

# Performance



## Ping Chong's Theatre of Simultaneous Consciousness

Kent Neely

The questioning of linear rationality that marked the beginning of this century and that has since been reflected in various visual art works and musical compositions is also seen among theatre artists who question the consciousness of time, space and self within performance. Ping Chong is a particularly good example. His productions lack plot. Personality does not develop in characters or, if it is suggested, it occurs with dubious stability. Settings seem fluid, without clear permanence in one time or space and chronology may exist but not necessarily in a predictable manner.

Consider Chong's play, *The Angels of Swedenborg*. It introduces the audience to Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth century Swede who was intrigued with the power of dreams. In Chong's play, the character is at once a reincarnation of Swedenborg's spirit and a modern archetypal computer operator. He is overcome with ennui and he longs for the spiritual connection represented in his dreams; a place depicted center stage as a feathery corral filled with playful angels.

Chong's *Nosferatu* conveys an alternate theme. Set in a modern upscale apartment, *Nosferatu* portrays the life of an affluent couple. It is a shallow existence marked by banal conversation, name dropping, chic clothes and designer furniture. Coincidentally with the play's progress, slides from the 1922 Murnau film, *Nosferatu*, appear above the stage. Similar to the plague that *Nosferatu* brought to the unsuspecting citizenry of legendary Germany, materialism and greed have crept into and infected the young characters on stage. Their contamination becomes so complete that the physical manifestation of *Nosferatu* at the play's closing is inevitable and appropriate.

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*Snow* enacts vignettes from different points in legend and history. The desolate aftermath of Berlin after World War II blends into an enactment of a Japanese myth. Later the Christmas Day armistice of World War I is replayed then fades to another scene in another place and another time. The one similarity that continues through the play is the portrayal of death and sorrow in each scene.

Finally, *Elephant Memories*, one of Chong's most recent efforts, shows a futuristic, ecologically soured world populated by mechanistic sycophants. It is a place that has endured war and conflict, where identity has been wholly codified and conformity is the only socially accepted behavior. Shamed "doubters," those who demonstrate independent thought, are incarcerated and finally executed.

These productions by Ping Chong represent his work since 1983. All are different from the style noted by Noel Carroll who described Chong's earlier creations as ". . . rooted in the historical and the individual case study."

These productions may contain historical events or suggest a particular contemporaneous poignancy but they do so merely as a means to devalue historical consciousness. Different characters appear but they lack the traditional means of structuring inner and outer identity. Instead, they are, in Chong's words, "subjects of fate," a phrase that reflects his view that fate subordinates self determination and will. Such emphasis upon random incidence is essential to understand Chong's experiential performance technique. I have termed the technique Simultaneity of Consciousness, that is to say, a consciousness which is observed within the theatrical performance and, simultaneously, experienced by those watching (1988).

The phrase, Simultaneity of Consciousness, is one derived from conversations with Ping Chong (1987 and 1988) in which he referred to one's awareness of the coincidence of events in different time and space configurations, the randomness of human existence. What the Self experiences may occur synchronistically with the Other. Likewise the Self may witness experiences in the Other that have occurred previously to them or vice versa.

Simultaneity of Consciousness results from Chong's manipulation of theatrical elements which would otherwise elicit a clearly objective or subjective response to the performance. It provokes various conditions among the audience: they are auditors watching a certain state of consciousness portrayed; the actions that they see might be similar to personal incidents and as auditors they can understand the experience and emotion objectively; and finally, the consciousness portrayed by what they see is coincidentally experienced by them so that the line between objective response and subjective response is blurred.

The plays mentioned here, *The Angels of Swedenborg*, *Nosferatu*, *Snow* and *Elephant Memories*, all demonstrate performance techniques which evoke

Simultaneity of Consciousness. I submit that there are two components to this performance technique: a plastic space of representation and a network of events and symbols. This study is offered in terms of those two elements.

### *The Plastic Space of Representation*

It was Michel Foucault who discussed consciousness and knowledge shaped by space and architecture and it was he who pointed to our acceptance of the convention of the space of representation, a three dimensional space in which actions of a particular time and place (such as in a play) may be represented. Most plays rely upon a space of representation that is consistent. The constitution of a time and place continuum facilitates the "willing suspension of disbelief" and acceptance of the play's pretense.

In Chong's productions that continuity is disrupted by a space of representation that is plastic. He eliminates the particulars of time, place and character identity so that, while the rectangular space of representation may continue to exist, it no longer maintains a continuum of time and place, historical consciousness is blocked.

Chong's texts are a major factor in creating the plastic space of representation because they do not rely upon realistic dialogue. *Angels* has almost none other than an opening monologue by Swedenborg and two other unusual components: the sounds of devil type creatures who try to disrupt the angels and hieroglyphic type symbols projected upon the rear wall. The only other literary element is a "chaser light" sign that runs this message continuously:

Emanuel Swedenborg. B. 1688. D. 1772. Stroke. The Lord has graciously opened the sight of my spirit. He has thus raised me into Heaven and lowered me into Hell and has shown me visually what each is like.

*Nosferatu*, *Snow*, and *Elephant Memories* have extensive dialogue but it is not rooted in conversation nor does it function to reveal character and thought.

In *Nosferatu* the characters are given names but the construction of complete identities is thwarted by the text. No one makes any sense. They speak in cliches and nonsequiturs that sound contemporary and hip but mean nothing. Chong built the *Nosferatu* text by cutting quotes from such popular publications as *Interview* and *Rolling Stone*. He then inserted necessary conjunctions to connect phrases or to complete sentences so that the couple's speech and character are superficial, hollow and vacuous, just like their reliance upon material items for identity.

The text in *Snow* offers more meaning but only within each of the play's eleven scenes. Every scene occurs in a completely different time and place with different characters. The text of scene one has no bearing on that of scene two. Scene two has no bearing on scene three, and so forth. The only obvious overlap of meaning occurs between three scenes, one, five and eleven, set in Berlin 1946. In those scenes the same soldier reappears. No other through line occurs as the play progresses. It is only at the end that one can sense the thematic similarity between the different scenes: the serendipity of death and suffering and of joy and celebration.

*Elephant Memories*, also containing extensive dialogue, makes the text a commentary on itself. The world represented is in a future devoid of personality and many natural resources. A voice projected over loudspeakers offers an on-going description of the horrid environmental conditions (e.g. temperatures of 120 to 130 degrees and the lack of water) in the happy rhythm of a pop radio DJ. The description has meaning but there is an additional irony attached by the method of speaking that glosses the severity of the situation.

*Elephant Memories* incorporates a second textual method as well, recitation by the performers. Each of the players comes to a microphone down left and recites the James Brown song, *It's a Man's World*, first as it was written:

It's a man's world.  
 It's a man's world.  
 But it would be nothing,  
 Nothing,  
 Without a woman  
 Or a little girl.

Then additional lyrics are added that have a dark pertinence:

Man made money  
 So he could buy another man.  
 Man made the micro-chip  
 To keep track of each other.

Later the performers attempt conversation in a stiff and robotic style that is all the more jarring.

The completion of Chong's plastic space of representation depends upon scenic elements that suggest different places. To this end, he incorporates multiple settings that are used both separately and simultaneously.

In *The Angels of Swedenborg*, two distinct areas exist. The computer operator's desk is located downstage right. The angel's corral occupies the rest of the stage. These two areas are never fully out of the audience's sight. Even if one is localized with light, the other can be seen. When the operator lapses into a dream, the audience can see the angels cavorting. Both worlds exist simultaneously but within the same space of representation.

Chong's stage arrangement succeeds in another way too. The computer operator's desk and fashionable dress make his work area appear contemporary and real. The angel's arena first appears as the illusionary world of the operator's mind. As the performance progresses and the operator sits motionless, dreaming at his desk, the angels dominate the action seeming more and more a part of the operator's reality, a reality familiar to the audience. At the play's conclusion, the operator leaves his desk and enters the heavenly area. His crossover thus joins theatrical elements which appear both real and illusionary at various times in the performance. The illusionary world of the computer operator becomes not just a state of consciousness, but one of being as well.

The slide projections are the scenic element which complete the plastic space of representation in *Nosferatu*. The slides summarize the Murnau film and function both as an imagistic commentary and as an emotional underscore. Chong deconstructs barriers between the stage space and the slides when, at the end of the performance, the rear of the apartment slowly opens. From a shroud of fog, *Nosferatu* materializes, rises from a coffin, and enters the apartment to attack the neck of the young woman.

For *Snow* Chong uses both simultaneous staging and numerous historical representations. The time and space distortion is as radical as from Berlin 1946 to Nippon 1862, from the Western Front 1917 into Prehistory and into the future. All the scenes include the appearance of snow or the suggestion of winter, a metaphor for death and sorrow.

The production incorporates small inner stages located at both sides that are covered by scrims which allow opacity or translucence. The stages reveal interior scenes which are related to the main stage action or which add an imagistic commentary, an emotional underscore (just as the slides do in *Nosferatu*). For instance, during the Western Front scene, the left one becomes a prayer nook where a nun ceremoniously lights a bank of prayer candles which burn for the majority of the play.

Similar to the use of the visual images of slides in *Nosferatu*, *Elephant Memories* relies on sound and music. Chong said that he attempted to incorporate techniques that would speak to an "MTV audience" (1991). The upbeat voice is often accompanied by similarly styled music and dance movement. He shifts scenes quickly and, particularly with the inclusion of the

James Brown song, makes obvious connections to pop culture. Still these serve a multivalent purpose.

The voice-over and dialogue separate the space of representation from the audience but the recitation of the James Brown song crosses the imaginary demarcation between the audience and stage; the actors are no longer distinctly performing the play, they are performing a comment upon it. Greater intimacy with the audience is established when two actors offer monologues in direct address style.

Chong includes transitional scenes in all these productions to emphasize and focus the themes of each. The computer operator's entrance into the heavenly arena in *Angels* is contrasted by slide projections of disaster, war, hunger and death. And if the point is not clear that his new existence is one of ultimate bliss, the play closes on him and the angels contemplating the projected image of a young buddha.

*Nosferatu* also includes a blatant transition. Accompanied by a sound recording from the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead, actors, costumed as skeletons, appear as prostitutes, panhandlers, street toughs, politicians and other images from a modern but imperfect world. They perform within the apartment setting without any adjustment or set change other than that created by their presence.

A futuristic scene serves as the transition in *Snow*. Actor's dressed in sunglasses, black frock coats and derbies confer atop Mount Chocura in 1990 (two years forward from this 1988 presentation). Throughout the play, members of this ghoulish group silently appear at moments of death. In this scene they discuss their achievements resulting from incurable disease, hunger, and such. Death is not sorrowful. It is merely their occupation, their business. They do not appear cruel. In fact, they are somewhat humorous. Their inclusion is true to the play's theme of the coincidental nature of existence.

Both aural and visual events are at work in *Elephant Memories*. An odd sound effect is heard while the actors face right and applaud. It is the sound of elephants trumpeting while being shot. It might seem incongruent, especially in combination with the actors clapping, but instead it is a chilling reminder of the absence of wilderness and nature and the silly sense of normalcy which has replaced it.

The plasticity in Chong's productions does not construct the conditions of a typical play. There is no chronological progress depicted, history is nonexistent and impertinent. Chong's characters and their actions suggest fundamental human behaviours which transcend individuality and temporal or spatial specificity. The poignancy of the effect can become personally relevant with the network of events and symbols that Chong employs.

*The Network of Events and Symbols*

An audience member typically perceives the theatrical performance space as removed, contained and separated from his or her presence and reality. Chong introduces a network of events and symbols that may make the audience member feel, at one point, within the space of representation and, at another point, outside it. In doing so, one's architectural consciousness of the space of representation is reconfigured so that one may feel surrounded by it, within it or removed from it.

Chong's technique is somewhat similar to work by artists like Lee Breuer, Jo Anne Akalaitis, Ushio Amagatsu, Tadashi Suzuki to name a few. All are experimenting with techniques that obscure the line between aesthetic and experiential response. The effect is not dissimilar to "restored behavior" described by Schechner in *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. The emotional effect aroused by Chong's plays is different because the effect is not dependent upon a widely understood and remembered event, person, or action. Chong stimulates responses that coincide with the emotion that he is portraying, by using signs and symbols whose significance is established within the confines of the performance. In Chong's case, events and symbols from his illusionary world intersect with those of immediate relevance to the audience member. The technique establishes different levels of reality within a space of representation that is itself plastic.

For example, Chong's omission of dialogue and his ingenious mixture of sound, light and movement within *The Angels of Swedenborg* make the presentation appear dream-like. Since dialogue is not essential to the presentation, the audience member lacks one means of tracing the passage of chronological time; characters discussing events.

Chong also slows down the movement on stage. The computer operator's and angels' movement is carefully choreographed to be measured and deliberate. The movement does not seem unusual because it agrees contextually. Nothing moves swiftly to contradict the pace nor to equate the scene with conscious reality.

The dream conditions are enhanced by the inclusion of familiar sounds (water moving, sounds of nature) that are not intrusive but relaxing and lulling.

Finally the lighting is controlled to accentuate these emotional states. The scenes are bathed in cooler colors that, like the sounds, relax and sooth.

In *Angels* he achieves a network of events and symbols as he juxtaposes the dream atmosphere with one moment that is, literally, awakening. A percussionist sits at the right end of the front row throughout the performance. Most of the audience is unaware that she is a performer until one moment near the end. Then, before the computer operator enters the angel's corral, she rises quietly and crashes a pair of cymbals together. She creates this

disruption standing between the performance and the seating areas. It breaks any spell that the performance might cast and intersects the audience's consciousness with the stage action.

Chong uses two events and symbols in *Nosferatu* in a similar fashion. The first device is fog. As the audience enters the theatre, the entire theatre, including the seating area, is clouded by fog; fog thick enough to obscure where the stage is.

The second device is a recurring symbol first presented in a mimed prologue. Two angels, identical to those in *The Angels of Swedenborg*, appear under a spotlight in a stage section that juts into the audience. They are locked in struggle. Their fight continues until one reaches into the chest area of the other and removes a large, ugly, black ball of matted fur. The removal of this tumor quiets the afflicted angel and allows both to celebrate.

The play proceeds without the angels or the balls reappearing until the end. When the figure of *Nosferatu* enters the apartment at the play's closing, scores of the black balls appear on the stage and roll into the audience. The symbol of evil that was earlier pulled from the angel's body has multiplied and flooded the stage and overflowed into the audience. Like the cymbal crash in *Angels*, the balls create a different level of consciousness based upon the audience's physical space that intersects other levels of consciousness already represented on stage or experienced by the audience.

The structure of *Snow* is more complex and the network of events or symbols is quite different. The cymbal crash and the appearance of the black balls in *Angels* and *Nosferatu* is surprising. Such acts in *Snow* would be truly extraordinary since the scenes each contain some sense of meaning reliant upon spoken text. As an alternative, Chong uses direct address and music.

Nuns enact the legend of an orphaned baby boy rescued in Aix en Provence, 1670. They perform off the stage, adjacent to the audience but, as the scene progresses, the nuns enter the seating area and, finally, speak directly to the playgoers. They then physically lead the audience into the intermission break thereby intersecting the performance and the seating area and even the lobby. The effect is heightened further when they retrieve the audience at the end of intermission. They reverse their proximity to the audience in successively smaller degrees, complete their scene, and leave the theatre.

*Snow* incorporates live music, from a squeeze box played by a wandering derelict in the Berlin scenes. Though inappropriate to those scenes, the music is correct to the theme of the whole play. In a most subtle fashion the derelict, who has no other purpose, provides the aural symbol which links the audience's consciousness of the preceding and succeeding scenes.

In *Elephant Memories* the presence of the microphone down left becomes the means to intersect the performance space with the audience area. It is certainly close in proximity but it remains separated from the audience as just

another part of the performance except in two instances. The first occurs during a depiction of a game show when the MC tests the speed with which contestants can demonstrate their compliance with and knowledge of correct life style (as one is prompted, "Our way of life. . . ." she answers, ". . . is THE way of life."). The MC then abruptly turns the microphone to the audience and walks close and asks "What's wrong with that?" The audience follows the natural tendency to maintain the performer/audience barrier and remains silent. The silence serves as tacit approval of the MC's badgering insistence about compliance and conformity. They have, in effect, joined the players on stage by conforming.

The second instance occurs when a woman appears in a window up left. She disappears and then reappears down right to cross the stage. Dressed in a white gown, her face is covered in a featureless black mask; she is unlike any other performer and seems to have suddenly entered the action from some other time and space. She takes the microphone and begins to ask the question, "What is strange." Although it sounds rhetorical, her posture leaves no doubt that she is directing the question to the audience. She even provides moments that would allow an audience member, if one were so bold, to answer. Again, the audience's silence demonstrates their need to retain proper decorum, or, as the play depicts, conformity.

The combination of a plastic space of representation and a network of events and symbols produces an unusual effect, one essentially experiential. It is a sense of being within a liminal space.<sup>1</sup>

Liminal moments occur as gaps between events or meaning, gaps between particular moments in time and space or gaps between states of consciousness or being. These liminal spaces necessarily carry thresholds which precede and succeed their occurrence, so for every liminal space there is a threshold before and after the change. This is most acute in considering the significance of symbols in Chong's works.

In theatre, a symbol's significance becomes relative to the moment in which it occurs. A church spire acquires particular significance to Solness in Ibsen's *The Masterbuilder*; glass animals acquire added meaning in William's *Glass Menagerie*; the American west becomes specially relevant in Shepard's works and so on. In Chong's plays, significance is unstable, it changes as it is seen or heard at various points in the performance and it is this multivalence that contradicts a consistent or absolute significance of any one event or symbol. The lack of significance, or the introduction of other levels of significance, produces thresholds from one idea to another and consequently there are gaps that are not completely reconciled. Liminal spaces are left in which the viewer is caught; meaning is found then lost or rediscovered in a different manner. Linear rationality does not work.

For example, the Murneau film sections follow the plot outline of the Nosferatu legend. This symbol, the film images, signifies a clandestine menace but that significance changes as the play progresses. At first, it is Nosferatu's deceptive character that seems to parallel the young couple's lives. Later that significance is short-circuited because the signifier shifts and reverses from the film to the stage action. The couple's stilted and affected behavior represents the zombies that Murneau's Nosferatu created. Likewise the recitation of *It's a Man's World* in *Elephant Memories* is a humorous parody of the song but the additional lyrics give a different significance to the style making the manner of presentation significant in a different way. It is an unusual coincidence of sign signifying another sign just as the opposite occurs. There is coincident and multiple significance in parallel signs--a mirror image reflects into another mirror and specificity is lost in an infinity of possibilities.

As the significance of various signs and symbols change through the play, one's suspension of disbelief is affected and an individual's confidence in his or her distinction between reality and pretense is altered. It is the combination of the plastic space of representation and the network of symbols and events that creates this sensation of liminality that continues throughout the performance.

A second effect occurs when the simultaneous events and locations affect how time is noted and perceived. *Angels* and *Nosferatu* both contain simultaneous events, but the significance of one event affects others. For instance, the computer operator's ennui was coincidental with the portrayal of the playing angels. His state of mind is both understood relative to the alternative reality of the angels and the reality where he originated. The audience's perception of both is separate yet coincidental and analogous. Consequently, one might perceive that the action is occurring in a contemporary time frame but the action is affected by events outside that same time frame.

*Snow* goes further by introducing bits of history. Each bit proceeds in a successive manner but a sense of logical time is destroyed by the mixed order of the scenes.

*Elephant Memories* appears to be contained to a semi-circular performance area until the woman in white appears outside it in the window up right. Her address to the audience completely disrupts a sense of time from the preceding events and intersects with the audience's realm of reality.

Chong's use of the stage affects the audiences' perception of where the performance space, and the stage illusion, begin and end. The simultaneous stage settings, the action off-stage, and the intersecting events (like the musician crashing cymbals and the woman in white's appearance), extend the boundaries of the stage space beyond its architecturally defined limits. Just as

signs and symbols become relative, architectural constructs become relative as well.<sup>2</sup>

Chong is manipulating time and space both within a performance and within the audience's perception of that performance. Through this control of time and space, Chong's *Simultaneity of Consciousness* has its greatest impact because it is through the specificity of time and space that one perceives, defines and understands individual existence.<sup>3</sup>

Chong purposely obscures traditional measurements of time and space such as successive events, singularity of location and individuality. By obscuring these measurements, the plays, the themes, and the audiences' responses are elevated from the particular to the general. The individual is diminished in relation to the species. The importance of the particular event shrinks within the range of all life.

This shift from the finite to the infinite is facilitated by the lack of logical connections. Neither the plays construction, the themes nor the audiences' responses can be joined in a particular cause to effect manner. The performances require an intuited response. This obfuscation of logic and reliance on intuition is precisely Chong's intent (Chong, 1987).

*Simultaneity of Consciousness* is made complete when the audience member shares in what the performance depicts. Their existential consciousness can extend beyond their individuality. Their perception of time and space can expand and they may comprehend their own transiency. At that point the viewer may concur with Chong's simple philosophical outlook that human beings exist in a universe governed by coincidence and randomness or, in Chong's terminology, fate.

*Minneapolis, Minnesota*

## Notes

1. Victor Turner discussed liminality at length (especially in *From Ritual to Theatre*). The reference here does not serve as a fully accurate example in accord with his description. For the sake of this discussion, liminality is defined as the gap between states of consciousness in which one may recognize those differing states simultaneously.

2. Chong may have achieved the greatest sense of *Simultaneity of Consciousness* with his 1990 production, *Deshima*, commissioned by the Dutch government. For it, Chong had an enclosed performance space constructed that seated only sixty people, all its surfaces (except the floor) appeared to be rice paper walls. For scene changes the seating area, with audience in place, moved as a unit until it faced a different setting. The architectural boundaries that constitute the audience's sense of reality are the same as those that constitute the performance space. First person observations cannot be offered here since the production has only been done in Amsterdam.

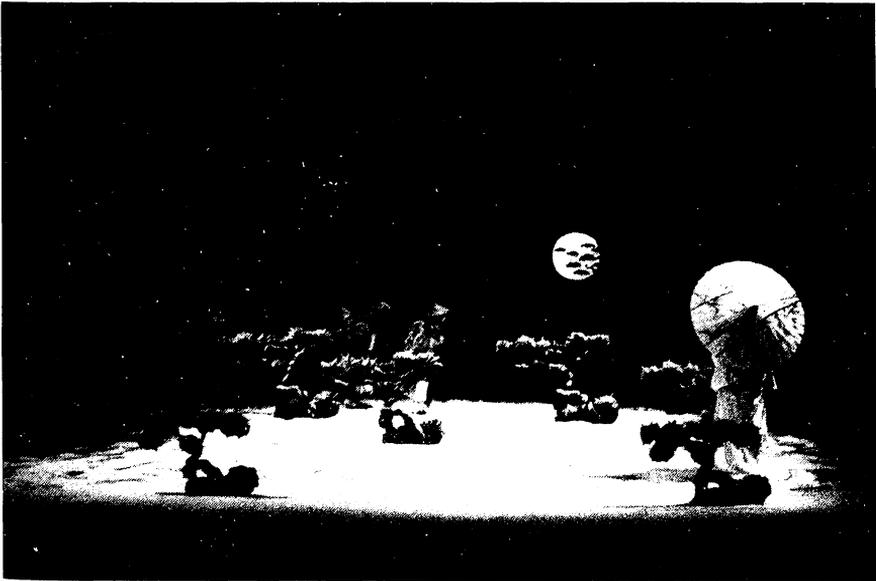
3. I note here Mircea Eliade's commentary on the role of history and identity. His comments regarding the "terror of history" in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* are particularly interesting in this context.

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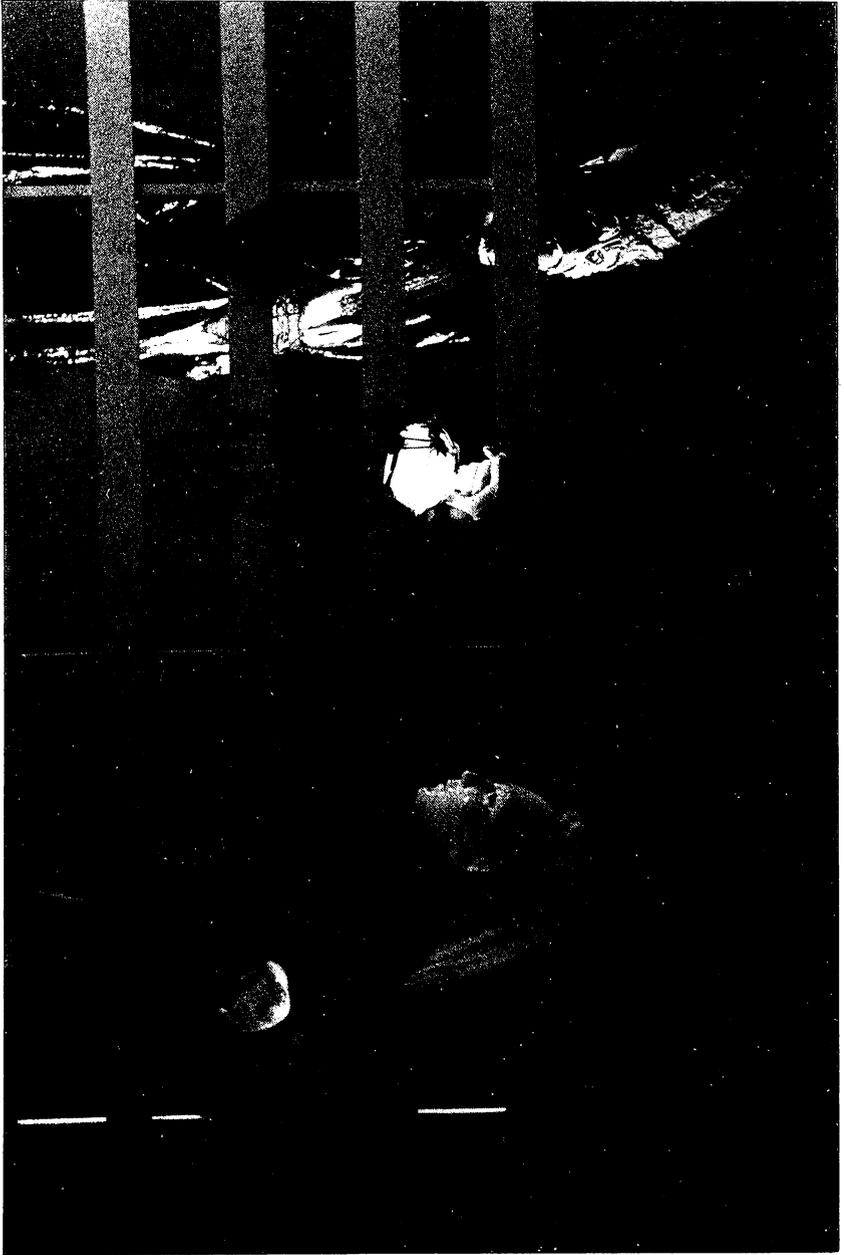
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"Day of the Dead" dance from Ping Chong's *Nosteratu*. Photo courtesy Illusion Theatre, Minneapolis.



The Japanese wood cutter legend from *Snow*. Photo courtesy Illusion Theatre, Minneapolis.



An angel from *The Angels of Swedenborg* confronts one of the devilish figures. Photo courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



*Elephant Memories* by Ping Chong, the "game show" sequence. Photo courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

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