

THE KITCHEN VIDEO MUSIC DANCE PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793



THEATER

'The Road to Immortality': The Wooster Group plays with images, found texts, soundscapes, stage machinery, the mechanics of acting, and every floutable expectation an audience can bring in. Whatever else the Group does or doesn't do, it always stirs up controversy. Now Elizabeth LeCompte and her stalwart band are revamping three of their most hackle-raising recent works and adding a brand-new fourth for a giant five-month retrospective. Their overall title implies that they think it'll put them in the history books—as if they weren't there already. The excursion starts Monday, November 17, at The Kitchen with *Route 1 & 9*, in which black burlesque routines collide with deconstructionist lectures on Thornton Wilder. December brings the frazzling parody-machismo of *North Atlantic* to the Group's home base at The Performing Garage, to be followed there in January by (... *Just the High Points*), so you can watch the Salem witch trials go on a 60s acid trip. In February and March, for a grand finale, Gustave Flaubert's philosophical novel-in-dialogue, *The Temptation of St. Antony*, will get a thorough Woosterizing. You won't want to miss a single plastic, fantastic, periphrastic moment. *Part One (Route 1 & 9)*: November 17 to December 6, The Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, 255-5793. Subsequent performances all at The Performing Garage, 33 Wooster Street, 966-3651. (Feingold)

VOICE
the village

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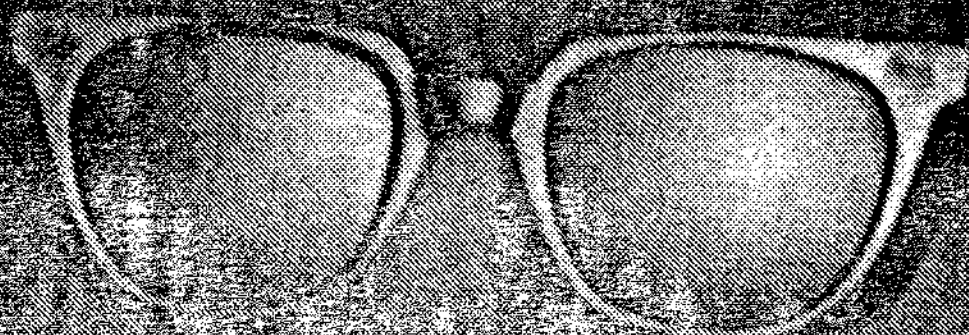
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VOICE

VOICE JANUARY 13, 1987

Black Like Them

Route 1 & 9



Uncivil Rites

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

In real life, Routes 1 and 9 are two old East Coast highways, one rural and one clotted with urban sprawl, that merge for a short time in New Jersey before going their separate ways. The Wooster Group's 1981 piece *Route 1 & 9*, revived with all the pain and controversy around it still intact, is a pair of linear events that share a similarly brief trajectory. They don't merge, however; they unreel side by side, one on video and one mostly live, implicit and devastating condemnations of each other. And the tension between them, which makes the evening one of the most disturbing I've ever sat through, stirs up giant questions of every kind—moral, political, social, legal, even the question of the artist's right to produce a particular work of art.

The material on the bank of video screens across the top of The Kitchen's performance space is centered on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*: a nauseatingly pedantic lecture film on the play for high school students (Ron Vawter doing a hilarious parody of Clifton Fadiman), full of glitches and sound distortion to show its age; then excerpts from the cemetery scene, treated as soap opera, with huge close-ups of faces and soaring, New England-y music. Under the monitors, the live actors propose a simultaneous anti-

THE ROAD TO IMMORTALITY: PART ONE (ROUTE 1 & 9). Performance piece by The Wooster Group, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, presented by The Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, 255-5793.

small-town pieties and metaphysics: Two women call fast-food places, trying to get them to deliver to The Kitchen's address; three men, in a slapstick vaudeville routine full of collisions and collapses, build a steel-and-glass skeleton of a suburban house; when they're done, everybody parties, and an old joke about "sending a telegram" (as a euphemism for "taking a crap") is acted out, in the crudest manner imaginable.

All through, the five actors are in blackface makeup; during the house-building sequence the men are also blind, large strips of white tape across their black sunglasses. The toilet joke comes from a routine by the black vaudeville comedian Pigmeat Markham. The sequences are separated from each other by the violent ringing of a fire alarm bell downstage center. During the agile, black-style dancing of the party sequence, the monitors display a standard

THEATER

video color spectrum, with the title "Color Bars" superimposed in white lettering.

When the conversation of the dead in Wilder's cemetery comes on the screens, the stage darkens and the party changes in quality, turning somber, intense, and secretive, an orgy of servants trying not to disturb the masters, with frequent cautious glances up at the monitors. The actors stumble through and around the skeletal house; there are furtive embraces, whispered conversations, subdued fights. The onstage music has changed, from the vital '50s pop of the dance sequence to muted Harry Belafonte

Continued on next page

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FEINGOLD from preceding page

fonte calypso. In the semidarkness the blackface characters transform themselves, distorting their makeup and changing into what look in the dim light like gaudy Mardi Gras costumes. Unlike Wilder's dead, who sit sedately in rows facing the audience, they drift one by one to folding chairs upstage, where they huddle with their backs to us.

Suddenly, as the corpses of Grover's Corners onscreen comment dryly on the living George Gibbs, sobbing over Emily's grave, a song with a jumping Caribbean beat comes on. (I think the alarm bell rang again at this point too.) The actors leap from their chairs and go into a violent, grotesque, shaking dance, zombies back from the dead; in a last flash at the end, we can just make out in the darkness that they wear vampire fangs and their mouths are dripping blood. While they dance, *Our Town* has been replaced on the monitors by film of a van driving down a highway (shot on the actual merged 1 & 9), stopping to pick up two hitchhikers, then driving on and vanishing in the distance. A battered old black-and-white set on the stage floor, which has flickered intermittently during the party sequences, shows (at least to those sitting down front) a shadowy porn film. A taped conversation between two flat-voiced men, which we've heard during the house-building routine, is briefly reprised here, fading (on a line about it being "difficult to see in the dark") as the van disappears down the road on the upper screens, the TV simultaneously flickers and goes out, and the piece ends.

Though dense and subtle, worked out with splendid theatricality, and enormously effective in the quiet, insistent way it gets under your skin, this interplay of images comes down to a simple duality: The white world, its mind trapped in its cornball rural roots, is smug, sheltered, sterile; the "black" underclass, underworld, Third World, whatever, is oppressed by it but free in spirit, haunting the white culture like an undead dream of sexuality and abandon. Though the ramifications are complex, and the piece is full of hints at that complexity, it leaves you feeling that a rug has been pulled out from under you without the courtesy of offering you a leg to stand on in return; you're as much disappointed as creatively disoriented.

As an act of deconstruction (of *Our Town*, of blackface, of the standard way of building theater pieces), it raises the question whether one can create simply by depriving, dismantling, and outraging, whether a deconstructive gesture can in fact be called a work of art, entitled to art's prerogatives. Art is made to raise questions, not offer pat answers, and *Route 1 & 9* certainly lives up to that rule—but as a provocation, not a fulfillment. Its deeper meanings tend to sneak away under cover of the darkness on which it's centered.

The piece can't be said to be an outrage against Wilder, who was attacking small-town complacency even while apotheosizing it; if anything, it reaffirms him. The question of blackface is more problematic. It would take a very dense audience to think The Wooster Group has any racist intent. The blackface is used blatantly to carry other meanings, not to caricature. Still, one can have effect without intent: From a black person's point of view, at this moment in history, I imagine that the sight of white people blacking up, even to say, by implication, "we want to be vital like you," must seem simply a reverse version of the same old insult. As Brecht says, if it steps on you, it doesn't matter what kind of boot it is.

I don't deny the care and subtlety with which the blackface material is woven into the piece; the question is whether it does any good, aside from creating a ruckus. It seems to me that for whites, the way to attack racism is not by deconstructing its images, but by creating alternative ones. If The Wooster Group is really worried about the gulf between

Continued on page 92

FEINGOLD Continued from page 87

black and white, there are many fine black actors in New York who would be happy to join it in making a piece on the subject. As with its artistry, what troubles me most about *Route 1 & 9* on this point is what often worries me in group work-like this: its hermetic nature. The implied assumption is that what the group decides to do is OK, no matter who else it might affect.

The Wooster Group wants to challenge our divided society, so it puts on blackface; it wants to explore our culture, so it makes a porn film; or uses a copyrighted text by Wilder. The artistic passion that motivates these acts is pure and praiseworthy; the acts themselves, added to similar adventures on other Group occasions, start to seem like a series of childish antiauthoritarian gestures, infant rebellion acted out. Surely there are other tactics: It's part of the function of art to be cunning, for the sake of its own survival, in the way it conveys its subversive messages. Maybe the duality The Wooster Group should study next is the one between hedgehogs and foxes. ■

Avant- Savage

VOICE JANUARY 13, 1987

BY THULANI DAVIS

There is a callousness lying close to the surface of *Route 1 & 9* which makes any confrontation with the work futile and infuriating. It is the kind of callousness that holds that brutality is justified by an artist's grappling for the dangerous edge—not for meaning or truth or anything so nave. Even on the high of that edge, the creators of *Route 1 & 9* and their numerous apologists cannot imagine what it is like to experience their blackface horrors knowing that black people, racism, and alienation are not even the subject at hand, and that blackface is just a device totally divorced from realities as close as Howard Beach.

Reading the thick volume of press debate from the work's 1981-82 controversy handed to me as I went to take my seat in the packed house—where mine was the only little black face present—it looked like The Wooster Group had come upon the notion that the work dealt with racism only after it had been attacked as racist. Director Elizabeth LeCompte has been fairly candid about the fact that she's not interested in race. In 1982 she said "... I don't feel that this piece has much to do with racism, frankly..." Of blacking up she said, "The blackface is not sociological—it's about theater and personas and masks," and

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DAVIS, from preceding page

"We don't accept it or present it because it's real, but because it's not real." The actors' masque is the thing.

In reaction to the controversy, LeCompte's instinct was to blame an "obtuse"—and "unsophisticated" audience. "The problem arises when a certain kind of person comes in and says first of all... that we're presenting black people as scatological, as poor, as dumb... and that you can't do that, that's a taboo, a horrible thing to do." About the moment in which Kate Valk, playing a black woman, calls local fried chicken joints to place orders, LeCompte said, "She does it to see if she can pass. You know, that's the exciting thing." These are racist assumptions and reactions.

I felt used and assaulted sitting there, not only by the "insensitivity" of the work, but by the irrelevance to which racism's victims are consigned. *1 & 9* is as ignorant, exploitative, and disengaged from life as most of the '80s downtown art scene from which it has sprung—a sub-culture which gets its blood from the streets of New York. And we all know who's in those streets. Whether or not the piece is about racism, which I seriously doubt, it is about the attitudes of a (presumably passive) white audience towards the evolution of a theater they have created and sanctified, and the rigors of experimentation in that theater. If it had been about anything else, it might simply have been termed inept and died.

Route 1 & 9 makes some rather savvy comments about Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* through the use of an enervating video lecture, the blindly assembled frame-house set, and the hushed reverence staged around a soapy, intimate reading of the play's final scene. If the vaudeville section had used a white text played in "whiteface" or with other masks, we might be able to talk about the clever way in which a "low art" sketch enhances the ignorant yet right last words of Wilder's play, and the hellishness and blindness of the "ordinary days" we are begged to know. And we might appreciate the visual comments made about realism, real time, the persistence of illusion even in pornography and in phone calls made to real people cooking real chicken and dirty rice.

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But "blackface" simply does not adequately describe what the actors are in fact doing while they have black paint on. Savage creations whose straight hair is slicked down with black grease or done up in pickaninny bunches, speaking broken-English garble, the men are blind, clumsy, and debauched, and the women are padded, screeching, with their tongues blocking their diction. They whoop and jump and shake that booty well. Their music is great. They talk dirty and call real Latins and real black people and we listen. The smell of whiskey fills the room as they pour vats of it on the floor, smash glasses. To the sounds of Harry Belafonte they transform into creatures somewhere between movie monsters and the zombie undead. Does it make sense in this context to say that Ron Vawter, Willem Dafoe, Peyton Smith, and Kate Valk are good actors? Is professionalism just proficiency? Their performances are deep across the Mason-Dixon line from anything I ever saw or heard Pigmeat Markham do in the days of race radio and the TOBA circuit, and saying he did the routine in the '60s is beside the point. Unlike The Wooster Group, Markham knew who was making fun of whom.

Other recent works have used classic (and white) texts and black performers or characters with a similar—though not racist—result: one experiences black faces, maybe even black music, but white mind. The Wooster Group actors, playing whites on video, are consciously commenting on *Our Town*; as "blacks" they make only coincidental, unconscious commentary. From *The Gospel at Colonus* or *CIVIL wars*, however, use the black image and text to enhance their texts in some unexpected way, revive them from some moribund, if

not obscure, state. In *Route 1 & 9* the "blacks" serve as demonic contrasts to the whites and hellish confirmations of the bleakest ruminations in the play.

On the other hand, in *Gospel at Colonus*, *CIVIL wars*, and other pieces using blacks, the text seldom enhances the black faces or reflects their society. The texts ring out as texts—divorced from all those things the performers know. These works do not show any signs of having engaged with the black mind in any way. Those black faces and the thoughts that should inhabit them remain maddingly mute. We are once again objectified.

Are artists in the 1980s any more enlightened than the experimenters of 50 years ago? They seem to be willfully disengaged from the language and images that define our culture and make political statement possible. The vanguard surely has more derring-do than conventional theater, but in the case of *Route 1 & 9* it is purely stylistic. Perhaps The Wooster Group is afraid to be really dangerous and let the mute speak for themselves. *Route 1 & 9* in New Jersey may run, as someone pointed out, to New Hampshire and the land of Grover's Corners, but it also runs through the site of some of the most violent riots of the '60s. The Wooster Group's *Route 1 & 9* seems only to run through lower Manhattan's loft country. ■

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VOICE JANUARY 27, 1987

Gray Areas:

*More Angry Words
on Route 1 & 9*



"Amos 'n' Andy" and Amos and Andy

CULVER PICTURES

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1 In this confined space, I can't refute all the arguments of Thulani Davis and Erika Munk [in the January 13, *Voice*], as well as of Michael Feingold, who weakly liked the Wooster Group's revival of *Route 1 & 9* but scolded it for being, well, not nice. The high voltage of the piece invites a children's sandbox response: It's racist. It's not. It's elitist. It's not. My aesthetics can lick your aesthetics. So can my social conscience. In this crackling atmosphere, which the piece generates around itself in order to succeed, I must confine myself to some scattershot counterstatements aimed mainly at Munk's remarks, which were the most passionate and disturbing.

At first, I was moved by her gut-wrenched abhorrence. It was honest, understandable given the vehemence of the work and her own political sense, but utterly misplaced. The shakiness of her arguments betrays itself in the critical methods she uses to make them. She attributes to the Wooster Group assumptions about its audience—"dislocated from the world we live in, dissociated aestheticized"—that are without basis and that a glance at the work reveals as preposterous. She goes on to fret at the audience for being "smug, specialized, and very white," and Davis chimes in with "passive"—all maladies, including whiteness, which seem to stem either from seeing *Route 1 & 9* or being seen at it. Unless these writers have some psychic abilities which would be of great interest to the Defense Department, the only one of these *ad hominem* presumptions that is verifiable is the racial one. The audience's race is obviously important and I'll discuss it farther on.

But these statements are logically pristine when compared to the irresponsible opinions Munk has to hide behind her art-critic theater companion to express: "I don't want my money going in any way to this shit," referring specifically to the funding that was refused the Group by the New York State Council on the Arts.

I would be happy if my tax dollars were spent on art, no matter how repellent to me, instead of some of the deadly shit it has gone for over the past quarter century, but that's beside a more immediate point. The censorship Munk and her friend blatantly ask for through such a statement is appalling. There's a kind of self-fulfilling curse that comes back to work mischief in the whole cultural community, which includes art and theater critics. And the cheap shot so clumsily nestled in the rhetorical, "How many black artists does the Kitchen represent?" is beneath contempt. The answer, if the underhanded question deserves one, is "Plenty!" That comes from the organization's non-white executive director Bobbi Tsumagari.

Enough picking the bones of other opinions. Here's my own. *Route 1 & 9* is white folks' theater. Yes, we should have a theater, and a world, where such segregation are ridiculous, but we don't. The Wooster Group is speaking directly from what it collectively knows to be the audience it has. Blacks aren't in that audience, because they aren't in most audiences. That is not this theater's fault, nor would the situation likely change even if the Group changed, such is the enormity of the chasms in our culture. Of course, blacks are welcome to see the work and can profit from the experience. But they will have to stand the extreme psychic battering of viewing themselves as the principal players in a collective white nightmare—a demon-haunted hell of the white fantasy so shockingly true to itself and deep that many whites, among them Munk, can't look and keep their reason.

To say, as Munk, Davis, and Feingold have, that the work is hermetic and divorced from reality sends me into a dizzying speculation about what reality they're talking about. *Route 1 & 9* is the realism of the white American, even Western, subconscious. Above it, beamed in on disembodied video, floats the bourgeois never-never land, a pastoral dream of a lost lily-white Eden as expressed in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (not a parody of the popular classic as some call it

but wistful, ironical homage). Below is an atavistic nightmare—wrought part of fear, part of fascination, part of hate—of Pignat Markham, et al. (not a homage, as it has been called, but an ever more terrifying reduction).

Munk and Davis ask with the kind of hushed piety that squelches discussion how the Group could present such a piece after the tragedy of Howard Beach. My dumbfounded answer is *Route 1 & 9* is Howard Beach. It runs right past that pizza stand. It is the only work of theater I know that comes close to depicting the dreadful landscape with no fake sentiment and no pat answers. Those "coarse, drunken, stumbling, shitting, crotchshaking fools [Munk]" are the phantoms of imagination that drove those white boys crazy, that lurk just off all our personal cameras when we venture through Washington Square too late, that take center stage when we go one stop too many and find ourselves on 125th Street.

Davis wonders why the Wooster Group "is afraid" to give the mute voices of real blacks a chance to speak for themselves. I can't speak for the theater except to be sure that it is not "afraid" of freedom of speech. Its work testifies to that. I also don't know its attitude on the subject, but I question whether the absorption of such voices into its own ranks—a tactic legislated to make its art somehow more palatable to sensitive souls—would make that art better, more valuable, truer, or anything but different from what it is now.

What it is now is a Romans'-eye view of the fall of Rome, a terror-struck dream of the coming of a new order. No, that new order—the real blacks, people of the third world and whomever else the old order perceives as *the other*—does not take part as itself. Not yet, anyway. Given the persistent recurrence of Howard Beach, perhaps not for a while. But I'm convinced that The Wooster Group's unexampled honesty and integrity in fearlessly looking into the hurricane of the old dreams are fundamental to preparing the way for what history proves to be the new ones.

James Everett

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2 It is a tribute to the strength and power of the Wooster Group's *Route 1 & 9* that it arouses the kind of emotions expressed in the *Voice* theater section. But I couldn't disagree more with your critics' assessments. None of these critics acknowledges that we live in a chaotic, frightening, hate-filled world and that *Route 1 & 9* is an unflinching theatrical model of that, rather than an inspirational portrait of idealized humanity.

Lacking the space to respond point by point (almost every sentence Munk and Davis wrote distorts or reduces or misrepresents the theater piece on display at the Kitchen), I would like to point out something none of these critics discussed, which is the context of *Route 1 & 9* within the body of the Wooster Group's work. Subtitled "The Last Act" when it was first presented in 1981, *Route 1 & 9* was the fifth in a quintet of related works that began with *Sakonnet Point*, an idyllic evocation of childhood. In this context, *Route 1 & 9*—like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, its inspiration—is clearly about morality, about death, "the last act," although the title also suggests the continuing cycle of life and death, the beginning and the end. Watching the piece again, I could not forget that LeCompte told me in a 1981 interview published in the *Voice* (and edited by Thulani Davis) that while completing *Route 1 & 9*, she watched her father die painfully of cancer and conceived her first child.

In her review, Davis objects to the Wooster Group's use of blackface as "ignorant" and "exploitative" and wonders why the group couldn't have explored high-art/low-art distinctions using "a white text played in 'whiteface' or with other masks." In fact, the use of such masks has been a running theme throughout the Wooster Group's work. In *Nayatt School* several children played adult characters from Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, and *Point Judith* included a film in which men frolicked in drag as nuns. As with the performers in *Route 1 & 9*, the audience was clearly meant to see the children behind the grown-up characters, the men behind the nuns' habits, the whites behind the blackface.

Many images and props from earlier works are recycled in *Route 1 & 9*—a gown, a lamp, a latex mask, a bullhorn, a hair-shaking dance, most importantly the house structure that provides the predominant architecture of each piece.

While they do come off as vulgar comic stereotypes when enacting the Pigmeat Blackham routine, the performers in blackface take on the additional aspect of ghosts—the life force that survives after death—rattling around the skeletal framework of the house. Davis complains that "the 'blacks' serve as demonic contrasts to the whites and hellish confirmations of the bleakest ruminations in the play." But isn't it true that the status of most blacks in Reagan's America is bleaker and more hellish than that of most whites? Probably most shocking and taboo about the Wooster Group's piece is that these white people clearly identify, as outcast artists, with these images of low-class black people, feeling equally marginal in society and embracing that status with anger and irony.

—Don Shewey

3 I sat through what James Leverett admits is the "extreme psychic battering" of *Routes 1 & 9*, viewing myself and all other black Americans as "the principal players in a collective white nightmare," and my reaction was no more from a "children's sandbox" than the tables once thrown at me in a hospital in Vermont because a "nigger" had walked in the room. I don't believe Leverett or Shewey has any idea what he's talking about, and that is why I say again that the creators of this work and their apologists are so disengaged from the world we live in. They do not have any idea, in their smug sophistication, how they degrade theater and art by dismissing this psychic battering so easily, as some necessary evil of "white folks' theater."

They both seem to think we should accept this portrayal of blacks as the principal players in white nightmares because the world is filled with hate and because, as Shewey says, "the status of most blacks in Reagan's America is bleaker and more hellish than that of most whites." Our status in Leverett and

Shewey's America, *white* America, is what it is because so many like Leverett and Shewey hold that they, the Wooster Group, and presumably NYSCA should not be held accountable. Leverett says theater is white because blacks aren't in most audiences, and it's not the fault of theater. Just where does the buck stop?

No, I don't want my tax dollars used to beat me up, or cannibalize my culture on the grounds that what is important is what "drove those white boys crazy" at Howard Beach. No, we don't have to support "wistful, ironic" homages to any "lost lily-white Eden." And clearly our tax dollars are the only way to get through that self-absolving, self-congratulatory "logic" that determines it is "not yet" time for "real blacks, people of the third world and whomever" to take part as ourselves—"perhaps not for a while." These guys obviously don't know what time it is. Send them some of those stop watches everybody's wearing on the street.

—Thulani Davis

4 Apologies to the Kitchen: Bobbi Tsumagari tells me that out of the more than 300 events they have presented in the last six years, at least 50 have involved black artists. For the rest, no apology. The censorship Leverett says I asked for never happened, nor would I want it to: *1 & 9* and all the Wooster Group's other works have been shown. The audience seemed smug to me because it didn't leave or throw things. But above all, I refuse to be included in Leverett's phony collectivity. Let him take responsibility for his own fantasies, and the Wooster Group for theirs; saying that these particular fears are everyone's, is just a cheap way of absolving oneself. I'm white folk, and I won't let that be my theater.

—Erika Munk

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VOICE JANUARY 13, 1987

CROSS ERIKA MUNK LEFT

Representation and Its Discontents

Like the *Cheshire Cat* in the topsyturvy world through the looking glass where appearances offered few clues to reality, the minstrel show, long after it had disappeared, left its central image—the grinning black mask—lingering on, deeply embedded in American consciousness.

—Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up*

Watching *Route 1 & 9* made me intensely ashamed, sick at the way. The Wooster Group assumed their audience, including me, was so dissociated from the world we live in, so complacently aestheticized, that this piece would cause neither pain nor anger. Does my shame prove that *1 & 9* "worked"? That acting in blackface showed the masks of deep-held stereotypes I couldn't face? No. I couldn't bear being implicated—by all the years I've supported the kind of theater The Wooster Group does; by sitting there as one of that smug, specialized, and very white audience the piece is made for—in something so asocial and mean.

I'd been curious about *1 & 9*, five years after its first production. Like most other Wooster Group pieces, this one juxtaposes a middlebrow classic (*The Cocktail Party*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Crucible*) with literalized metaphors of construction and deconstruction, and wraps the whole thing in hysteria. Unlike them, *1 & 9* raised—though unintentionally—direct political issues which I had looked forward to sorting out: intention vs. effect, formal vs. social meaning. "Sorting out"? I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. Punched in the stomach while bored, however. There wasn't a single interesting artistic question, theater-about-theater question, ironies-of-performance question. Or at least not one interesting enough to override the real question: *Those images now? Why?*

Not that those images had such a different meaning then. But with some rationalization and selective blindness, in 1981 the white downtown audience could see *1 & 9*'s blackface as grotesquery from the past, which might have shaped us, still lie dormant inside us, and be useful to confront. The force of those particular stereotypes seemed to have become history (at least on our little turf); it was possible to downplay how blackface by and for whites always has been a means of reinforcing prejudice, not of breaking it down, and to try to imagine it in a new, almost liberating, role. I didn't quite buy that argument, but it seemed perfectly respectable.

Many critics supported the production. James Leverett wrote in *Theatre Communications*, "The Wooster Group is actually one of the most radically political, culturally radical... the country, perhaps the world. It has to give it a serious label... it would be 'theater of irony.' It operates from no single ideology; there is no message or revolutionary program. Instead... it answers a complex, contradictory, cruel world with an unrelentingly complex, contradictory, cruel theater."

Bonnie Marranca, writing in *Live*, found that "the question of racism is such a stupidly myopic entrée into an analysis of the piece. Does putting actors in blackface mean that the work is racist? Is racism only about color? ... If the idea of representation is undermined it destroys the foundation on which theater is based... *Route 1 & 9* is a triumph of survival without capitulation to social and artistic expectations." There were black defenders, too; John Patterson started a piece in *The Villager*, "One thing I love is watching white folks act black. It's one of the less noted forms of American egalitarianism... This play digs deep into American life." In opposition, Eileen Blumenthal's *Voice* review—which, unlike all the above, isn't included in the current Kitchen press packet—said, "the Pigméat Markham routine loses its ironic framework and is, finally, just an hour of trash showing dumb, blasted-out nigras. Moreover, it is these lives we see while *Our Town*'s Emily weeps out her wise comments about human shallowness."

The debate grew hotter after the New York State Council on the Arts decided to cut The Wooster Group's grant from \$35,000 to \$20,000 "because of artistic problems with the production of *Route 1 & 9*." A disingenuous explanation, as I then wrote—the play has the same performance style and formal concerns as the group's earlier work, it had no technical loose ends, and clearly the money was withdrawn because of its content. NYSCA's action struck fear into the experimental theater community, even when those vague "artistic problems" were set out more specifically in a Council finding that the production "contained in its blackface... harsh and caricatured portrayals of racial minority" which shouldn't be supported with "funds that are raised as taxes from the community at large." A wrong decision, I then thought—how ever racist the play's effect, whatever unconscious attitudes it revealed, clearly wasn't meant to be racist, etc.

cont

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

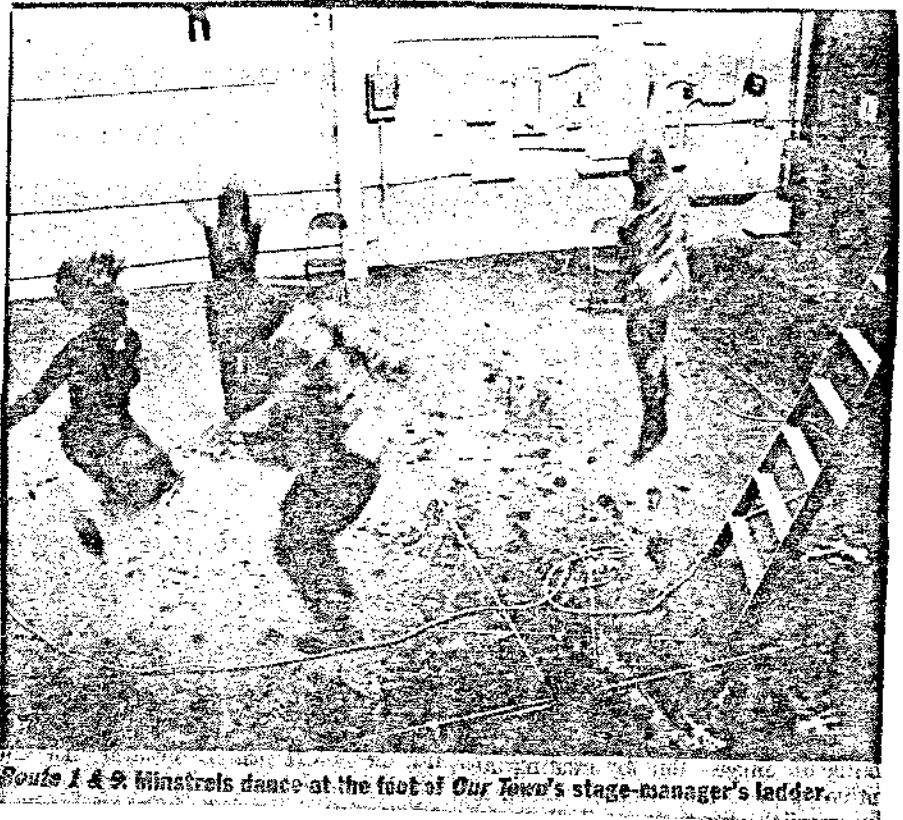
Reservations: 255-5793

NYSICA shouldn't "censor."

This time I went to *1 & 9* with a white art-critic friend of no especially radical bent who asks reasonable questions: "I don't want my money going in any way to the shit. Good for NYSICA! How many black artists does the Kitchen present? Why should I have to support this?" And I felt she was right. It's not just that times have changed and my consciousness along with them; times have changed, and *Route 1 & 9*, through not changing, has become something worse than it was. Theater is a social art. Its context is an enormous part of its meaning, and can override intention.

Now that we're five years deeper into Reagan, racism is stunningly more pervasive, more open, and more acceptable. History's come around again to remind us that we live Up South. And there is no way to justify the coarse, drunken, stumbling, shitting, crotchshaking fools LeCompte sets at the center of her play. They are not a tribute to black culture. They are not phantasms of postmodern aesthetic theory. They don't shape any critique of racism. And placing them in tandem with *Our Town*, Charles Ives, a stageful of videos, and a bit of modestly darkened porn doesn't give them new reverberations, it just makes them accessible to avant-gardists.

It's hard to imagine any company deciding to revive this play without discussion among themselves—unless they thought the whole issue of race was unimportant. Norman Frisch, Wooster's dramaturg, told me last week, "We never talked about it, there was no consideration of not doing it. It's hard playing that show and not thinking about Howard Beach, but in our minds that would be more reason to do it." Do it in Howard Beach perhaps? Or Harlem? The Kitchen's management calls *1 & 9* "an unflinching critique of social and theatrical stereotypes." I think they would have done well to flick a bit. They haven't shown us that "grinning black mask" so we'll tear it away to see a true face; they're embedding it ever deeper in our culture.



Route 1 & 9 minstrels dance at the foot of *Our Town*'s stage-manager's ladder.