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Review of The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking The Rules, by David Savran

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twilight zone between ingenuity and criminality – Bohemianism.

DAVID ZINDER
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THE WOOSTER GROUP, 1975–1985: BREAKING THE RULES. By David Savran. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press (Theatre and Dramatic Studies, #39), 1986; pp. 238. \$39.95.

Since the emergence of the director as the “shaper” of theatrical performance in this century, his/her job has been, by and large, that of a “unifier.” The director has functioned primarily as a script interpreter, searching for the meaning of or solution to a text’s labyrinth of riddles and subsequently communicating a unified, conceptual message to an audience. Psychological analysis of character and action is still the preferred methodology utilized by most traditional directors.

One of the few contemporary American theatre companies to disavow this approach is the New York City experimental theatre ensemble, the Wooster Group. The company has been creating startling and often controversial performance pieces since 1975 and David Savran’s new book, *The Wooster Group, 1975–1985: Breaking the Rules* is the first full-length investigation of their work. It is a splendid study and long overdue.

While Savran calls his book “a fractured history juxtaposing documentation and analysis,” (p. 5) it emerges as a detailed and incisive description of the first ten years of this country’s most consistently innovative theatre ensemble. Although Savran doesn’t organize his materials strictly chronologically, the reader easily develops a clear sense of the group’s evolution and development as well as its procedures and creative processes. Savran includes detailed descriptions (including photographs, text fragments, and interviews) of each of the seven Wooster Group works presented in its first decade: *Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1977), *Nyatt School* (1978), *Point Judith* (1979), *Route 1 and 9 (The Last Act)* (1981), *Hula* (1981) and *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)* (1985). Savran also describes Spalding Gray’s transition from the center of the group’s work (in the first four productions) to its periphery and provides a clearer understanding of Gray’s own development as a performer, monologist and writer.

The book closely examines the two major controversies that have marked the Group’s history: the

New York State Arts Council’s 40% cutback in grant funds to the group following charges that the blackface sequences in *Route 1 and 9 (The Last Act)* were racist; and the imbroglio with Arthur Miller over the group’s “unauthorized” use of sections of *The Crucible* in *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*. (*Route 1 and 9* was revived by the Wooster Group in January of this year and accusations of racism surfaced once again.) Savran clearly defends and supports the position taken by LeCompte and the Wooster Group in each case. He makes it quite clear that in the first instance the Group was, in fact, exploring the ambivalence of blackface as a theatrical convention and in doing so, focused on all the “assumptions and emotions that we harbor regarding racial difference” (p. 39). In the second, Savran shows that among the many ideas LeCompte explores in *L.S.D.* is the validity of concepts such as words, text, history and ownership. What happens to a text once it has been spoken? Is LeCompte’s deconstruction of *The Crucible* any less valid than Miller’s deconstruction of the original historical events occurring in seventeenth century Salem? As Savran points out, Miller depicts John Proctor as a hero brought down by a woman’s (Abigail) revenge. But Proctor, when all is said and done, manages to secure property and wealth for his family, “unwittingly reinforcing the social and economic system to which he has fallen victim” (p. 209). The Wooster Group is interested in this irony and in juxtaposing *The Crucible*’s false language and values with another questionably heroic figure struggling against a critical society and a world of “darkling forces” (p. 206): Timothy Leary. It is through this juxtaposition that Miller’s implicit values and “unconscious promotion” (p. 206) of systems and structures he seeks to question are, in fact, exposed.

One of the disturbing factors emerging from Savran’s study is the almost uniformly negative critical reception the Wooster Group has had to confront during its ten year history. Clearly it has affected LeCompte and other group members. While many of the anecdotes recounted by the performers (in interviews with the author) are amusing (an egg and tomato throwing episode in Zurich, the fear that an audience member was hiding a gun under his coat during one performance and the reality of performing in front of seven or eight people each night), the alienation the group must feel from its critical response is real. The fact is that American alternative theatre is in a very sad state right now and may accurately reflect the deficiencies of our culture in general. *Village Voice* theatre critic Michael Feingold complained in a recent article that the New York theatre is now in a state of complete artistic decay approaching a total collapse. The work of the

Wooster Group is surely a beacon of light in this darkness. David Savran's excellent study shows us the way to this light.

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A MIRROR TO NATURE: TRANSFORMATIONS IN DRAMA AND AESTHETICS 1660-1732. By Rose A. Zimbardo. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986; pp. viii + 248. \$25.00.

Rose A. Zimbardo's *Wycherley's Drama* appeared in 1965, offering a novel view of a difficult playwright with its case for Wycherley's familiarity with and his frequent resort to the techniques of classical satire. *A Mirror to Nature* expands the critical and historical compass of the earlier book. Using the playwrighting career of John Dryden as her fulcrum, Zimbardo contends that a steady but inexorable change took place from an "ideal, or ideational, reality" in plays of the 1660s to an interest in rendering an "inner psychological experience" (p. 1) by the end of the seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth. She then schematizes this development by dividing the span of seventy-two years into neat chunks, consisting of the drama between 1660 and 1670 which "imitates nature as the Ideal" (p. 15); the drama between 1670 and 1680, which "imitates the interplay between the ideal and actual" (p. 18); the drama between 1680 and 1700, which "moves to close the distance between ideal and experiential reality" (p. 23); and that from 1700 to 1732, which draws "nature to imitate art" (p. 32). This is a tidy progression, and it marshals support for Zimbardo's assertion that as dramatic literature interested itself increasingly in rendering up subjective human experience, it was brought face-to-face with its formal inferiority to the novel as a purveyor of "interiority."

This argument has been advanced previously by Laura Brown in *English Dramatic Form, 1660-1760* (1981), which Zimbardo credits, so it will hardly surprise readers familiar with the literature on the period. *A Mirror to Nature* deals with only about ninety plays, or an average of 1.2 plays per year in the span from 1660 to 1732. Thus, generalizations in the book about trends and progressions often have the feeling of being held so firmly that the plays serve only as props for supporting them. This deductive approach stands in the starkest contrast to the inductive one used with a much larger sampling of plays—and over a somewhat shorter historical

period—by Robert D. Hume in *The Development of English Drama of the Late Seventeenth Century* (1976). Zimbardo also chooses to ignore several important playwrights from the period: notably George Farquhar and Susanna Centlivre who seem both to fall short of featuring the interest in personal experience which Zimbardo identifies as a leading feature in the drama of the early 1700s; and Henry Fielding and John Gay from the 1720s and 1730s, who would appear not to conform to Zimbardo's image of a drama dedicated to presenting social exemplars in the years just before 1732.

A Mirror to Nature does rather better in documenting a change in aesthetics than it does in the drama. Zimbardo makes a strong case for a profound and fundamental reassessment throughout the late seventeenth century of notions of human personality, behavior, and perception, and she shows the ways in which such changes pointed writers progressively toward formal experimentation in the drama, as well as toward that which resulted in the flowering of the novel. I wondered, in the light of her larger argument, why Zimbardo chose not to consider novels more extensively, in order to discover more distinguished and clearcut examples of the "interiority" she never finds fully realized in plays.

In sticking so resolutely to plays and their distinctive ways of rendering character, Zimbardo might have made fuller use of theatre history as a supplement and complement to literary criticism, in something of the way Judith Milhous and Hume have done recently in *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays 1675-1707* (1985). Zimbardo's dramatic criticism ignores entirely the contributions made to the plays, on the stage, by great actors and personalities in the period: Nell Gwynne, Charles Hart, Michael Mohun, and Edward Kynaston. Thomas Betterton, who created Dorax in Dryden's *Don Sebastian*, is mentioned only once and briefly in his capacity as editor of the play. He and other actors had such skill and presence that audiences from the 1660s onward could never have reacted to them exclusively as "ideational" entities. Charles II receives only two brief mentions; and it seems certain that his tastes and example to playwrights were equal at least to the imprints of Roman satire and of literary tradition.

Zimbardo's view of drama in *A Mirror to Nature* is never careless or simplistic, but neither does it do justice to the plays as vital and permutable entities. Drama, in its attachment to the stage, demands to some degree its own aesthetics, as recent work in semiotics has suggested. I wish that the particular