

## PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

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Virtual reality is the rage; one can be in an event without physical presence. Do such technological creations only prove Baudrillard's theoretical conception of a hyperreality? In 1994 there are so many examples, they border on parody. Consider the proliferation of communication devices (from Macintosh's "Newton" personal communicator to Sony's "Pyxis" portable global positioning system), the abundant recorded entertainment options (cassette tapes, DAT, CD, laser disc, video tape and MIDI) and the ever present video tape camera (in a variety of configurations and abilities). Added to this is the expanding reach of telecommunications that has collapsed the world beyond a global village to a blurred, channel-surfing maze of images. The list becomes a numbing catalog of mediating devices that serve to incapacitate one from distinguishing experience and simulacrum.

Within this mixed-up media matrix, live performance struggles to reinvent itself. At one end is the Cameron MacIntosh school of spectacle and sentiment and at the other is the politically charged performance art of confrontation. In both there are agendas: performance either serves profit or privilege. Andrew Lloyd Webber becomes wealthier and Karen Finley becomes a pop icon. Even in these extremes, any vibrancy of performance is dull to an audience stupefied by the number of images, messages and ideas that bombard them daily.

Can nothing penetrate Baudrillard's hyperreality? Lurking beyond the messages of simulacra that pervades American consciousness, AIDS has reconfigured any notion of simulation. The horror that sickness represents shatters the possibility of a simulacrum perhaps as the Holocaust forever shattered any Jewish conception of the second World War. In today's over-stimulated and simulated world, it is our knowledge of AIDS that serves as the terrifying crucible for truly unconventional, perhaps, profound performance.

In this issue of PRAXIS, three writers offer essays about performance that defy simulation in an age of AIDS. A fourth writer covers America's iconoclastic originator of "environmental theatre."

Graham Dixon addresses the most conventional and best recognized treatment, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize drama, *Angels in America*. Dixon demonstrates that the traditional theatre can still obviate itself. While the "legitimate" New York theatre offered *Phantom of the Opera*, *Miss Saigon*, and promised *Sunset Boulevard*, it coincidentally presented this play.

Marvin Carlson's performance study of Reza Abdoh's *TIGHT, RIGHT, WHITE* asserts that young HIV positive, Oriental artist has re-ignited the fire of experimental theatre. Abdoh does not give a sanitized version of AIDS in America. His is a nightmarish view; one that he demands we enter conscious of its repulsive and horrible dimensions.

Carrie Sandahl's study of *The Jim Rose Circus Side Show* asserts that performance must bring us out of Baudrillardian theoretical consciousness and into the experience of reality; one confronted, informed even celebrated in pain.

Finally, Carol Rosen examines a recent work by Richard Schechner by way of his contemporary, Jerzy Grotowski. Rosen reacquaints us with the techniques Schechner made famous three decades ago. Today, they are merely a pale reminder of more viscerally charged productions that attempted to span the separation between representation and reality.

Taken collectively, these essays are a stimulating examination of the proximity of performance vis-à-vis experience. It is a discourse that unmask assumptions and provokes new ideas and one that makes us reassess the application of Baudrillard's theories to performance.

No **Angels in America?** AIDS as Three-Dimensional Savior on a Two Dimensional World of Baudrillardian Hyperreality.

Imagine a play with no protagonist. The action proceeds, some characters suffer unimaginably and die; others are left bereft, crazed, numb with shock. The performance goes on: lasting days, months, years. Uncounted numbers participate . . .<sup>1</sup>

The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene play of the world's obscenity . . . he can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer produce himself as mirror. he is now only pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.<sup>2</sup>

We exist in a world of paradox. An obscene paradox. The "play" in which we are walk-on characters contrasts with the "confusion" of Baudrillard's postmodern vision. In a world in which the boundaries between what is "real" and what is "unreal" become increasingly dubious, hazy and even irrelevant, the specter of AIDS rises like the ghost of Hamlet's father. Remember me, Death says. The Western world was starting to forget about death: the old infectious diseases were fading memories, one died of luxury or old age. There is little tragic about the death of an eighty year-old in her sleep. But now tragedy reappears, reasserts itself as young men and women die an often terrible death. The modern doctor stands as helpless as Oedipus watching his Thebes slowly rot and die. Perversely, the unexpected revival of a tragic disease has injected life into old representational forms which had begun to eye themselves suspiciously in the mirror, a process which seemed to be inevitably leading to their destruction. While AIDS disintegrates the bodies of those it afflicts, it has reintegrated the representational forms of modernism, or at least offered them new material to argue their relevance. *Angels in America* won the Pulitzer Prize; AIDS plays are now a mainstream spectacle of modern theatrical endeavor.

Before tackling the multi-dimensional complexities of *Angels in America* I shall construct a conceptual framework. Like Edmund Husserl, I argue that we should return to the "things themselves,"<sup>3</sup> the "things" in our case being the "Janus-faced thing" which Bert States speaks of, "the sign/image."<sup>4</sup> the sign/image is the dramatic play, but the play involves the "play" of Baudrillard's shifting kaleidoscope of seductive appearance. The pre-AIDS artistic sign, as part

of the traditional representational model, has difficulty in existing at all. For in the postmodern world there may not be a "thing" to say anything about. As Baudrillard suggests,

The scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead there is a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold—the smooth operational surface of communication.<sup>5</sup>

In the postmodern structure there is an eternal unfolding of images replicating one another without any need of an original. It is the play of these imagistic simulacrum that I shall consider in *Angels in America*. Baudrillard originally argued that this situation was an inevitable process, both unstoppable and irreversible. However, AIDS has brought complexities to Baudrillard's surface: the Frenchman has recently suggested that "the sudden whirl-pools which we dub catastrophes are really the thing that saves us from catastrophe."<sup>6</sup> He continues with what might initially seem a perverse evaluation:

So the actual catastrophe may turn out to be a carefully modulated strategy of our species—or more precisely, our viruses, our extreme phenomena, which are definitely real, albeit localized, may be what allows us to preserve the energy of that virtual catastrophe which is the motor for all our processes, whether economic or political, artistic or historical.<sup>7</sup>

To be succinct: AIDS is a savior. The "virtual catastrophe" implies the reappearance of the world of three-dimensional reality, related to an escape from the smooth surface of hyperreality. AIDS has a unique role as a kind of Societal Sword of Damocles, hanging over individual and group alike. AIDS is a brutal reality in a world otherwise made up of hyperreality, it provides a third dimension, a height above the surface from which we may identify previously hidden features. AIDS saves while it destroys. Is *Angels in America* inescapably held captive on the surface or does it manage to rise above it, and, if it does, how far is AIDS a catalyst for the process. Ultimately I must consider whether Baudrillard's contention of AIDS-as-savior has any validity beyond an admittedly fascinating intellectual licentiousness. *Angels in America* shall be the mirror (screen?) for this consideration.

The dominant feature of most of the characters' lives in *Angels in America* is "chaos." The following exchange appears early in the play:

Roy: Crazy life.

Joe: Chaotic

Roy: Well but God bless chaos. Right:

Joe: Ummm . . . 8 (15).

Roy's desk, with its constantly noisy and elaborate phone system, is the perfect image of this chaos. While there is instant communication there is little understanding: conversations are started but never finished as they are interrupted by others which are in turn curtailed in an endless cycle of confusion. While Roy's over sexuality is subsumed beneath a layer of self-righteous denial Kushner tells us that he "*conducts business with great energy, impatience and sensual abandon.*" Roy is in love with the chaos, he is in love with the avoidance of genuine communication and understanding that the phone system enables. His ability to float easily in the hyperreality of postmodern communication also enables Roy to indulge in a form of sophistic verbal materialism later in the play as he denies that he is a homosexual because "what I am is defined entirely by who I am . . . Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys." Words have no concrete meaning, they drift with Roy in the postmodern ether.

Harper is in direct juxtaposition to Roy. We first see her in scene 3, immediately after Roy's frenetic introduction. Harper is sitting alone at home, listening to the radio: immobile, lonely, alienated from Roy's system. Ironically, it is Harper who understands the very fragility of the system that Roy, the practically successful man-of-the-world, holds in such awe:

*Harper:* People who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining . . . beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart . . .

She goes on to describe the Ozone layer as "a kind of gift, from God," and sees its destruction as both a catalyst for, and symbol of, the destruction of wider systems which had previously protected humanity. At this early point in the play Roy *appears* in power while Harper *appears* powerless. The appearance of AIDS-related matters in both of their lives and their subsequent fates will be important in our final evaluation, but for now it is sufficient to state that the two positions are laid out side by side.

AIDS appears in *Angels in America* with neither a bang nor a whimper, but in the guise of simple, compelling *pause*:

*Prior:* Cats know when something's wrong.

*Louis:* Only when you stop feeding them.

*Prior:* They know. That's why Sheba left, because she knew.

*Louis:* Knew what?

(*Pause.*)

It is soon turned into a joke with Prior's punning on the word "lesion," a tendency of avoidance which soon becomes a pattern. The "humorous avoidance" is dissimilar to Roy's avoidance, for the characters are not entirely convinced of the success of their evasions. So when Louis tries to explain why he may have to leave Prior, he initially hides behind the pseudo-intellectual explanation that "maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection . . . can't incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are meant to go . . . ," but he soon admits to more mundane concerns: "Maybe vomit . . . and sores and disease . . . really frighten him." The intellectual explanation soon fades into the terrible realities of AIDS. At first Kushner avoids dwelling upon these realities; they are hinted at by the characters and then drawn away from—AIDS is glanced at briefly rather than carefully examined.

These brief glances are part of an overall pattern of fragmentation in the play. The split scene device encapsulates this fragmentation, it brings a kind of confused lucidity to the complex transformations and juxtapositions of time and place which embody what might be seen as a Baudrillardian "immanent surface." Scene 7 clearly illustrates how Kushner enlightens through staying just the comprehensible side of the line between utter confusion and understanding. As he says in the stage directions, "*for some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering.*" But there is a method to this bewilderment:

(*Harper appears*)

*Harper:* Are you . . . who are you?

*Prior:* Who are you?

*Harper:* What are you doing in my hallucination?

*Prior:* I'm not in you hallucination. You're in my dream. (31)

Here is a surface in which "operations" may indeed "unfold" without the normal constrictions of realistic time and place. The method to all of this comes when one half of a split scene ironically comments upon and reflects the other half. In one of the most consummate examples of the technique (II.4) Kushner places

Joe and Roy in a "fancy straight bar" with Louis and a Man in Central Park. The superficially polite but consummately vicious platitudes of the bar conversation contrast hilariously with the strangely unaroused sexuality of the park pick-up. At one point the two conversations meet:

*Joe:* Can't Washington wait?

*Roy:* You do what you need to do, Joe. What *you* need. You. Let her life go where it wants to go. You'll both be better for that. *Somebody* should get what they want.

*Man:* What do you want?

*Louis:* I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed. (54)

AIDS is the common background to all of this: our knowledge of Roy's condition and his reluctance to accept it ironize his aphoristic advice, while Louis's apparent disregard for the risks of contracting AIDS provide an image of another form of denial. AIDS is the framework for Kushner's brocoleur design, he never allows the audience to focus on any one type of denial for long, each simply "appears" much as Harper "appears" in Prior's hallucination. The audience catches a brief glance of the type, but never for long enough to rationalize it, to set it within a conceptual framework. This facet of the play may be viewed in several ways. On one level, the device makes for a highly entertaining evening of drama, simply contrasting/combining realistic dialogue with fantastical, almost circus-like technique. Kushner is also avoiding the kind of dogmatic step-by-step, political diatribe of other AIDS plays (*The Normal Heart*, etc.). For our purposes the technique clearly illustrates how Kushner appears to agree with Baudrillard's contention that the "screen and the mirror no longer exist," *Angels in America* does not mirror the world as much as it produces a fragmented impression of it. On the smooth surface of communication no idea, statement or action stays still long enough to become a rational whole. All is, as Roy suggests, chaos.

The chaos of the split scenes develops until they merge in a kind of choric lament to the betrayals and inconsistencies of modern life. Each character echoes the other, they encapsulate and define one another's loneliness:

*Harper:* Oh God. Home. The moment of truth has arrived.

*Joe:* Harper.

*Louis:* I'm going to move out.

*Prior:* The fuck you are.

Joe: Harper. Please listen. I still love you very much. You're still my best buddy. I'm not going to leave you. (76)

Kushner states that "*the proceedings may be a little confusing but not the final results*," a comment which might suffice for the whole of the second act of the play as it becomes increasingly embroiled in a hallucinatory environment mixing past and present. The voices on the immanent surface are indeed confused, but what of the (V)voice from above? The Voice of death, the angel . . . whatever it is, is indelibly linked with the voice of AIDS. It comes from above both in the physical space of the theatre and, perhaps, in the theoretical modality of Baudrillard's theory. So the development of the Voice's influence, culminating in the appearance of the Angel at the end of the play is vital in our evaluation of whether the "virtual catastrophe" of AIDS is indeed a three-dimensional savior. The voice is hardly enlightening, it is rather confusing:

Voice: No death, no;

A marvelous work and a wonder we undertake, an edifice awry we sink and straighten, a great Lie we abolish, a great error we correct, with the rule, sword and broom of Truth!

Prior: What are you talking about, I . . .

Voice: I am on my way; when I am manifest, our work begins:

Prepare for the parting of the air,

The breath, the ascent,

Glory to . . . (62)

What *is* she talking about? Is the Voice merely a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of religious rhetoric? She seems to offer hope with "no death," but the description of what she actually is offering is too amorphous and imprecise to engender much confidence in the dying Prior. The voice is all style and little substance; it is cut off in mid-sentence to be replaced by Martin's political platitudes in the next scene much as Roy's clients were cut off in his opening scene. Indeed, the process seems just as easy whether one is indulging in apparently meaningless small talk or whether one is delivering a Saving Message: all forms of communication are fleeting and constantly threatened with arbitrary cessation. There is a humorous, lightly sardonic tone to these lightning changes of perspective, as when the "*great book*" appears in Act 2.2 in "*an astonishing blaze of light*" with "*a huge chord sounded by a gigantic choir*"—a sequence of events which is completely unnoticed by one of the characters on the stage at the time. Uncertainty and apparent chaos are the key ingredients here, and the

Angel, far from providing the respite that she promises, is an integral part of the pattern. Louis expounds a possible explanation for the fluid, immanent surface:

*Louis:* . . . there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people . . . (92)

There are "no angels in America" and yet, paradoxically, we are watching "Angels in America."

Two vital questions arise: 1. Is the Angel some kind of postmodern Godot for whom the characters wait in a kind of eternally unfolding stasis? 2. If "there's only the political," what precisely *is* political in this world of constant ebb and flow? Firstly, there clearly are angels, spirits and ghosts in this world: Prior is haunted by several ancestors and even Ethel Rosenberg makes a brief but vital appearance. The ghosts become, in a sense, more "real" or at least more vivacious than the characters that they miraculously appear before. Roy and Prior are dying of AIDS, inexorably shrinking and descending towards death, the ghosts surprise them, stride into the "real" world and diffuse their hallucinatory energy around them. Louis's political assertions are suspect as well: Roy is the archetypal political animal, yet his posturing, dealing and lying do not save him from either the New York Bar Association or ultimately from AIDS. Politics, that art of the possible, is rendered impotent by a world in which, paradoxically, everything is possible (ghosts appearing, angels descending, mutual dreams) and yet also nothing is possible as AIDS, betrayal and the stultifying anomie of the postmodern world reduce the characters to endlessly repetitive cycles of despair.

Oddly enough, it is Harper, the apparently hapless housewife at the beginning of the play who finds some form of fulfillment in the saccharine world of Mr. Lies at the end of the play. She may be blissfully unaware but she is, at least, blissful. She escapes the despair through becoming an integral part of it, through ceasing to struggle with philosophical and political questions which are irrelevant. In a supreme irony, she lives up to Roy's dictum to "live in the raw wind, naked, alone . . ." (58), one which he vainly aspires to himself. But Harper is naked and alone in a National Geographic world, a world in which the desolation is perfect, in which one may indeed "respect the delicate ecology" of one's "delusions." She escapes one area of the immanent surface only to be entrapped on another, Mr. Lies offers precisely what his name implies.

The old truism has it that birth, death and copulation are the only certainties of life, but the end of *Angels in America* suggests that even these fail to rise

above the immanent surface. Prior's state at the end of the play is essentially an amalgam of all three experiences. He is captured by "*an intense sexual feeling*" as both death and the Angel approach. Now, as sexuality and fever draw him towards death and an apparently positive rebirth, now one might expect the play to rise above the surface, to provide evidence that AIDS might indeed be a form of perverse savior as it forces humanity to consider itself in brutal three-dimensionality.

But all Prior has to say about this unique, potentially enlightening experience is,

*(an awestruck whisper)* God almighty . . .  
Very Steven Spielberg. (118)

The Angel arrives in suitably breathtaking manner, but it is merely an illusory splendor—the play ends as the Great Work begins, a Work which involves a blackout and the breaching of the theatrical illusion. The "virtual catastrophe" of AIDS does not save us from anything, it does not raise us above the smooth surface, for in all its tragic intensity it is merely part of the surface. The reality of Prior's suffering is submerged by the pervasive immanence of a Spielbergian/Baudrillardian hyperreality. This immanence is a block to any restoration of the "energy" which Baudrillard identifies as essential to human activity, throughout the play characters are left in stasis while the magical special effects and their attendant ghosts flow freely around them. Thus Ethel Rosenberg magically appears to taunt Roy in his agony before miraculously vanishing: it is the Angel who descends with all the ephemeral energy of modern special effects while Prior remains still. AIDS is no "virtual catastrophe," but rather it serves to accentuate the inability of the characters to effectively influence their own lives.

The ineffective stasis of "reality" contrasts with the effective fluidity of hyperreality:

Roy: I'm immortal. Ethel. *(He forces himself to stand)*  
I have forced myself into history. I ain't never gonna die.  
Ethel Rosenberg *(a little laugh, then)*: History is about  
to crack wide open. Millennium approaches. (112)

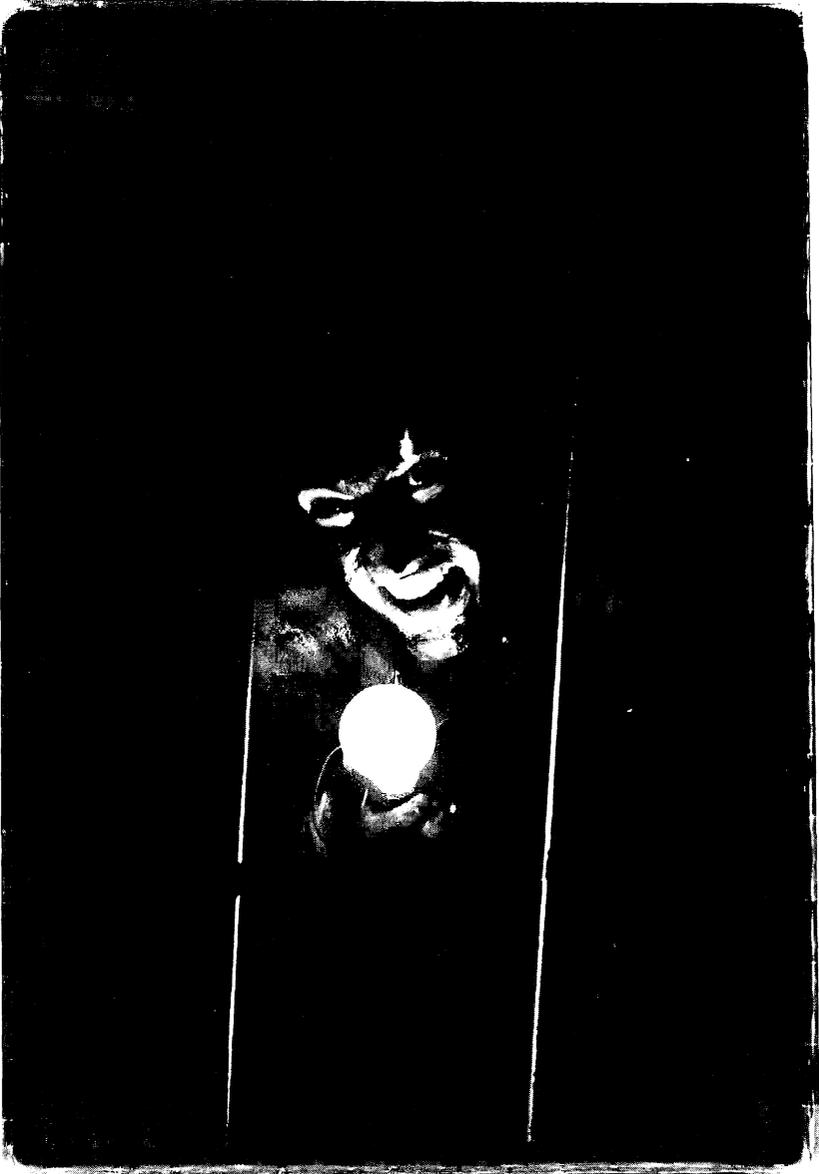
The rational world of cause and effect, a world in which "history" exists which can be "forced" into, the world which Roy must believe in because he both defines it and is defined by it, this world is cast aside with the delicate, omnipotent ease of Ethel's "*little laugh*." Ethel, a victim of the politics of a supposedly rational world is a suitable herald for the coming of the new world.

What do we find when history cracks open? Not the terrible yet cozy stability of Baudrillard's AIDS-as-virtual-catastrophe-yet-savior but rather an open crack which allows an uninhibited flow of hyperreality. The Angel's message is one of doom, not salvation. It is apt that it is delivered to a PWA on the verge of death.

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## Notes

1. Elizabeth M. Osborn, *The Way We Live Now: American Plays and the AIDS Crisis*, introduction by Michael Feingold (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990).
2. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).
3. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 1913.
4. Bert States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985).
5. Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication."
6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* (London: Verso, 1993).
7. Ibid.
8. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993). Subsequent pages cited parenthetically.



Tom Pearl in Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White* produced by Diane White for DAR A LUZ. Photo credit: Paula Court.

Back to the Basics: **Tight, Right, White**, created and directed by Reza Abdoh, New York City, March 27, 1993.

A quarter of a century has now passed since the revolutionary year of 1968, and I am sure I am not alone in registering with some surprise the fact that many of the students to whom I describe the exhilarating theatre of that era were in fact not even born then. This realization has in turn led me from time to time to wonder if the more memorable experimental theatre of that era was really so much more intense and provocative than more recent work, or whether the combination of my own youth at the time and nostalgia today has exaggerated its effect in the memory. Were the early Living Theatre productions really that gripping, the works of John Vaccaro and the early Charles Ludlam really that outrageous, *Dionysius in 69* really that provocative, Grotowski's *The Constant Prince* really that viscerally disturbing? Recent years have not been devoid of striking, even memorable experimental theatre works in New York, but much of it seems, in comparison with my memories of the work of that earlier period, more intellectually abstract, more technological (if not technocratic). Even Richard Schechner's recent *Faust Gastronomer*, which recalled the work of the late sixties in many ways, both positive (in its striking physical images) and negative (in its casual sexism), never, for me at least, generated the kind of physical excitement that I recall from the best work of the Performance Group at that time.

Just when I was about to conclude that either advancing age or postmodern abstraction had put me beyond the reach of that kind of visceral theatre, along came the works of Reza Abdoh, to provide a salutary shock treatment for the New York experimental scene, and a welcome reminder of how stunning, dangerous, and provocative such theatre can be. Abdoh's family emigrated from Iran to London, where he directed a National Youth Theatre production of *Peer Gynt* at the age of 14, then to California, where his production of a radical restaging of *King Lear* in a small Los Angeles coffeehouse gained him the attention and support of the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

The first two parts of Abdoh's *Bogeyman Trilogy*—*The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice* and *Bogeyman*—outraged, scandalized and fascinated the audiences of the LATC and established Abdoh as one of America's most imaginative and provocative young directors. When the LATC closed, Abdoh moved his base of operations to New York, establishing here his own company, Dar A Luz. The third play in the *Bogeyman Trilogy*, *The Law of Remains*, was thus premiered in New York last season. Although New York has not yet, unhappily, hosted the rest of the trilogy, it had seen one previous example of the work of this gifted

director, *Father was a Peculiar Man*, an ambitious piece of site-specific theatre presented in several blocks of the Manhattan meat-packing district in July of 1990 (reviewed in JDTC, Spring, 1991).

*Father was a Peculiar Man*, presented in an unknown part of the city in the middle of summer at a time when Abdoh's name was almost unknown here, did not attract a great deal of attention, but word of it, and of the *Bogeyman* plays in California, spread through the theatre community and *The Law of Remains*, in mid-town (in the semi-derelict Diplomat Hotel) and in mid-season made it the most talked about experimental theatre event of the season. *Tight, Right, White* has built upon that enthusiasm, and with Dar A Luz scheduled for a series of European performances, it seems very likely that Abdoh will soon become a significant figure in the international theatrical avant-garde.

Scarcely a review of Abdoh's two more recent New York works has failed to evoke Artaud (Michael Feingold's review of *Tight, Right, White* in the *Village Voice* bore the headline "Artaud You So"), and the overwhelming sensual assault of these productions, their thrusting upon the stage precisely those elements in our private imaginations and social constructions that we would most like to suppress (not to mention the frequent specific images of torture, graphic violence, and bloodshed) perhaps inevitably stimulate associations with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. In this respect, stunning and imaginative as it was both visually and spatially, *Father was a Peculiar Man* was not quite representative of the main line of Abdoh's work. Despite visual references to the banal typical American family of the advertising world, or to the eruption of violence represented by the Kennedy assassination (literally reenacted in the district streets), the structuring of this work around Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* necessarily pulled it away from the exploration of the American social psyche that informs the other works and the sprawling, largely exterior performing space prevented the kind of concentration, even entrapment of the audience that has contributed importantly to the power of the later, more enclosed works. Only in the last "station" of *Father*, when the audience was taken inside one of the packing and processing plants and left wandering in small, death-haunted rooms amid tableaux of nude and tortured bodies, did they enter the world that would make up the ground of Abdoh's subsequent work.

As an HIV-positive gay artist who creates highly charged sexual and social material, Abdoh has inevitably been compared with such controversial artists as David Wojnarowitz, Tim Miller, Karen Finley, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and there are certainly points of similarity in the high level of intensity and the brutal foregrounding of the darkest secrets of our social organization. Yet despite some thematic overlap (Reagan and AIDS, for example, are linked in the works of several of these artists, and mutilation and rape provide frequent images),

Abdoh's creations develop their effects in quite a different way. Most obviously, they are always company works. Performance artists like Miller, Finley, and Gómez-Peña have from time to time worked with groups, but their most striking and memorable creations have almost always been solo pieces. Abdoh takes full advantage of a company approach, bombarding his audience with multiple stimuli often provided by actors working on several sides of the audience at once, supplemented by film and video projections. Related to this multiple focus is the relatively minor role played by directly autobiographical (or presumably autobiographical) material in Abdoh's creations. Abdoh, very widely read and highly thoughtful about his art, is well aware of the power of liberation and resistance culture and identity politics, and as an Oriental and gay, well positioned to utilize these. Nevertheless, even though in the *Bogeyman Trilogy*, with its no-holds-barred evocation of the dreams and nightmares of homosexuality in America, from tattooed naked chorus boys in a kick line to the grisly activities of Milwaukee serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, inevitably suggests a relationship with Abdoh's sexual and socio-cultural positioning, it does not really use this as a grounding in the way that Finley and others have done.

*Tight, Right, White*, though deeply implicated in American sexual and racial politics and phantoms, is even less an "autobiographical" meditation, but for that very reason allows a clearer glimpse of just how an Abdoh piece operates. Each of the three New York productions have been based upon an organizing narrative: the Dostoyevsky novel for *Father*, an imaginary film of Jeffrey Dahmer's life by Andy Warhol for *The Law of Remains*, the 1975 blaxploitation film *Mandingo* for *Tight, Right, White*. Onto these structural frames Abdoh weaves a dazzling postmodern mélange of cultural references. Among the material utilized in *The Law of Remains* was the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, American folk songs, Hitchcock films, World War II military songs, and baby-care videos, while *Tight, Right, White* utilizes slave narratives, minstrel routines, white supremacist documents (astonishingly, Abdoh managed to live for a while with a group of white supremacists in Idaho to gather material), German tales and folk songs, Punch and Judy shows, and a stand-up Borscht Belt comedian in a plaid fat suit and with a huge fake Jewish nose as a running narrator. His opening lines provide a touch of the show's free-wheeling satirical attack. "I think there was a day—first grade or second grade," he begins sentimentally, "when my best friend Carl hit me on the way home from school and said he wouldn't play with me anymore because I had killed Jesus." Taking his microphone over to a sweet little old lady in a shawl sitting in a rocking chair he continues that he told his mother of the incident. She rocks quietly for a moment, then mutters "Fuck the shvartzers. Fuck the goyem." In both productions, Abdoh's astonishing mix of material and of tone is evoked in stunning, overwhelming profusion, with

monologues and dialogues often overlapping and so rapidly delivered as to challenge comprehension, the whole interspersed with a staggering variety of dance routines, circle and square dances, folk dances of all types, chorus kick lines (Abdoh loves these), ballroom dances, African dances, and so on, all executed at the same supercharged energy of the entire piece. The constant mixture of text, music, movement, video, film, and visual spectacle is disturbing, moving so rapidly as to defy analysis, even comprehension, and yet Abdoh's productions inevitably give a total impression not only of an astonishingly rich theatrical imagination, but of an equally astonishing control of this complex material. Partly this is due to the way that the diverse material all relates back to key images and concerns, different in each work, and partly it is due to the use of repetition and variation of specific lines and images, building great poetic resonance in the course of the production. Two examples among many in *Tight, Right, White* are two interchanges from an ongoing TV interview between a black and the Jewish MC: "What's your name?" "Blaster." "What's your tale?" "Nothing has changed." and "Pack your bags. You're going home." "This IS home."—simple phrases that gradually take on profound resonances.

Abdoh's multi-focus productions would be impossible in a conventional theatrical space, and fortunately his producer, Diane White, has a remarkable gift for discovering virtually unknown flexible spaces in the heart of New York's various theatre districts. The Hotel Diplomat, two floors of which were used for *The Law of Remains*, is on 46th Street, just a block from Times Square. Its stunning, now partially derelict top floor two-story ballroom, which Abdoh used for the "heaven" to which Dahmer (and the audience) ascended for the final scene, may be recalled by movie-goers as the ballroom in the early scenes of *Malcolm X*, though to the best of my knowledge it has not before been used as a theatre venue. *Tight, Right, White* is staged on most of the sixth floor of a building on Lafayette Street in Greenwich Village, directly opposite the Public Theatre.

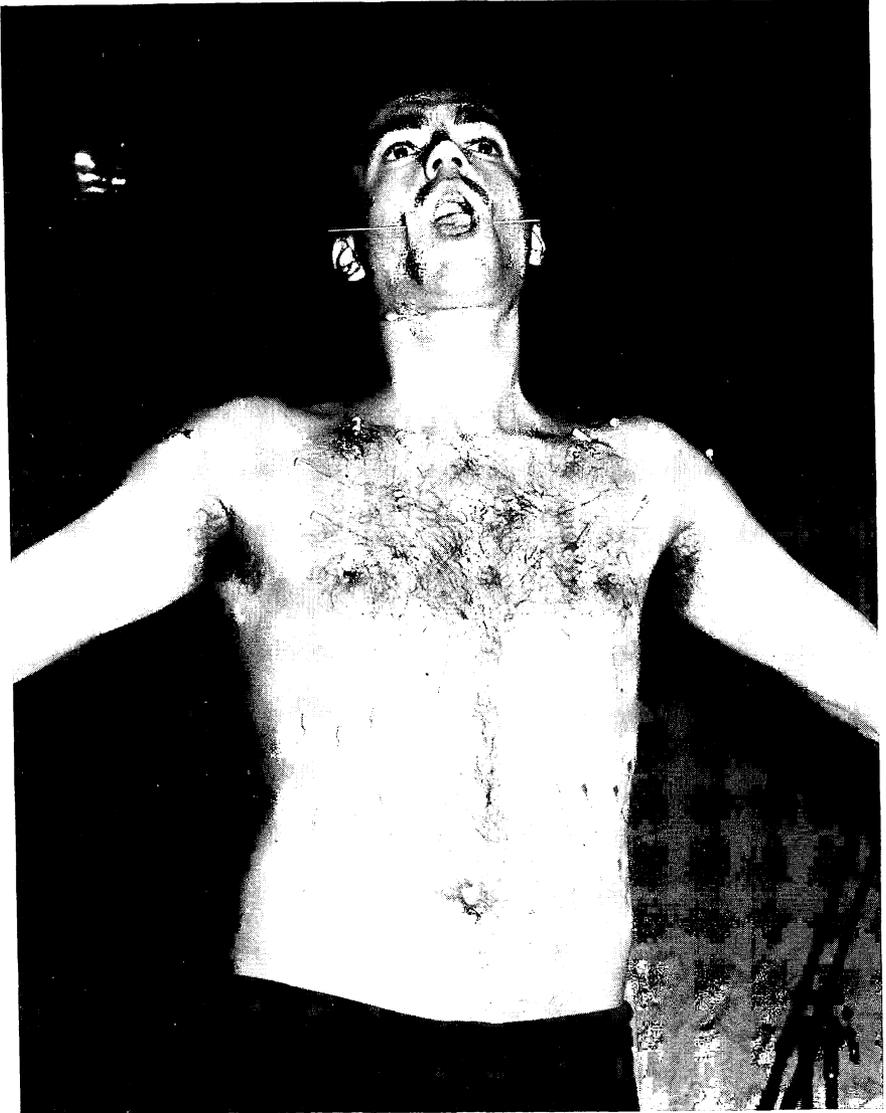
The audience moves to three different locations during the evening in this latter space, with action often almost totally surrounding them. In the first location, large open stages backed by multiple film projections are to the audience's right and left, with, in front, a burlesque sort of runway connecting these and two continually running TV monitors. Beyond the stage to the left is another lower performance area used mostly for supplementary dances, pantomimes, and lighting effects. Behind the audience (which they must turn to see) is a kind of puppet stage, two elongated slots in large flats, primarily used for the display of real and false heads to carry on conversations. In the second location, the audience moves so that the stage formerly on their left is now on their right, a small percussion band is behind them and a new stage, backed by

complex revolving panels depicting Southern mansions on one side and the beating of slaves on the other. The original seating area can still be seen and serves now as another acting space. For the final scene, the audience moves to another corner of the building, where the action is essentially concentrated on a single large stage in front of them, but one divided into two levels and several acting areas. The effect throughout is one of multiple activity, but as I have noted before, the repetition of themes and images, the relationship of all elements to the central concern of racial tensions, and the often ironic effects of playing one element against another both spatially and temporally do not result in an ultimate feeling of frustration or confusion. Rather each spectator is provided with the means to put together a unique experience out of this rich mixture, and to go away with the impression that while much has inevitably been missed, so densely packed and so ingeniously conceived has the total spectacle been, that a stunning whole continues to vibrate in the memory long afterward.

Marvin Carlson  
City University of New York



(L/R) Dana Moppins, James Williams, Gerard Little, Randi Pannell, Brenden Doyle, Raphael Pimental, and Tom Pearl in Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White* produced by Diane White for DAR A LUZ. Photo credit: Paula Court.



*The Jim Rose Circus Side Show: Representing The Postmodern Body in Pain.* Photo credit: Alison Braun

### The Jim Rose Circus Side Show: Representing the Postmodern Body in Pain

Our late-capitalist, postmodern society offers paradoxical representations of the fate of the body. On one hand, identity is fluid and mass-mediated images and technology offer endless possibilities for the reconfiguration of the body, and on the other, the body's boundaries are regulated like never before in the face of the AIDS crises and "the war on drugs." Despite the current fascination and intense debate over the body in popular culture and academia, the corporeality of the body is peculiarly absent in representation. In their essay "Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-Modern Condition," postmodern theorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker adopt a cynical Baudrillardian view by claiming that the concern over the body today "emphasize[s] the fact that the (natural) body in the postmodern condition has already disappeared, and what we experience as the body is only a fantastic simulacra of body rhetorics."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the material body is unrepresentable: it is no longer "real."

Although the mass media does increasingly mediate and mutate the body, I disagree with the Krokers' notions that we are living under a "false sense of subjectivity" and that the body no longer exists.<sup>2</sup> As theatre theorist Linda Hutcheon points out, these notions suggest that at one time a natural, unmediated body did exist untraced by language and free from ideology. Hutcheon critiques a Baudrillardian world view in her book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*.<sup>3</sup> She explains that in "The Precession of Simulacra," (1984) Baudrillard argues that the media have

neutralized reality by stages: first they *reflected* it; then they *masked* and *perverted* it; next they had to mask its absence; and finally they produced instead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality.<sup>4</sup>

She points out that Baudrillard has been criticized for "the metaphysical idealism of [his] view of the 'real,' for [his] nostalgia for pre-mass-media authenticity, and for [his] apocalyptic nihilism."<sup>5</sup> She contends that a common sense notion of reality has always been mediated, and that the real has always been known through its representations.

Though I disagree with a Baudrillardian world view's paranoia, I believe that many people do *perceive* a sense of dislocation in regards to the "natural body." Hutcheon claims that there has never been anything natural about the real.<sup>6</sup> However, the body's mutation into multiple reconfigurations in the media,

and our sensory apparatuses'<sup>6</sup> improvement and externalization through technology, challenges our current common sense notion of the "real." The desire to identify and possess an "authentic" bodily experience haunts those who feel dissatisfied with the glossy hyperreality of computer generated images, television, photography, and film.

Consider the current popularity of the Jim Rose Circus Side Show as a signal of today's audiences' desire to elude the dizzying effects of Baudrillard's hyperreality by seeking an experience of the "real." The Jim Rose Circus Side Show which began as an underground nightclub act in the Pacific Northwest is a full-blown revival of the American freak show. During the summer of 1992, they toured the U.S. with Lolapalooza, a popular alternative music concert, and have since found even wider success in Europe. I saw a performance in September 1992 at the Barrymore, a progressive theater in Madison, Wisconsin, and in October 1993 at Cabaret Metro in Chicago. Unlike the freakshows of the past, Jim Rose does not feature the presentation and performance of disability. Instead, Rose has appropriated the terms "freak" and "human marvels" to refer to his able-bodied group of five white male performers and one white female assistant who perform a combination of old sideshow novelty acts and daring acts of body mutilation.

Jim Rose, a.k.a. Jimmy the Geek, the group's charismatic ringleader, models the *mise-en-scène* and performance text closely after circus and carnival sideshows of the past. Rose updates several of the show's features to appeal to its audience which includes mostly white middle-class college age students, the young, jaded, underground nightclub crowd, and "modern primitives" who are into body piercing and tattooing. The set is simple: a painted Victorian-looking backdrop featuring caricatures of the performers executing their trademark stunts, and on stage left, a collection of musical instruments and props. Loudspeakers alternately boom eerie synthesized carnival tunes and contemporary grunge music. Rose emcees the fast-paced performance as a reborn P. T. Barnum keeping up a high-energy slew of non-stop verbiage which includes witticisms, puns, literary allusions, circus lore, anecdotes, and chants.

Broken into two acts, the stunts build from relatively benign to particularly gruesome, with Rose's banter, or "geek relief," in between. A sampling of the milder acts include: firebreathing, Houdini-like escapes from straightjackets and chains, chewing and swallowing a broken light bulb, climbing a ladder of razor-sharp swords, and slug, maggot, and worm eating. The grand finale of Rose's "circus of the scars" is a toss-up between Matt "The Tube" Crowley's bile beer routine and Mr. Lifo's lifting act. Crowley (otherwise known as "The Duke of Puke" or "The Earl of Hurl") pours forty ounces of beer, ketchup, chocolate, and Maalox for good measure, into his stomach via a tube threaded through his nose.

Then, he regurgitates the ungodly mixture with a stomach pump. Rose pours the liquid, now green from stomach bile, into cups and displays it to the spectators. The other cast members eagerly treat themselves to a sip of the concoction, and finally they invite spectators to sample the liquid from the same glasses—which they offer like communion cups. This act is rivaled only by Lifto's hoisting of cinder blocks, irons, and other heavy objects from holes pierced in the most delicate regions of the human body: the nose, the middle of the tongue, the nipples, and his penis.

The Jim Rose Circus Side Show's representation of the body's fluids, pains, and pleasures refuses panic simulacrum by forcing the audience to confront the body's visceral presence. Its audience of mostly white, privileged youth are logical spectators of the performance. As theorist John Urry has noted, some people are more postmodern than others.<sup>7</sup> Privileged youth who feel dissociated with a common sense notion of bodily reality flock to see the Side Show to experience something real. On the other hand, those who deal with the fate of the material body on a daily basis, or who are struggling for survival may not concern themselves with the disappearance of the body into postmodern simulacrum. The Sideshow communicates the body's palpability to this crowd through the presentation and representation of self-inflicted physical pain, the exhibition of invaded bodily boundaries, and the fluids such acts produce.

In her recent article, "Focus on the Body: Pain, Praxis, and Pleasure in Feminist Performance," theater theorist Jeannie Forte examines feminist performers' representation of pleasure and pain to insist on the materiality of the female body. While the Circus Side Show does not offer a feminist message, their performance strategies mirror those used in the performances Forte analyzes. According to Forte, pleasure and pain offer circumstances in which the material body is undeniable, "when the body's material presence is a condition of the circumstance."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, pain and live performance are "two cases when the body must be acknowledged, when it becomes visible/palpable through inhabiting temporarily a process that depends fundamentally on its presence."<sup>9</sup>

Forte grounds her assertions by citing the work of Elaine Scarry who theorizes the discursive problematics regarding pain in her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry describes the political consequences of pain's inexpressibility in the structures of torture and war. She maintains that pain is resistant to language and is unsharable, making its existence that which cannot be confirmed or denied. Furthermore, "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."<sup>10</sup> Unlike any other state of consciousness, physical pain has no referential content: "It is not of or for anything. It is

precisely because it takes no object that it, more than other phenomenon, resists objectification in language."<sup>11</sup>

The Jim Rose Circus Side Show exploits pain's resistance to language by representing an odd mixture of pleasure and pain. The presence of the live physical body in pain presents a challenge to the distancing effects of technology and creates the illusion that their pain is "real." While The Side Show does not pretend to espouse any political or spiritual ideologies, it does promise an experience that is "real and dangerous." Rose tells reviewers that he has "made atrocities palatable in a way that's in your face," and "it is my artistic vision to have a fast-paced, live, real, raw, dangerous human demolition spectacular."<sup>12</sup> Their painted backdrop reinforces their claims to authenticity with the words "REAL!," "LIVE!," and "IT'S SCIENCE!" prominently visible behind the performers.

Each freak performs his pain differently. For example, The Torture King is calm, cool, and silent as he penetrates his unpierced cheeks, arms, eyelids, and voice box with long, gleaming meat skewers. Lifto, a tall, lanky, tattooed young man exhibits a wide-mouthed grimace as he stretches his chest and penis skin to the breaking point by hanging heavy objects from them, and then smiles blissfully at the completion of the stunt. Rose, the most lively of the bunch, grunts and contorts his face wildly during his most painful moments.

Audiences and critics alike favor those feats which appear most painful and those which most strongly challenge the taboos concerning the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body—boundaries which have been accentuated by the AIDS panic. Marilouise and Arthur Kroker point out that "we have reached a fateful turning-point in contemporary culture when human sexuality is a killing-zone."<sup>13</sup> They contend that the regulation of bodily fluids and the fascination with highly socially constructed notions of the body's health and boundaries further removes us from the "natural body." Like the presentation of pain, the Sideshow's live, flagrant violation of bodily boundaries reveals and flaunts body fluids in an age of "sex without secretions." This exhibition serves as an insistent reclamation of the common sense notion of the "natural body" which is composed of actual flesh and blood. The result reported by several reviewers and audience members alike is that the show is "sexy." A young woman told *The Times Magazine* reviewer, "Want to know what I think? It's really horny . . . Anything that pushes your boundaries, I just find really compelling and sexual."<sup>14</sup>

The pre-show music anticipates the focus on bodily functions with songs punctuated by burps and flatulence. In nearly every act, the performers emphasize bodily fluids such as saliva, bile and blood. Sluggo's gleeful ingestion of bugs and slimy creatures transgresses beliefs about what should enter the body.

While Rose claims that "ninety percent of the time [the] show is completely bloodless," blood oozes from his cheek and temple after putting his face in broken glass, and a few small streams of blood run down his back after lying on the bed of nails.<sup>15</sup> When Timm Grimm (or The Torture King) removes the meat skewers from his body, red puffy wounds remain. Audience members make a game of pointing out the performers' wounds, their signs of pain, to one another, proud to find the mark that authenticates the realness of the act. The Tube also contests taboos against coming into contact with body fluids in several ways in his bile beer act. First, Rose displays the regurgitated stomach bile and beer, then the other cast members treat themselves to a sip of it, and finally they invite spectators to sample the liquid from the same glasses. At the Chicago performance, spectators mobbed the stage, vying for the opportunity to taste the liquid.

Lifto's appearance and performance perhaps most highlights the link between the violation of bodily boundaries and sexual pleasure. Before his act, Rose exhibits Lifto's body as a sign of this defiance by pointing out his numerous body piercings, tatoos, and intricate scarifications—each one supposedly hand-crafted by a different lover. Lifto often appears in drag, wearing spike heels and tights, his face softened by make-up, and Rose publicizes how he "discovered" Lifto staging his lifting routine in a Seattle gay bar. Lifto's seeming sexual gratification from his performance foregrounds the pleasurable pain in rejecting the regulation of the body's boundaries.

The performance elicits strong visceral responses from the spectators, raising their awareness of the body's material aspects. One reviewer claimed "there's no question about [the show] being real or not. Also, it makes you question your own body, how your body would feel if you were to do those things to it."<sup>16</sup> Another reviewer wrote:

We observe [the performers] with a mixture of dread and admiration; their abilities force us to confront our own bodies. Timm Grimm's . . . exercise in self-skewering causes us first to concentrate on the flesh as flesh, and provokes the rather loathsome perception of ourselves as animated pieces of meat.<sup>17</sup>

As a reaction to the realization that we are "animated pieces of meat," audience members have been known to gag, vomit, faint, screech, and laugh. In one place, "the management felt compelled to mention that stomach-distress bags were available at the bar."<sup>18</sup>

A spectator not only encounters the performers' corporality, but the materiality of the other audience members as well. Some audience members

make a lively show of spotting signs of sickness in their friends. Another strong visceral reaction to the performance is unrestrained laughter. Rose says,

What we get all the time that no one writes about are the laughs. People laugh continually throughout the show. It's the laugh of 'I can't believe this.' Initially, the reaction is like they're cautious and in wonderment, then they relax and begin to see how outrageous it is and they laugh.<sup>19</sup>

Jim Rose encourages interaction between the spectators and the performers throughout the show which reinforces the credibility of the stunts. In both Madison and Chicago, audience members contested the authenticity of several of the acts. Rose dares the doubting spectators to mount the stage and verify that the broken glass is real, that the maggots are real, and so on.

Rose continually engages in a lively repartee with the audience. He often leaves the stage to speak with various spectators, flirt with the women, hurl insults at hecklers, make fun of the squeamish, and choose "volunteers" (of which there is never a shortage). After particularly daring feats, Rose leads the audience in chants of "it's beeyotifulllll," and "oohs" and "ahhs." Rose admits that some of the stunts are professionally crafted illusion, while others are actual acts of self-torture. Nevertheless, the performers utterly convince the majority of viewers that their pain is real.

Audience members whom I interviewed after the Madison performance compare the Side Show to viewing a film—that they came to see the show because it is more real. The show is advertised this way, too. The *Toronto Star's* review begins with the following:

So you say slasher flicks are just a snore, the WWF (World Wrestling Foundation) a goofy bore? There was too much talking in *The Silence of the Lambs* and you still can't believe they banned dwarf tossing? . . . Sounds like you're a little tired, my friend. Tired of high-tech trickery and empty images that have numbed your Sense of Wonder.<sup>20</sup>

A tattooed female college-age student told me that she had seen the performance in Chicago and was back for a repeat. "I only saw the first act," she said, "but it was real, you know, like you could tell that it was real. That sort of shocked me, but you sort of get used to it after a while. They're like, oh people faint, and I never felt like I was going to. But there were people behind me that were getting pretty sick." Her male counterpart told me, "I came cuz I'm a voyeur. I came cuz people told me about it. Just sounded interesting. Something out of

the ordinary, better than a movie." When I asked him why the show would be better than a movie, he added, "The difference is that supposedly these things are really happening. That these things are really going on." His friend chimed in, "I'll never get the chance to see something like this ever again. I'm a little bit scared about it, but I figure, it will get me going. It'll make me feel alive."

Often reviewers make similar comparisons of the performance to film or other high tech medium. Rose himself told the *LA Weekly*

If you want to know why the people at these shows are going so crazy for us, it's because there's like this lost generation of kids who are so sick of stuff that's clean, contrived and choreographed. I mean, a kid came up to me the other day and said, 'It's so real!'. . . . it sure sound[s] like kids today have a real freedom problem.<sup>22</sup>

The *Seattle Weekly's* reviewer quotes an "expert," Katherine Dunn, Portland author of the acclaimed novel *Geek Love*, a bizarre fictional account of side-show life. Dunn dubbed the side show performers "'avant-garage' or 'garage freaks' because of their down-to-earth, low-tech credibility." She expresses her sentiments against high-tech simulacrum when she tells the reviewer,

It's not like watching David Copperfield make a Greyhound bus disappear. It's a very high-tech world, and there's nothing more low-tech than the human body. We live in this fragile and rather silly construct; people who do extreme things to their body are very interesting to us.

The authorities perceive The Jim Rose Circus Side Show's performances as more real or dangerous than other forms of representation as well. The show has been banned or censored in many cities including Cincinnati, Miami, and St. Paul. During their recent tour in England, they were forced to change venues in several cities, and the British press was full of sensationalized articles calling for a ban. Even England's Humane Society condemned the performances citing Sluggo's ingestion of slimy creatures as cruelty to animals.

Apparently, the shock value of the Jim Rose Circus Side Show's performance is ephemeral. Nearly everyone I spoke with told me that at some point in their performance, they became immune to the acts. Though the shock value does wear thin, a second reaction is often reported. *Seattle Weekly's* reviewer describes this reaction as follows:

After the initial horror has worn off, we wonder what such an ability implies—perhaps the mind and body are more intimately linked than we ever would have thought, and the body is a miraculous and to some extent controllable part of the self rather than an awkward contraption of vulnerable flesh and bone. Being in proximity to near-death and near-dismemberment reminds us graphically of our own mortality, and at the same time reassures us that we are not such fragile beings, after all. . . . [it] is not unlike that of dance or gymnastics—it expands our awareness of what the body can accomplish.<sup>23</sup>

This second reaction, the realization of the malleability of the human body, may not return us completely to a naive sense of the "natural body." But for a moment, however, the flesh and blood existence of the human body brings the hyperreality of Baudrillard's postmodern condition back down to earth.

Carrie Sandahl  
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## Notes

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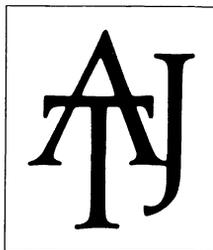
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*The Jim Rose Circus Side Show: Representing The Postmodern Body in Pain.* Photo credit: Alison Braun.

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## SPRING 1994: A SPECIAL ISSUE ON CHINESE THEATRE

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Take-Out Goethe: Schechner's **FAUSTgastronome** at La Mama. Presented by La Mama E.T.C. and East Coast Artists. Co-Sponsored by Goethe House NY, German Cultural Center. Text adapted and directed by Richard Schechner. La Mama E.T.C., New York, New York. February 18-July 31, 1993.

Richard Schechner is the Jerry Garcia of Off-Off Broadway. Synonymous with "cutting edge" in the late 1960's and early 1970's, Schechner left his mark on American theatre with a series of landmark productions (and some noble fiascos) in a transformed garage on Wooster Street. From that Soho space, Schechner played a vital part in shaking up conventional categories and boundaries in acting and production styles. He introduced America to Jerzy Grotowski, and he coined the term and the performance style of environmental theatre. From March through April 1993, with the first troupe he has headed since the Performance Group splintered in 1980, Schechner directed his version of the Faust myth at La Mama. Like a Grateful Dead concert, the occasion was as much a timewarp, a reunion, and a flashback as it was a fresh event.

When he founded the Performance Group, Schechner saw all the lines that could not be crossed, and he erased them. In that now legendary garage, conventional boundaries vanished. The line between actor and character, individual and collective, performer and audience, play and ritual, classic text and contemporary adaptation, method acting and epic theatre, the personal and the political—all of these principles were called into question.

Boundaries between disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and art were also up for grabs, and Schechner grabbed them, applying the theories of sociologist Erving Goffmann and those of anthropologists Victor Turner and Claude Levi-Strauss to the theatrical experience. He was always at once a scholar, theorist, *and* director; he acted as his own dramaturg; he was always the most useful commentator on his own experiments.

Most important, Schechner brought a sense of fun to his legacy from the more bleak and earnest worlds of the Living and Open Theatres. He knew quite well the lesson of the revolutionary avant-garde: the world's gone awry. But to Schechner's credit, he put a playful spin on his view of the abyss. He delighted in the collision of received masterpieces with pop culture pleasures: What the hell, tonight there's a ritual journey and a celebratory feast scheduled, let's see where it takes us.

More than any other avant-garde director of his time, then, Schechner seemed true to the spirit of the Living Theatre's *Frankenstein*, which always began with an attempt at levitation that, if it ever proved successful (it never did),

would render theatre unnecessary. *Dionysus in '69*, based on Euripides' *Bacchae*, hurled a myth through time, and found a physical contemporary language for the birth and power of a seductive, dangerous god. The brilliantly conceived *Mother Courage* converted the entire garage into a wagon with ropes and pulleys hooked onto the back of Brecht's "scavenger of war," and followed her out onto the street, leaving Swisscheese dead in a ditch that used to be a car pit, and leaving Katrin and her drum to plummet from the rafters. Even Schechner's *Tooth of Crime*, scorned by Sam Shepard, its author, had a punk, downtown sensibility that was true to the play's futuristic scenario about a rockstar whose artistic integrity remains uncompromised, though he is devoured by a more street-smart rip-off artist, a "gypsy killer" who knows his mask is his identity.

The strengths of Schechner's experiments were his broad definition of the playing space, his gift for showcasing quirky yet brilliant actors (some alumnae of his group include Spalding Gray, Joan Macintosh, Elizabeth LeCompte, Leeny Sack, and Ron Vawter), and his relentless pursuit of the pleasure principle. Even rough pieces like *Makbeth*, *Commune* (loosely based on the Manson murders), and Seneca's *Oedipus* (translated by Ted Hughes), whirled around ideas of ambition, political and sexual power, and fame as a luscious trap.

Revolutionary though they were, these environmental productions all also shared a single phallogocentric point of view, and that brings us to 1993 and *FAUSTgastronome*, Schechner's new production, very loosely based on Goethe's *Faust*, which premiered this February 1993 at La Mama.

Performed by a new group of actors, dubbed the East Coast Artists, many of whom Schechner has trained, *FAUSTgastronome* was vintage Schechner, an homage to Grotowski's 1963 *Dr. Faustus* as audience banquet, a vaudeville of birthings and bodies, feasts and sly anachronisms.

Jan Kott, whose *Eating of the Gods* similarly catapults tragedy into the post-modern realm of appetites, once casually joked in conversation that there are only two male myths worth plundering: Faust and Don Juan. In his February 1993 program notes to *FAUSTgastronome*, Schechner wonders, as he puts it, "ironically," if as the director of a new experimental and daring acting troupe, he might "use some of [his] own Faustian drives to counter the destructive aspects of the Faustian striving. A bit of fighting fire with fire."<sup>1</sup> Grotowski's long history with Faust certainly lends support to Kott's notion, too. Having first explored variations on Goethe's *Faust* as a directorial apprentice in Poznan, and having been inspired by Thomas Mann's novel as his *Apocalypse Cum Figuris* took shape, Grotowski turned to Marlowe's "tragic" version of Faust's fall in his Laboratory Theatre of Thirteen Rows production of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (words by Christopher Marlowe), which premiered 23 april 1963 in Opole, Poland.<sup>2</sup>

Grotowski's 1963 version of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* has itself taken on the aura of legend, to some extent because of Grotowski's daring and highly influential repositioning of the Faust archetype for our time: his apocalypse-now Faust is presented as a martyred shaman of black magic, whose quest for taboo knowledge is rendered as saintly.<sup>3</sup>

This production has also become legendary because, though much discussed, it was seen by very few. Unlike the Polish Lab Theatre's more widely seen *Akropolis*, Grotowski's *Dr. Faustus* was never funded to tour abroad. It was, however, attended in Lodz in June 1963 by a handful of influential Western critics and artists who, serendipitously, were then gathered in Warsaw for a meeting of the Congress of the International Theatre Institute. This group did *not* include Richard Schechner.<sup>4</sup> But with *FAUSTgastronome* Schechner tries his own hand at out-grotowski-ing Grotowski, grappling with Faust in a new key and for a new audience.

Eugenio Barba's first-hand account of Grotowski's re-invention of Faust as martyr, sacrificed in a "Passion" to a "female Mephistopheles," was translated by Richard Schechner, and was first published in America in the *Tulane Drama Review*. Later included as the chapter, "Dr. Faustus: Textual Montage," in Grotowski's seminal work, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Barba's account suggests that his production focused on compressing and exploding religious and secular definitions of ecstasy. He calls this *Faust* a "dialectic of mockery and apotheosis," consisting of the conflict between contemporary "lay sainthood" and traditional "religious sainthood."<sup>5</sup>

In his study of *Grotowski and His Laboratory*, Zbigniew Osinski writes that:

"The framework for the performance was the final scene: a banquet (with students). . . . In Opole, the production was conceived as a meal taken in a refectory. . . . The audience members are guests invited by Faust to a great farewell banquet. The spectators were seated on benches next to long tables arranged in a horseshoe, on which the action took place.

He goes on to cite Michael Kustow's vivid account of the production, first published in *Encore* in 1963:

The actors perform very close to us, not more than five meters away. They appear behind us, under us, and among us. Two of them sit together with the spectators on the benches and pronounce crude, comical verses from the text. . . . One hears strange vocalizations: Christian hymns are accompanied by pagan practices and prayers

sound like threats. There is one terrifying sequence in which Benvolio (Ryszard Cieslak) goes mad, begins to run about the auditorium, and tears apart the folding tables. . . .<sup>6</sup>

At La Mama, *FAUSTgastronome* was wedged into a shoebox space which cramped Schechner's broad canvas style. But even confined to a limited area, the setting by Chris Muller evoked expansive energy by means of different levels for the smooth, ironically made-for-late-night-T.V. band and the episodic action played out below. Recalling Grotowski's set as a destructible makeshift banquet hall, Schechner's set was mainly a rough hewn rectangular tables. First, they served as Faust's kitchen work station; and last they suggested his torturous banquet hall. In between, the tables were overturned, revealing a frieze-like backdrop of hellish murals painted on their underside, and they were also occasionally reconfigured, locating a bedroom as well as a prison in the geography of Schechner's *faust/play*. Deep focus on scenes played out in the distance also added to the sense of a geometric journey.

Eventually Grotowski sought to abandon the insufficient theatre of productions. By the mid-1970's, he chose rather to devote himself more and more to paratheatrical experiments such as "The Tree of People" and "The Vigil," events that might challenge received ideas about the boundaries between play and reality.<sup>7</sup> His ideas of theatre, however, had a vast and lasting impact on revolutionary and experimental theatres troupes, comparable to those put forth in Artaud's manifesto of the theatre as plague and of representational action as cruelty, *The Theatre and Its Double*.<sup>8</sup>

All of Grotowski's pieces were characterized by his signature post-modern theatre language, a highly physicalized style of acting that deeply influenced Schechner, among others. It is a performance style requiring nothing less than magic: the "holy" actor as shaman. As Grotowski describes the process in *Towards a Poor Theatre*:

The actor makes a total gift of himself. This is a technique of the "trance" and of the integration of all the actor's psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct, springing forth in a sort of "translumination."

. . . The forms of common "natural" behavior obscure the truth; we compose a role as a system of signs which demonstrate what is behind the mask of common vision: the dialectics of human behavior. At a moment of psychic shock, a moment of terror, of mortal danger or tremendous joy, a man does not behave "naturally." A man in an elevated spiritual state uses rhythmically articulated signs, begins to

dance, to sing. A sign, not a common gesture, is the elementary integer of expression for us.<sup>9</sup>

This highly suggestive passage could serve as the credo for Schechner's new troupe. It is not so much a road map for a revolutionary performance as it is a rousing call to arms, a poetic image of the potential destination of contemporary performance, a provocation of actors to transcend mundane gestures and everyday behavior, to instead find a concrete, physical language to be apprehended sensually.

Ever faithful to the tradition of Grotowski, the guru's guru in the contemporary movement aiming theatre at the "ideoplastic realization" of the "holy actor" engaged in a dialectic with the received myths of religion, biology, and nationalism,<sup>10</sup> Schechner's *FAUSTgastronome* used Goethe's plays as a jumping off point. It was a daring work-in-progress, linking Faustian appetites to the cult of celebrity on American chat shows, where a skin head squeals hate to polite applause (a woman in leather howls epithets to an Arsenio Hall imitator), and linking Faustian ambition to the rise of Hitler. Schechner objectified this link in good old scatological style. Recalling Alfred Jarry's prankish *Ubu Roi*, Faust excreted Hitler early in the show.

The actors in this troupe brought a lot to the table. Their tasks were physically strenuous, and required discipline and quirky humor as well as frequent leaps of faith in the project. Some actors were costumed in coarse earth toned generic peasant clothes; others in more showy roles got clever prop laden outfits. Mephistopheles was best served by the costume designer. Mephistopheles, for example, came equipped with top hat, white tie and tails, one high heel, a goat hoof, and a dusty penis dragging at the end of her reptilian tail.

There was, in fact, a Grotowski-like edge not only to the episodic shape of the action, but also to the ironic fusion of archetypes and anachronisms in each secondary character, and to the fusion of athleticism and trance states in all performances save the central one. Following Grotowski's lead in reinventing ideas of acting and actin, in Schechner's production, one actor doubled as a hip, flexible Narrator and as an icy, still Albert Speer. Another actor straddled genders, centuries, and acting styles by playing both a sentimental female confidante and a broad parody of a contemporary talk show sidekick. Hitler was played here with fierce concentration by a woman in pure Brechtian epic style.

As Schechner still puts it in his 1993 production notes, the demand is for:

a "total theatre" approach—acting, singing, masking, dancing, performing, music making, environmental theatre design. Every

performance must express a meeting place between the political and the personal.<sup>11</sup>

Curiously, Jeff Ricketts, the cheerful and energetic actor from whose bare ass Hitler sprang nightly, played Faust simply as a charming juvenile lead. Ricketts spoke the leftovers of Goethe's poetry with passion and clarity, but when he spoke as our contemporary, he came across as callow, and his dreams seemed too mundane to let him soar to the tragic level of Faust's pride and desire.

Schechner described the concept of the show in his program notes as "phallic energy . . . the revel of individual power—derived from the devil, but exercised as a Renaissance bursting forth." This concept sounds like vintage Schechner, but it is still old wine in new bottles. Schechner's vision of Faust recalls Peter Brook's characterization of Gounod's operatic version: "not a soul-shaking parable but a lovable . . . Romantic work."<sup>12</sup> Though pivotal characters—Hitler and Mephistopheles—were performed by women in drag, Faust was still played as a Romantic hero. He was hip, American, and bland in his desires, but he was, nevertheless, still a conventional Romantic hero, and he was still in love with the blushing, virginal Gretchen, who, as Schechner presented her, is just a girl who oohs and aahs over Mephistopheles' basket of goodies: a tiara, some finery, jewels, a pizza, and a rainbow.

Schechner wrote that he tampered least with Gretchen because "Goethe puts at the core of *Faust Part One* the romance between Gretchen and Faust. And this part of Goethe's play poses the question: can 'love' redeem sin, is Love the Divine Principle, Love such as embodied by Gretchen."<sup>13</sup> But Goethe never stops Schechner from tampering with anything else. This production turned *Faust* upside down and inside out; it travestied, pillaged, and shuffled Goethe (both Parts One and Two) and some of Marlowe, harking back, also, to the pantomime and marionette versions of this allegory of yearning and its price that may have inspired Goethe in his youth. In fact, Schechner's principle here, as always before, was to leave no stone unturned.

But he did leave one crucial stone alone: this patriarchal notion that woman is just a dramatic idea, a locus of response on which to project a male language of desire, sin, guilt, and redemption. Back in the 1960's Schechner (and plenty of others) could get away with carrying on that time-worn tradition, the male patois. But times have changed, and it is disappointing to discover Schechner, like *Sleeping Beauty*, is still snoring in the castle. For him, at its core it is the same old story. For Schechner's Faust, Gretchen is now and forever an ideal of feminine salvation, the only earthly hope for a possessed and driven hero.

Along with its outdated depiction of the "woman" as other, this *Faust* suffered from another missed opportunity. As this version may evolve in future

productions, Schechner might reconsider the stage image he substituted for alchemy in this work-in-progress. The idea of a chef as a creative genius was never quite as convincing as Schechner's program notes suggested (invoking Levi-Strauss and the conversion of "the raw [nature] into the cooked [culture]"<sup>14</sup>), mainly because there are plenty of other avenues Faust might take today (computer science, virtual reality, atomic physics, corporate takeovers, directing [!], to name a few) that would more convincingly suggest alchemy's magical and dangerous (that is to say, Artaudian) *and* transformative (that is to say, feminist) relation to power.

Also, the image of Faust as cook was not as fully developed as could be expected from Schechner. After all, cooking in the theatre is part of Schechner's signature style. The Performance Group once staged Terry Curtis Fox's *Cops* in a working diner straight out of an Edward Hopper painting, and another time, his *Mother Courage* rustled up and sold supper at intermission. But though the first scene of this production implied that Faust is a gourmet chef, he mostly gnawed on phallic raw vegetables, and his last supper was not a transcendent culinary expedition, but take-out Chinese food still in the cartons.

At its best, *FAUSTgastronome* was a lively reminder of the kinetic energy this director always expertly generates. And for those who missed the 1968-1978 renaissance in which Grotowski and Schechner played major parts, this production was a must see time machine. Newcomers to Schechner-style theatre would have been well-advised to just imagine that these actors were clambering over them instead of just staring through them. But this promising production of a very young company still taking shape did not yet fly as Faust must fly. It stayed mired in old ground, once even reducing the Faust contract to adolescent male graffiti: "What's signed in blood cannot be unsigned in semen."

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## Notes

1. Richard Schechner, "FAUSTgastronome, director's notes," included in *FAUSTgastronome* Program (La Mama E.T.C., New York: February 1993) 3.

2. Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen, 1985) 66-67.

3. See Kumiega 66-71. See also Raymonde Temkine, *Grotowski*, trans. Alex Szogyi (New York: Avon, 1972) 118, 126-131.

4. See Zbigniew Osinski, *Grotowski and His Laboratory*, trans. and abridged by Lillian Vallee and Robert Findlay (New York: PAJ, 1986) 70-71, 76.

5. Eugenio Barba, "Dr. Faustus: Textual Montage," trans. Richard Schechner, *Tulane Drama Review* (New Orleans, T24, 1964). Reprinted in Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) 79-87, especially 86 and 80.

6. Osinski 70-71.

7. See Margaret Croyden, "Whatever Happened to Jerzy Grotowski," *The New York Times*, II (February 24, 1980) 3, 7.

8. See Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958) especially 15-32 and 89-100.

9. Grotowski 16-18.

10. Grotowski, quoted in "The Theatre's New Testament: An Interview with Jerzy Grotowski by Eugenio Barba," in Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* 34, 38, 42.

11. Schechner, "FAUSTgastronome, a director's notes" 3.

12. Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 173.

13. Schechner, "FAUSTgastronome, director's notes" 1-2.

14. 2.

# **Notes on the Net**

