



## **The Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)***

**by Arnold Aronson**

The Wooster Group has been one of the most provocative and significant performance collectives of the past several years. As a descendant of The Performance Group, they have continued to operate as an ensemble with all members contributing to all aspects of a work's evolution. Yet under the leadership of director Elizabeth LeCompte, they have evolved an esthetic closer in style and spirit to performance art or conceptual art. The acting at times approaches an intensity more often associated with the expressionistic style of many ensemble groups of the late 60s; the raw material and subject matter of the pieces often evolves from instinctual or subconscious sources; and at the same time the structure—the most dominant aspect of the performances—is highly formal and abstract.

Although not overtly influenced by the deconstructionist theories of Derrida and others—LeCompte says she is aware of this critical movement but has not read any of the sources—the Group's recent work provides virtually the only example of deconstructionist ideas put into practice in the American theatre. Beginning with *Nayatt School*, the third part of *Three Places in Rhode Island*, and continuing through *Point Judith*, *Route 1 & 9* and now *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*, the Group has taken modern classics (*The Cocktail Party*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Our Town* and *The Crucible*) as raw material upon which to construct theatre pieces. Out of these sources come fragments of scenes, characters, dialog and thematic material which are explored, reworked, echoed, quoted, blended and juxtaposed with fragments from popular, cultural and social history as well as events, ideas and situations that

DADAIST/MANIFESTO/K1920

## L.S.D. MANIFESTO

Art (Theatre) in its Execution and Direction is dependent on the Time in which it Lives, and (Theatre) Artists are creatures of their Epoch. The highest Art (Theatre) will be that which in its *Content* presents the thousandfold Problems of the Day, the Art which has been visibly shattered by the Explosions of last Week, which is forever trying to collect its Limbs after yesterday's Crash. The best and most extraordinary Artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their Bodies out of the frenzied cataclysm of Life, who, *with Bleeding Hands and Heated* hold fast to the Intelligence of their Time. Has *Expressionism* (To-day's Theatre) fulfilled our Expectations of such an Art, which should be an Expression of our most vital Concerns?

**NO! NO! NO!**

*Has Today's Theatre* fulfilled our Expectations of an Art that burns the Essence of Life into our Flesh?

**NO! NO! NO!**

Under the Pretext of *Organizational Survival*, the *Theatre in America* have banded together into a Generation which is already looking forward to an Honorable Mention in the Histories of Literature and Art and aspiring to the most Respectable civic distinctions. On the Pretext of carrying on Propaganda for the Soul, they (dramatists and avant-gardists alike) have, *with their eyes fixed on the Past*, found their way back to the *Authoritative Voice*, (illustrative, falsely naturalistic) gestures (the Authoritative Voice, empathy with) which (allows the public to) presuppose a comfortable Life free from *Contradiction* (Ambivalence) or *Hatred* (contempt) of *Popular Culture*, hatred of *Advertising* (T.V.), *Noise*, are typical of People who prefer their armchair to the Noise (Life) of the Street, and *with their hands on their heads* (It is a) Sentimental Resistance to the Times, which are neither Better nor Worse, neither more Reactionary nor more Revolutionary than other Times, that at Weak-kneed Resistance, flirting with Prayers and Incense ... (which attempts to find in the Theatre what it has Lost in the Church.)

DADA!!!!

## L.S.D. !!!!!

*Put(s) forward a New Art (Theatre)*, from which we Expect (Pursue) the Realization of New Deals. What then is *Dadaism*? (L.S.D.)? *Dadaism* (L.S.D.) symbolizes the most Primitive Relation to the Reality of the Environment; with *Dadaism* (L.S.D.) a New Reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous Muddle of Noises, Colors and Spiritual Rhythms, which is taken unmodified into *Dadaist Art* (the Theatre), with all the sensational Screams and Fevers of its Reckless everyday Psyche and with all its brutal Reality. This is the sharp dividing line separating *Dadaism* (L.S.D.) from all *Artistic* (theatrical) Directions up until now and particularly from *Post-Modernism* (POST-MODERNISM) which not long ago some *Primitive* (dodos) took to be a new version of Impressionist realization. *Dadaism* (L.S.D.) has ceased to take an (Exclusive) Aesthetic Attitude toward Life, and this it accomplishes by *Exploding* (exploding) all the slogans of *Morality*, *Politics*, and *Psychology*, which are merely cloaks for weak Muscles, into their Components... (TO BE CONTINUED)

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emerge from the personal and collective experiences of members of the Group. The staging also quotes the Group's performance history as scenic elements, props and the arrangement of space repeat, echo or transform from earlier productions. The result is somewhat like a modern city built upon the foundations and monuments of succeeding generations of earlier cultures—the past is there supporting the present work, emerging through the new framework to add historic resonance and significance, but the new work is still unique.

*L.S.D.* became the most notorious of the Wooster Group's productions because of the legal entanglement that developed with playwright Arthur Miller, whose *The Crucible* made up the 20-minute second section of the performance. (In an early version of *L.S.D.*, the entire performance consisted of a manic 50-minute condensation of the play.) Miller threatened to bring legal action against the Group if they continued to use sections of his play. Subsequent attempts to play the section in gibberish and then to use new dialog (written by Michael Kirby) within the same structure failed to appease Miller, and the production was finally forced to close in January 1985.

The Group is no stranger to controversy. Their 1977 production of *Rumstick Road* was attacked for the unauthorized use of a recording of a telephone conversation with a psychiatrist. The use of blackface and apparently stereotypic depiction of blacks in *Route 1 & 9* cost them their New York State Council on the Arts funding for a year (although little mention was made of the use of blackface again in *L.S.D.*). And many people saw their production of Jim Strahs' *North Atlantic* as sexist.

In its penultimate form (prior to the Miller-forced changes), *L.S.D.* consisted of four parts and used material from *The Crucible*, writers and poets from the "beat" generation, the debates between Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy, interviews with Ann Rower (a babysitter for the Leary household), and miscellaneous interviews, biographies and writings, live and recorded music, dances and video.

Rows of metal folding chairs on the floor and on low risers face a long narrow platform about four feet above floor level behind which, and separated from it, is a steeply raked stage. Both platform and stage are nearly the width of the Performing Garage. At the front of the raked stage, a table extends nearly the entire width. Performers, for the most part, sit behind the table, speaking many of their lines into microphones. It suggests, among other things, an interrogation committee—such as the House Un-American Activities Committee that was the ostensible target of Miller's play.

Behind the table is a metal framework structure representing a house. It has appeared in one form or another in almost every Group production since it was first used in *Nayatt School* (in which it echoed certain spaces in the previous *Rumstick Road*). The arrangement of space is essentially a reversal of that for *Nayatt School*, in which the audience sat on a high bleacher looking down at a table on a high platform and on the main performing space and house on floor level.

*L.S.D.* is in four sections. Part I, entitled "Newton," consists of random readings by the male performers from the works of Aldous Huxley, Arthur Koestler, Timothy Leary, Alan Watts, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Bryan and Dr. Charles Slack (the latter two being biographical works on Leary), interspersed with material from Ann Rower, the babysitter.

Part II, "Salem," originally the excerpts from *The Crucible*, has become in the final version "scenes from *The Hearing*, a play by Michael Kirby with The Wooster Group." Part III, "Millbrook," presents a "stoned" version of *The Crucible* in rehearsal (taken from a video recording) together with live rock music and video images of Wooster Group performer Ron Vawter in Miami. The final section, entitled "Miami," is a fragment of one of the Liddy-Leary debates and a dance "impersonating 'Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos.'"

## **The Performance**

Part I begins with all but one of the men seated at the table facing the audience. They have microphones, although some mics are shared. One performer (the one reading Jackie Leary) is in the "trough" between the stage and the platform. Nancy Reilly, as the Babysitter, sits at the left of the table with a boom mic and earphones. Wearing heavy black-rimmed glasses and speaking in an exaggerated nasal-toned Brooklyn-like accent, she creates the impression of a caricatured phone operator or radio announcer. (Throughout the scene, she will listen to a taped interview with Ann Rower and repeat lines from the tape as they seem appropriate in context, although it will not necessarily be clear to the audience that she is listening to or repeating anything.) Jim Clayburgh, the Group's designer and technical person, sits at the left end of the table behind a phonograph and other sound equipment. He plays a Maynard Ferguson album, and shows the jacket to the audience while reading parts of the liner notes. He will control sound levels and act as a time-keeper for the other readings.

Ron Vawter, next at the table, functions as an emcee and onstage director, as well as reading texts by Huxley and Koestler. He introduces the performers, exercises some control over the sequence and flow of readings, and enforces time limits as he wishes—according to the "rules" that he announces, each reading is to last only one minute. There is no predetermined sequence or selection of passages to be read. (In early versions, the performers frequently tried to find passages that would "answer" the previous one.) It is clear that these are performers reading the works of others, and there is frequent banter and commentary among them.

When *L.S.D* was performed for a month at the Boston Shakespeare Company, Michael Kirby, who read Watts and Burroughs, could not participate during the week. His performance was videotaped, and his place at the table was taken by a video monitor. Later, it was decided to keep the video (with the sound muted most of the time), so the audience is presented with two Kirbys, whose actions sometimes coincide, sometimes not. The Watts readings are on the video; Vawter asks the technician to turn up the sound or rewind the tape as necessary. (The cast could watch the monitor on a platform above and behind the audience.) Kirby indicates that he is Burroughs by wearing a cowboy hat.

There is a two- or three-minute break between Parts I and II as the women take their places at the table; other performers make minor costume changes and arrange props. A metal bedframe is placed under the table across the "trough" at about center stage. Rising through the bed frame, an adolescent actor dressed as a Puritan girl stands in the trough, his head on a pillow. It appears he is in bed—though no attempt is made to create an illusion. The women are all in period costume; the men are in contemporary dress. The men speak into microphones; the women do not. Kate Valk, playing Tituba, is in blackface and speaks in an "Aunt Jemima" accent. She also plays Mary Warren, but remains in blackface—the characters are identified by signs hung in front her place at the table. For the most part, all lines are spoken from the actors' places at the table. Some words and phrases—all from the Miller script—are chanted loudly in chorus. The teenager (Matthew Hansell) who played Judge Danforth in *The Crucible* and is now playing the chairman of an investigating committee, walks the narrow front platform. Characters sometimes stand: during the hysteria/hallucination scenes the women run frantically in the trough, and some characters hide under the table. But it is in no way a realistic staging. Just as costumes mix with street clothes, so theatrical action mixes with the atmosphere of an interrogation or, perhaps, a staged reading. The lines are generally delivered at a frenetic clip, sometimes, especially in the case of Ron Vawter, barked out at a painfully loud volume. Yet it is strangely understated. Emotion, if present, seems to be indicated by volume and speed. Psychological realism has been undercut and eliminated. The scene ends with a dance in which three women in full skirts stand facing front at equal intervals

Q: Do you think that you are being harassed for your unorthodox beliefs?

LEARY: I don't use the term "harassment," and I have no paranoid theories about conspiracy. The game I am involved in is set out with exquisite precision. What I am doing has been done by people in every generation in the past. It's like the Harvard-Yale game. It's played o

## **L.S.D. MANIFESTO (2)**

ut every year. Now, Harvard isn't harassing Yale. The game between those who know that man can change and become divine in this lifetime and want to teach people how to do it completely threatens the establishment. In every generation you say, "No, it's all been done and settled, and just get your good lawyer-priest and do what we tell you to do." And this dialogue between the establishment and the utopian visionaries will inevitably exist in every historical era. It's played fairly. The fact that they want to hound me out of existence is right. They should, just like the Harvard defensive team wants to throw the offensive quarterback for a loss. I have no complaint about this; I'm perfectly good-humored about it. The more energy that is directed against me, the more energy that is available for me. It's the perfect physical law of jujitsu - the more government and professional establishment dynamism that is set off against what we're doing is just a sign to us that we're doing fine.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

The Performing Garage (1984)

on the narrow platform while three men, pants rolled up, sit behind them, their legs dangling off the stage. It appears, as the women move, that they have incongruous dancing legs coming out from under their long skirts.

*The Crucible* text consisted of “just the high points”—fragments of scenes. But the scenes were presented in order, and there was no rearranging. “I didn’t just want to throw the text up in the air and have it come down on the floor and rearrange it,” explained LeCompte. “It was very important to me to take full sequences of the text without changing sequences of lines. There was no reversing or adding lines to make meaning or to make the story ‘work.’ I wanted to make very clear that we were not destroying or dislocating the text. It was an adaptation, not a deconstruction.”

As *The Hearing*, the presentation is identical. The text, however, seems to be about espionage or treason trials. Finding a needle in a poppet, for instance, becomes the discovery of a secreted roll of microfilm. The apparent analogy to the Alger Hiss trial of the 1950s is, in effect, a de-historicization of Miller’s play. Acting copies of *The Crucible* are placed in pockets behind chairs in the audience, and acts and scenes are announced so that the spectators can follow along in the Miller text as the Kirby/Wooster Group text is being spoken. If a performer “accidentally” slips into lines from the original, Vawter sounds a loud buzzer.

Part III appears to be an attempt to rehearse the previous scene in the midst of a party. The performers are drinking, moving about the stage, giggling, reading lines and losing their places—and their interest—in the text. Two video monitors show scenes of Miami—primarily a man (Ron Vawter) making calls from phone booths. This section is somewhat disconcerting to the audience because, unlike the previous two sections, it is not readily apparent whether it is indeterminate or fixed and to what extent the performers are acting. It also includes deadpan recreations of incidents at the Leary house as narrated by the Babysitter. For example, when she describes someone running out of the house, an actor stands and runs in place. When the narration describes people pounding on a door, several actors stand and mime knocking while unemotionally chanting, “Let us in.” Toward the end of the scene, several performers take up musical instruments—electric and acoustic guitars and drums—and play fragments of old Velvet Underground songs.

In Part IV, the video monitors project a Brecht-like legend: “What is this dancing,” a line from *The Crucible*. Certain of the performers, still at the table, recreate a scene from the Liddy-Leary debates (the text of which is printed in the program). It begins with an obscene poem by Liddy and goes to an attack on Leary’s morality by a Vietnam vet who was blinded by a shotgun blast fired by people under the influence of LSD. Leary’s reply is confused and pathetic. This is followed by a grotesque and intense dance by four performers in cartoon-style “Spanish” costumes—the men even have grease-paint mustachios. “Donna Sierra” stands on the front platform with the men on floor level on either side of her with sneakers on their hands. Donna Sierra dances to the accompaniment of pseudo-South American dance music. As she finishes a passage, the men slam the soles of the shoes onto the platform with great energy and flair. She and the men glare at each other for a moment; the action is repeated several times.

## **Creation of the Performance**

One of the criticisms hurled at The Wooster Group following the *Route 1 & 9* controversy was, according to LeCompte, “Why don’t these people just do a play?” She decided to do a whole season of American classic plays—one a week, like summer stock. *The Crucible* had been in her mind for a few years. She had never read the play—she tends to choose texts

based on a visual or aural image—but she was fascinated by a line of John Proctor's dialog that Spalding Gray had once mentioned to her: "Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer." As LeCompte recalls,

*It was such a comic strip image—it combined modern comic strip imagery with phony Puritan dialect. It was like a great meshing of two cultural languages: phony languages—both of them. By changing the tenses in lines like, "She were not . . .," it makes it sound like really old language, but both of them are ersatz. I love the language as a mask. I don't like working with kitchen-sink realism. That is, I do like working with it, but as a mask, as a part, not as a whole piece. I felt we could do this play better than anyone in creation because of our particular distance. It's a distanced political play that takes its power from the situation in which it was written, not from the internal relationships. That is so often the way in which our work is conceived.*

*I also remembered that there was a black woman in *The Crucible* and that a white author had written it with a black dialect. I considered that a similar problem to what we had faced in *Route 1 & 9*. Why was Miller not told that he could not write a black character? I thought it was an interesting irony and an injustice to us and a lack of understanding about what we had done.*

LeCompte's productions have been typified by scenes of hysteria and manic activity. She enjoyed the idea that such scenes were written into Miller's script—it was Miller's hysteria, not hers.

At the same time, the Group was working on staged interpretations of records: They had recently done a piece called *Hula*. They were creating film images based on an album called *LSD*. LeCompte saw a connection between the two projects, and they eventually merged. At the first performance of excerpts of *The Crucible*, the record of *LSD* was played as a sort of curtain raiser.

Much of the show evolved out of happenstance and accident, such as the introduction of Kirby and video. In its early stages, there was a cast of 18, with the girls being played by women over 50. But the need to tour the production necessitated a smaller cast. Miller's injunction, of course, radically altered the production. "I love any kind of limitation," says LeCompte. "It's golden for me; I grab it. But it's always from the outside—practical circumstances rather than esthetic choice, though I swear it probably comes together as the same thing." When the limitations do not occur by chance, LeCompte tends to impose them, constantly undercutting easy or obvious theatricality. At one point in Part II, for example, Kirby stood up to deliver a line to the teenager playing the judge. He is very tall, angular, bald and has deep-set eyes—the mere act of standing was menacing and theatrical. LeCompte insisted that he remain almost seated—the effect was to come from elsewhere.

*The Crucible* is probably one of the most frequently performed plays in high schools and colleges and, as such, has a certain degree of instant recognition, as a sort of theatrical icon. LeCompte set out to stage "the perfect high school play," which to her meant giving it a certain sense of pageantry combined with "bad" acting. This image was reinforced by the presentations and tableaux she saw at Salem. Furthermore, high school productions are frequently adaptations, focusing only on the "high points," which is how the Group approached the text. The speed evolved in an attempt to get over boring sections. "Whenever I got bored," explained LeCompte, "or the actors were unable to enliven the text or make it work, I'd just say, 'Go fast and get it over quickly.' "

*It became a game structure. Whenever anyone was bored, they would go fast. Ron [Vawter] would buzz, and we'd have to get the whole thing in before he buzzed. Or they'd have to overlap so fast that they lost their place and got demerited five points. They would lose the sense of trying to make meaning out of the characters and would just get to the rhythms. This helped us when we had to switch to a new text or gibberish.*

Placing the women in costume created instant historical and literary connections and recognition. The costumes have become images that, in the terms of semiotician C.S. Peirce, are "indexical signs" pointing not only to Salem but to Miller's play itself. But for LeCompte, the motivation was more sensual. She was strongly impressed by the textures and materials of the dresses of early poppets she had seen and wanted to project that soft sensuality. "Whereas, when I put men into those costumes, it hardened it into a play," she explained. She also compared it in motivation to the late work of Cezanne. "He doesn't finish a line, she notes. "He leaves the canvas showing here and there. It gives a space and an air; it doesn't solidify it into a form that's not breakable. I can't stand it when something becomes perfect, enclosed. I like to leave the system open."

The space, as mentioned, was a conscious mirroring of *Nayatt School*. The use of a table was in part an intuitive decision, in part a reflection of the political nature of the repertoire of plays that had been considered (the image of a meeting hall, interrogation room, etc.), and in part an image that grew out of *Route 1 & 9*. In the latter play, there was a small table inside the frame house. LeCompte saw the long table as "growing out of this." This small table reappears in the upstage house in *L.S.D.* as a reference back to that production. But despite the tenuous political associations, the space is in no way a direct consequence of the script. It is an independent element.

The microphones referred to a hearing or investigation, but their use was purely esthetic. LeCompte wanted to play with the contrast of normal and amplified voices. The rapid juxtaposition of such voices causes information to be lost—as when eyes adjust to sudden shifts from light to dark or vice versa. LeCompte noted that "the live performer has to shout very loud and give an immense emotional output to equal a whisper on a microphone. So a lot of the performance played off huge emotional vocal outputs against very tiny verbal outputs into the mic." Also, working against expectations, the mics were given to the men, who are conventionally assumed to have louder voices. "The women got the costumes, the men got the mics," says LeCompte with amusement.

The dance at the end of Part II, says LeCompte, came about simply because they felt they needed a dance there. The image was simple and childlike, resulting from the disjunctive images suggested by the levels of the set. There is also a suggestion of the disjunction of male and female, but that was not a primary impulse.

Once the connection between Leary/LSD and *The Crucible* had been made, the rest of the performance began to evolve. The opening sequence provided a cultural context for the work. The writers whose works are read are the ones in the Leary circle or ones that affected that generation. Although Miller is of the previous generation, much of his writing occurred simultaneously with Ginsberg, Kerouac, et al. LeCompte says that since she had never read any of these people ("I'm not a reader"), she used this as a chance for "self-education." The original structure was taken from old television shows like "You Are There" or the Steve Allen show "Meeting of Minds" that set up round-table discussions among historical figures. But, LeCompte noted, what came up in the random selections reverberated throughout the rest of the performance on that day.

The use of chance and indeterminacy to structure the reading section was not consciously based on John Cage, but LeCompte acknowledges that through the art world, The

Performance Group, and the theatre of the past two decades, she probably absorbed these ideas. "It's all there. I've just taken it. It's all recycled junk."

The babysitter in Parts I and III was equally a result of chance. Ann Rower saw an early version of *The Crucible* and wrote to LeCompte that this reminded her of certain episodes at the Leary house. LeCompte felt that the connections could form the basis of the third part. They interviewed Rower, and Nancy Reilly began working with the tapes, trying to capture Rower's tones and delivery.

Part III came about as a result of trying, in LeCompte's words, to "disintegrate" *The Crucible*. She recalled the ongoing discussions in the '60s as to whether artists could create while on acid or whether creation was a rational process. So she decided to take a section of *The Crucible* that the company already knew very well, have the actors take LSD and see what happened. She videotaped the result, although frequently she taped only closeups of the performers rather than the whole stage. The result, LeCompte felt, was the "disintegration" she had sought. The scene, therefore, is an attempt by the actors to recreate 15 minutes of this event using the videotape as text and score—they recreated their actions and dialog exactly as recorded. When the video did not show them, they tried to remember what they were doing and thinking.

The Leary anecdotes were overlaid on this scene—"etched in on top," as LeCompte says. "When it comes to that reenactment, the performers are still playing out the LSD *Crucible* underneath. They have to do both."

Part IV, of course, is derived from the Liddy-Leary debates, but the derivation of the concluding dance is less obvious. LeCompte calls it her "take" on Indian dance. When seeing certain dances in India, she was fascinated not by the technique of the dance itself or the movements of any section or raga, but by the way in which the dancer went in and out of "character" between the ragas. "To watch the dancer drop out to prepare for the next raga was the most exciting thing for me—to watch that transformation. This dance is kind of a play on that. Kate Valk picks up these idiot ragas—there's nothing to them—but the whole thing is about the change of persona. From the preparation to the execution of the dance with such incredible aplomb. That's what dancing is about! It doesn't matter what you do, it's how you do it." The dance can be disconcerting because it is humorous yet almost sinister in its intensity and persistence. This aspect of it, and the choice of this dance to conclude the play, is tied up in the themes that LeCompte finds in the piece.

## **Themes and Meaning**

Superficially, at least, the "meanings" and messages of *L.S.D.* (. . . *Just the High Points* . . .) seem obvious. So much so that certain critics tended to dismiss the work as mere self indulgence. One critic commented on the oddity of taking Miller's play, which used the Brechtian technique of historicification to make a contemporary point, and re-setting it in contemporary period. Certainly there are clear themes of mass hysteria, hallucination, persecution and paranoia. The latter two enter into the Group's thinking on the piece, but they form a minor component.

The attacks on previous Group works led LeCompte to feel "hounded," much the way she felt Leary was.

*I knew there was a prejudice against this way of perceiving the universe—now more than ever. The '60s were dead, and that brief flurry of "expanding consciousness," of seeing the world in a fragmented or different way, was now considered dangerous. I knew that that was a time that coincided*

*with a kind of paranoia. There was something I identified with in The Crucible script because I felt hounded. So I identified with the emotional core of that. And I identified with Leary's sad desperation and his being hounded. I recognized the danger of stepping outside the system that far. It was a self-criticism that I was going through deeply. I hated Leary, I didn't identify positively with Leary, yet at the same time, I also recognized that I was in the place that Leary was in that sense. I was saying there was another way of making theatre, another way of viewing politics that is not literal, issue-oriented—it's not attached, so to speak. My intuitive way of making theatre was being called irresponsible, and that was the main problem with Leary—he was always being attacked as irresponsible. He was working with something and not taking responsibility for the effects on people. There was some connection there—though I hated Leary. There was some criticism there that I was attracted to. I was forcing myself to look at the worst side of the way we work as a theatre company, and what art is, and what we do with it. But I tried to keep that connection tenuous. I just tried to locate an emotional center that felt right, and worked from there and watched the connections evolve.*

This theme of taking responsibility for one's ideas or art became most pronounced in Part IV, in the scene in which Leary is unable to respond to the attack on his teachings. "I began to see something new in Leary," explains LeCompte.

*The only thing he could say, of course, was, "I feel very sad." First of all he said, "I've never condoned violence," because this man accused him of condoning violence, just as people accused us of racism. But at the same time, he couldn't say, "That's not my fault." He could only express sadness, which is all that I could ever come to about the Route 1 and 9 controversy. I could never get beyond that; I could never figure out what I had to do with it, or why. I always felt that it was the flip side of anything that's radical. I always identified with the women radicals who, when they bombed something and someone was killed inadvertently, didn't know what to say, how to justify the radical belief that the change must come through violence and individual violence to someone who was "innocent." I've never been able to reconcile that; I don't think anyone has or ever will be able to reconcile that. We have to recognize that there is that irreconcilable thing. And it was right there in that speech. So we finally decided that the last section in Part IV would be a question—an unanswerable one. It would have to be juxtaposed for me with my work. And my work was the dance. That is, the dance represents all the work I've ever done in the past seven years. And it is all the idiocy, all the threat, all the fun, all the violence.*

The inexorable repetition of the dance movements at the end of the play became for LeCompte an equivalent to the unanswerable yet inexorable questioning. The answer to "What is this dancing," became, in essence, "My art." In a sense, then, *L.S.D.* is not "about" paranoia or persecution—it is about dancing.

The persecution theme, however, is clear throughout. The video images of Part III are seen by LeCompte as a sign of the future. Just as Lenny Bruce was banned from performing in New York, LeCompte fantasized about the Wooster Group as a "troupe of ne'er-do-well drug addicts who could never perform in New York any more." Ironically, this has come true in a way because *L.S.D.* was forced to close.

*The only place we could ever perform L.S.D. would be in a hotel in Miami*

*where Miller would never hear about it. So it becomes Ronnie down there casing out old hotels where the Wooster Group will eventually end up in the '80s performing. I also think of it as that we're very old, and it's an old retiree community. This was overlaid afterward. When Ronnie made the film, we didn't know that we would use it in this way, so Ken [Kobland, the photographer] just had him walking around Miami making phone calls, doing what people do. When I saw it, I said, "Oh, it's Ronnie trying to find a place for us to work."*

Further fantasizing on these images led to the idea of Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos, who have cancelled their gig at the Shelbourne. The Group pretends they are Spanish and takes over. "It was just my kind of spinoff on what would happen to artists in the future, banned from their city, away from their home and wandering the backwaters of American culture, picking up whatever tidbits they could to make a living," explains LeCompte. It also ties in with Liddy and Leary, who now tour the country like old vaudeville performers, trying to cash in on some of their old glory.

One other important theme is the contrast of male and female. Part I is a clear reflection of society. The writers whose works are read are all male; the one female onstage is a babysitter. The Group wanted to include female writers from the period, but who? Burroughs' wife wrote, but there is apparently nothing readily available.

The male-versus-female theme is reinforced in Miller's play, in which women are the villains and are essentially depicted as the root of evil. As one of only four or five men who were executed for witchcraft in Salem, John Proctor, for LeCompte, is more identified as a woman. LeCompte sees Miller making this identification because Proctor lacks moral clarity. "That's one of my things about male writers of the '50s," says LeCompte, "their ability to pinpoint right and wrong. Miller is so clear about it. I can't be clear. As a woman of the '60s, '70s and '80s, I can't be clear. I don't know who the enemies are. I don't know if there are enemies." Whereas some critics have seen the ambiguity of this and other Wooster Group works as a failing, LeCompte sees it as a strength and as a necessary result of the culture and the process of their art.

## **Semiotics**

A knowledge of these themes and ideas might help explain the process of generating the performance and enhance the understanding of text and images, but it cannot fully justify experience. Clearly, many of these themes are private—not readily accessible to a general audience. And insofar as certain motifs are comprehensible, they tend to be seen as trite. Is this merely a play about paranoia and persecution? Has The Wooster Group merely chosen to combine two symbols of persecution—Timothy Leary and the Salem "witches" (and, through Miller's implied analogy, current-day political dissidents)—in order to make a statement about artistic freedom? The history of the Group, with its focus on formal esthetics over sociopolitical messages makes the answer obvious. Since *Rumstick Road*, the Group's pieces have been "about" performance itself, which is to say, semiotics. Biographical, social and literary substance have provided the raw material upon which these explorations were founded.

In terms of the text itself, what the Group does falls into the general category of deconstruction. The group takes an existing piece of dramatic literature, in this case *The Crucible*, and through a process of segmenting the text, repetitions and stripping away theatrical and dramatic contexts, finds resonances, meanings, textures and references in the text that were either not readily apparent or were not originally intended. The new, deconstructed text becomes a commentary on the old one. The process is naive in the sense that it does not

proceed from a theoretical basis; it is an instinctual response by artists to other art. Its roots may be found in John Cage's suggestion that the way to deal with past work is to quote it, not reconstruct or repeat it.

But in creating a total *mise en scène*, the process seems closer to a manipulation of theatrical signifiers and icons than to any formal deconstructive process. (Besides, just as semioticians are still grappling with ways to analyze the multilayered signals of theatrical performance, the ideas of deconstruction seem not to have moved beyond the literary field.) The Wooster Group's work seems to fall into two areas. One might be called "layering," the creation of successive layers of sign systems based upon a foundation of conventional theatrical signs. The other, a sort of reversal, is desemanticization, the conscious attempt to divorce signs from their semantic content.

A good example of these processes is the use of blackface. *Tituba* was written by Miller as a black character. This in itself functions as an icon. The audience immediately thinks in terms of slave or servant, the echoes of this relationship in today's society, the association of this character with voodoo, as well as a host of stereotypical images regarding personality, vocal patterns, movement, etc. By playing it in blackface, the Group is making a sociopolitical statement. Blackface is considered by many to be racist (and in many places is illegal) and conjures up images of minstrel shows and, especially in the vocal patterns adopted by the actress in this case, such popular entertainment figures as Amos and Andy. Thus, an American theatrical tradition is invoked—a tradition now viewed with some embarrassment—and the assumptions that would allow Arthur Miller to write a black slave character are called into question. At the same time, a purely theatrical sign system is being emphasized: This is an actress who, through the use of certain conventional signs (costume, make-up, physical characterization), is presenting a symbol that the audience interprets as *Tituba*. In terms of pure physical iconography, what she is doing is no different than what an actor playing Hamlet or Willy Loman or "Moon" (in the Mechanical's representation of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) does.

But then, the sign becomes separated from its object. When the same actress appears as Mary Warren, she is still in blackface. Although the character of Mary Warren is a servant, we know, from Miller's text and from history, that she is not black. Moreover, the actress drops the other signifying elements that refer to some image of a black person. The spectator is forced to either ignore the makeup, assume that the actress is representing a black woman playing a "white" role, or that there is some sociopolitical significance to the incongruity. (In fact, the presentation is simply a result of insufficient time for the actress to remove her makeup—but the signs remain for the audience to read.) When the text changed from *The Crucible* to *The Hearing*, the Group maintained the iconography, yet it became (or could have become) totally irrelevant within the informational context.

LeCompte described the effect as being like the two images of a stereopticon coming together to create 3-D. "But here, it's two slightly different frames that mesh together and overlap each other. You have a sense of two colliding images or overlapped images that are slightly different," she says.

Although she does not use it in the strictly semiotic sense, LeCompte repeatedly refers to the Miller text and associated symbols (such as the Puritan costumes) as icons. But in the context of *L.S.D.*, these icons point not only outward—toward historic and conventional people, places and ideas—but inward, toward themselves.

Picking up on an essentially Brechtian esthetic (one that was reinforced by director Richard Schechner with the Wooster Group's predecessor, The Performance Group), LeCompte allows each theatrical element to develop independently—to "speak in its own language," as Schechner once said. Thus, the setting is clearly a theatrical creation. It is not a bare stage or

“empty space,” yet it does not mesh iconographically with *The Crucible* or the Leary sections. “I don’t ever try to make one part of the play illustrate another,” she comments. “All of the elements of the piece have their own life. They are not supportive or secondary.” Thus, the physical setting refers more to earlier Group productions than it does to any semantic information contained in the text.

There are many more examples of layering and separation that could be explored. Most interesting are the segments, such as the “stoned *Crucible*” sequence, in which the text and score are recreations of their own actions.

Because critics have rarely been willing to look at The Wooster Group’s work as a developing and interconnected whole, and because there is an attempt to decode the works in terms of a more conventional information structure, the pieces tend to be seen only in terms of their superficial qualities. The *Village Voice* review demonstrated the critic’s attempt to reunite the semantic content with the iconographic image. In Part III, the “video Kirby” aims a gun at a woman holding a glass of water on her head. There is a live gunshot, the woman puts the glass down, and another performer says, to the monitor, “Hey, Bill. Bill, you missed.” The multiplicity of signifiers (performer, character, video image—which indicates a disjuncture in time as well as place—blank pistol to represent real gun, reference to circus act and William Tell, the ability to fairly realistically convey the idea of a gunshot coupled with the greater difficulty of depicting a person being shot, etc.) force the audience to interpret the moment on many realistic, theatrical and social levels. It is also funny. The *Voice* critic, however, pointed out that Burroughs shot his wife. Is this moment in the play a reference to an actual occurrence? Was Kirby “playing” Burroughs on the video? Most importantly, is the historical reference, which is obviously there, the significant aspect, or is it the “layering,” the multiplicity of theatrical messages? If the Wooster Group pieces can begin to be looked at in this way, their complexity and resonances—their significance in the development of a theatrical avant garde—become clearer.

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