses the senses"; "that seeks to reestablish the unity existing in music, theater, and dance"; and "that reaches toward emotion we have no words for" (Jowitt: 17). Like Wilson, whose work she predates, Monk sometimes uses text as much for sonorous as semantic purposes, and she frequently dispenses with character and narrative. Also like Wilson, although with a more affirmative affect, Monk does not try to inundate the stage as a signifying field; she leaves gaps for the spectator to fill in. The positive, community-oriented tone of Monk's work lends itself to a mildly essentialist form of feminism, although such a description may understate the sense of irony and play and the lack of didacticism in her art. Some of her more well-known theatrical "operas" include *Education of the Girlchild* (1973), *Quarry* (1976), and *Atlas* (1991).

Monk also created a number of dance/music/theatre pieces with Ping Chong, such as *Paris* (1982) and *The Games* (1983). In *Paris*, the two evoke the quirky experimentalism of French Left Bank Modernism, but the piece is more of a danced and sung tone poem about the spirit of the Parisian avant-garde than an actorly imitation of figures and events. Other works by Chong, such as *Nuit Blanche: A Select View of Earthlings* (1981), *Kind Ness* (1986), and *Snow* (1989), are more traditionally dramatic in form, using characters and nominally realistic dialogue. However, Chong's narrative structures often intercut radically discontinuous periods and places or embed allegorical resonances into quotidian events. Narrative context becomes intercultural and global rather than a local, naturalistic slice of life. Regarding *Kind Ness*, James Frieze writes that it is less the "frail map of a performance than a blueprint for other, future productions" and that "Chong has said that [this work] is the item in his oeuvre that can

most squarely be described as ‘a play’,” albeit a play “very much in quotation marks” (169).

Emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s (after the so-called Theatre of Images and artists like Monk and Chong) are director-writer John Jesurun, director Peter Sellars, and, most significantly, the ensemble The Wooster Group, with director Elizabeth LeCompte. Some dramatic texts have come directly out of the Wooster Group’s work, such as Jim Strahs’ play about NATO, *North Atlantic* (1984, in *Wordplays 5*). Wooster Group performer Ron Vawter, along with writer Gary Indiana, created the superb one-man show, *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*, a script that merits performance by others. However, the Wooster Group has especially influenced other artists by showing how rich the possibilities of collaging different texts and performance styles are (see *Frank Dell’s The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1987 in *Plays for the End of the Century*) and through its creation of a whole new theatrical vocabulary and set of conventions for integrating multimedia with live performance. Most recently, they have returned to classical dramatic texts such as Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* (*Brace Up!*, 1991), O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1995), and Racine’s *Phédre* (*To You, the Birdie!*, 2002). The Chekhov and Racine plays were translated for the Group by Paul Schmidt, and they deserve mention as examples of what might constitute contemporary experimental translation. Schmidt translates not only for the semantic value of a word; he also tries to recast syntactical and rhythmic values that are too often lost in word-for-word translations (for more on Schmidt, see the interview “The Labyrinth of Words” with director Liz Diamond).

Another artist who incorporates multimedia into dramatic writing is John Jesurun. He emerged in New York's off-off- scene with his “living film serial” *Chang in a Void*

Moon (1982-86), staged in nightclubs and theatres. Later scripts, such as *Deep Sleep* (1986, in *Wordplays 5*) which won an Obie, *White Water* (1986, in *On New Ground*), and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1990), all incorporate multimedia directly into their stage directions and dialogue. Frequently Jesurun plays games of address and reception in which a live actor speaks in dialogue with a televised actor, but whether the characters are actually communicating with each other or carrying on a *dialogue de sourds*, a dialogue of the deaf, remains open to question. The child of Puerto Rican parents, Jesurun also plays with issues of identity, albeit in ontological as much as ethnic ways. Many of his scripts are multi-lingual. Jesurun received a MacArthur Award in 1996, and his work deserves critical and artistic attention.

While Peter Sellars is also known for incorporating multimedia into his stage work, his primary contribution to experimental dramatic writing has been the promotion, in conjunction with composer John Adams, of new American operas and musicals, namely Alice Goodman's librettos for *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) and poet June Jordan's libretto for *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* (1995).

Also in the 1990s, San Francisco-based director George Coates, who began working in the 1970s, continues to create multimedia "operas," often based on emerging technologies from Silicon Valley. In New York and elsewhere, the director Anne Bogart also creates dramatic texts from pastiches, such as *The Medium* (1993), based on various writings by media theorist Marshall McLuhan; *Going Going Gone* (1996), based on quantum physics; and *American Silents* (1997), which explores American silent film. Finally, the Los Angeles- and New York-based director Reza Abdoh produced a variety

of savage collages before his death from AIDS in 1995. *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice* (1990, in Mufson 1999) is the text perhaps most amenable to re-creation by others, although it is stylistically difficult in its non-linear, associative leaps. "A parable of the repression of homosexuality" (Mufson 3), *Eurydice* juxtaposes classical myth and contemporary sitcom; image theatre and word play; and quotidian banalities with Artaudian flights of fatalistic imagery. Abdoh's *The Law of Remains* (1991, in *Plays for the End of the Century*) is an apocalyptic fantasia which intercuts the life of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer with the world of Andy Warhol's Factory. *Tight Right White* (1993) brutally riffs off the kitschy Hollywood film *Mandingo* (1975) to create a scathing image of America's continuing reliance on ethnic and sexual exploitations. While all the artists in this section take up Artaud's suggestion to redefine drama by exploring the theatre's non-textual dimension, Abdoh probably provides the strongest embodiment of other Artaudian ideas. In effect, Abdoh's work is an Artaudian "theatre of cruelty" that clarifies by corrosively stripping away kitsch, masks, sentimentality, and sham panaceas.