

1-1-1984

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David Wohl

Winthrop University, wohld@winthrop.edu

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North Atlantic by Jim Strahs

Review by: David Wohl

Theatre Journal, Vol. 36, No. 3, Renaissance Re-Visions (Oct., 1984), pp. 413-415

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/~press/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3206963>

Accessed: 25/07/2014 11:16

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anguished struggle in life and her implied eternal unrest. Its tight focus and sparse exposition facilitate the noh drama's aim to suggest the core of a situation in the simplest terms.

Primarily using the conventional stage spaces of the noh, including the entrance bridge and the strategically-placed pillars, the Theatre of Yugen's masked Antigone (Helen Morganrath) performs slow, evocative noh dances which intensify her verbal torment at tyrant Creon's denial of a consecrated burial for her brother. Not all is strictly traditional, however. The chorus of two here wear their conventional masks on the side of their heads, allowing them to alternate between the masks and their actual faces. Overtly, this dual usage visually magnifies the indecisive and ineffectual nature of the Theban people stripped of democratic government. It also strikingly clarifies the dual allegiances that form the play's core themes: between man's laws and God's laws, between individual and state, between family and government at large. Liberty is also taken with the masks of the guards who capture Antigone. They are abstractly designed of fierce red and white patterns, reminiscent of Expressionism, and inject an intentionally immediate, jarring element into the refined, remote noh world. Several characters remain unmasked. Teiresias (North Siclar) is portrayed as an elderly woman whose severe grey hair and black kimono, bright, blank eyes, and expressive, unadorned face contrast sharply with the other characters and endow her with an exceedingly powerful, austere presence.

The ceremonial conventions of the noh function well to heighten *Antigone's* insistence on the significance of proper ritual in linking man with the divine. To the mournful beat of the drum, wail of the flute, and eerie moans of the drummer, Antigone's ghostly, progressively ritualized dance towards imprisonment in a spider-like bamboo cage elevates the action to the realm of a dream universe in which the intermingling of man and spirit is possible. The modern spectator not only comes to understand Antigone's viewpoint but actively participates in the ritualized action she undertakes, for in noh the action is so reduced that the spectator is forced to finish that which is only suggested. The climactic suicide of Antigone by hara-kiri is accomplished by painfully elongated twirls of and pulls at Antigone's body until she is stripped of her elaborate brocaded noh robes and revealed in a chaste white kimono, stained red with blood. This most haunting moment in the production is potent because mere imitation of action is replaced by an involving, agonizing, ritualized enactment.

Unfortunately, inner emotional development of the actors and the charged energy created by formal restraint of such emotion are missing during much of this production. Without this emotional base, the commanding images and arresting patterns of sound and color woven by the director often seem ultimately hollow. The Theatre of Yugen succeeds fully in revealing the enormous possibilities ancient Japanese forms have for modern American theatre and in making these forms accessible without trivialization. However, providing the true experience of yugen is not yet within this young troupe's reach.

MARI KATHLEEN FIELDER
University of California, Los Angeles

NORTH ATLANTIC. By Jim Strahs. The Wooster Group, Performing Garage, New York City. 13 January 1984.

The Wooster Group's production of Jim Strahs's play *North Atlantic* typifies the group's continuing exploration of space, text, and image in an effort to create multi-field performance works. Beginning with her directing work on the trilogy, *Three Places in Rhode Island* in 1975 (under the auspices of The Performance Group), Elizabeth LeCompte has been actively examining the nature of the performance event, using non-psychological and non-social/political techniques and methods.

Like the Wooster Group's most recent productions, *North Atlantic* uses a playscript as a starting point. *LSD* (1983) was a reworking of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, while *Route 1 and 9 (The Last Act)* (1981) used portions of Wilder's *Our Town* to create an American cultural collage. And while *North Atlantic* is not a classic text by any means, it is quintessentially American and thus continues the Group's focus on American themes and subjects. Strahs's play is a satire, loosely woven around a group of military women and men on duty on an aircraft carrier somewhere in the north Atlantic. They are, ostensibly, on an "intelligence" mission that turns out to be a decoy for the real military action occurring elsewhere. Using comic dialogue taken from old 1940s war movies, Strahs creates an amusing portrait of "a few of the men and women in uniform who served their country in the cause of peace." The characters include General Lance "Rod"



The Wooster Group in *North Atlantic*. Photo: Nancy Campbell.

Benders (Spalding Gray) who, among other roles, serves as the judge for the nurses' "wet uniform" contest. Also on hand is Captain N. I. "Roscoe" Chizum (Ron Vawter), a visiting Army Air Corps Intelligence officer who is shot at the end of the play by the drunken Colonel Lloyd "Ned" Lud (Willem Dafoe), the tough-talking company commander. The army nurses and secretaries, including Ensign Word-Processor Ann Pusey (Kate Valk) and Corporal Nurse Jane Babcock (Nancy Reilly) are the objects of the men's constant adolescent sexual banter and macho mumblings. As a play, *North Atlantic* is little more than an intended spoof of the musical *South Pacific*, complete with theatrical musical numbers and choreography. But it is the "deconstructive" work of director LeCompte that makes the performance interesting.

Forsaking the traditional role of the director as "unifier" of the theatrical event, LeCompte deliberately creates disjointed fields of theatrical and

non-theatrical material. The process of performance perception becomes more important than the story of the play. The text is but one aspect of the performance event – creating associations quite different, for instance, from those stimulated by the physical language used by the performers. LeCompte selects her images carefully, but never to "support" or explain the text. By creating unique spatial relationships between the audience and performers, LeCompte further disrupts the narrative structure of the play.

Like previous Wooster Group productions *Nyatt School* and *LSD*, LeCompte seats her actors on chairs behind a long table, facing the audience. The theatre resembles a classroom arranged for a lecture/demonstration. The table is on a large, raised metal platform which is angled mechanically and extends to a forty-five degree angle, creating a stage so absurdly raked that the performers have difficulty keeping their balance. Going a step beyond Brecht's

estrangement of the audience from the performance, LeCompte's work with space in *North Atlantic* serves to alienate the performer from the play. Actors, text, and environment (designed by Jim Clayburgh) literally confront each other – especially in the musical numbers, which are performed deadpan, the performers facing the audience in grotesque parodies of Broadway dances. The harsh angles of the set are in marked contrast to the flatness of an actual aircraft carrier – another example of LeCompte's juxtaposition of performance text and performance space. The "dances" and movement of the performers on and off the set create a second juxtaposition – between image and text. The result is a multi-leveled, almost cinematic experience, with three different "tracks": visual, aural, and contextual.

Like the best of the post-modernist directors, including Lee Breuer and Robert Wilson, LeCompte leaves the interpretation of the performance to the audience. Our own "reconstruction" of image, text, and space make *North Atlantic*, like all previous Wooster Group works, a fascinating performance event. It also provides further evidence that Elizabeth LeCompte is one of the more important director/artists working in the contemporary theatre.

DAVID WOHL
West Virginia State College

THE HOSTAGE. By Brendan Behan. Long Wharf Theatre, New Haven. 9 November 1983.

Brendan Behan professed that he had "a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer." His *Hostage* (1958) is not one of the plays that make the roads safer. It is essentially the work of a political anarchist waging war on all social institutions. The Irish brothel in which the play is set is a running metaphor: it is a microcosmic society, full of heavily stereotyped characters, whose shortcomings Behan ruthlessly exposes through a series of contradictory, indeed absurd, images. The result is iconoclastic. The tenants of the brothel are hostages of a past that has created an absurd political situation in which they feel trapped, as the presence of their British hostage constantly reminds them. They are torn between their ancestral hatred of the British and

their essential good-heartedness. *The Hostage* is a play of extremes and contradictions, in which much of the satire derives from the juxtaposition of opposites: corruption versus innocence, promiscuity versus love, realism versus idealism, cynicism versus fanaticism, theatre versus metatheatre.

The only possible result of the juxtaposition of contrasting moods and attitudes is irreverent laughter, as no one is spared. This irreverence is completely absent from the Long Wharf Theatre's production of *The Hostage*, which fails to bring out the most prominent feature of the play: its provocativeness. In his interpretation of the play, the director, Joseph Maher, has adopted a middle-of-the-road line, which does not take into account the dialectic mechanism of Brendan Behan's irony. The result is a total flattening of characters and action.

Pat (Joseph Maher himself) and Meg (Paddy Croft) do not correspond to the traditional image of brothel-keepers; they look like lower middle class pensioners. As a consequence, Pat is not a telling counterpart for the I.R.A. officer (Sean Griffin), as Behan intended him to be. The "queers" (James McDaniel and Gavin Reed) do not really look gay, except perhaps for Rio Rita, who is nevertheless played with too much restraint. The prostitutes (Mary Fogarty and Barbara Shannon) are not doing very well: a Russian sailor is their only customer for the night, and the director has forgotten to give them some action.

Monsewer (John Braden), Mr. Mulleady (Louis Beachner), and Miss Gilchrist (Joyce Ebert) all strike the same keynote, that of patriotic and religious bigotry. That the former is not really Irish and the latter two are interested only in sex is not given enough emphasis in the production. The contrast between the characters' pettiness and the grandiloquence of their romantic songs is not sharp enough, so that the performance becomes a monotonous sequence of songs interrupted at intervals by action.

The staging of this action lacks variety and imagination. Throughout the performance, the actors sit with their backs to the audience. They sip tea and drink beer while exchanging reminiscences or pitying the young Irish terrorist who is to be executed. Occasionally, they get up to sing and dance, but they soon return to the chairs and benches that the set designer, Hugh Landwehr, placed around the stage. The atmosphere is not that of a brothel, but rather that of a tea-room in which some social game is being played. We are in fact presented with an elaborate game of musical chairs: the characters rise from their seats when the music starts playing, and