

Nancy Campbell

Theater of Resistance

The Wooster Group's "The Road to Immortality"

The Wooster Group's theater is not apolitical. Nor is it political, that is, in the modernist, transgressive sense. Rather, the Wooster Group is a theater of resistance. Before I discuss the theoretical framework of postmodern political performance, I want to briefly introduce the Group's history.

This year marks the Group's 20th anniversary. In 1967, Richard Schechner formed The Performance Group in New York City. The Group converted an industrial space into its theater, the Performing Garage, located at 33 Wooster Street in what is now SoHo. Both Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte joined The Performance Group in 1970. In 1974, Gray and LeCompte began working apart from Schechner. Within six years, a body of group-autobiographical work developed under LeCompte's direction: *Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1977), and *Nayatt School* (1978) form the trilogy *Three Places in Rhode Island*; in 1979, *Point Judith* was presented as an epilog to the trilogy. When Schechner left The Performance Group in 1980, the collective of people working with LeCompte remained at the Performing Garage and renamed itself the Wooster Group.

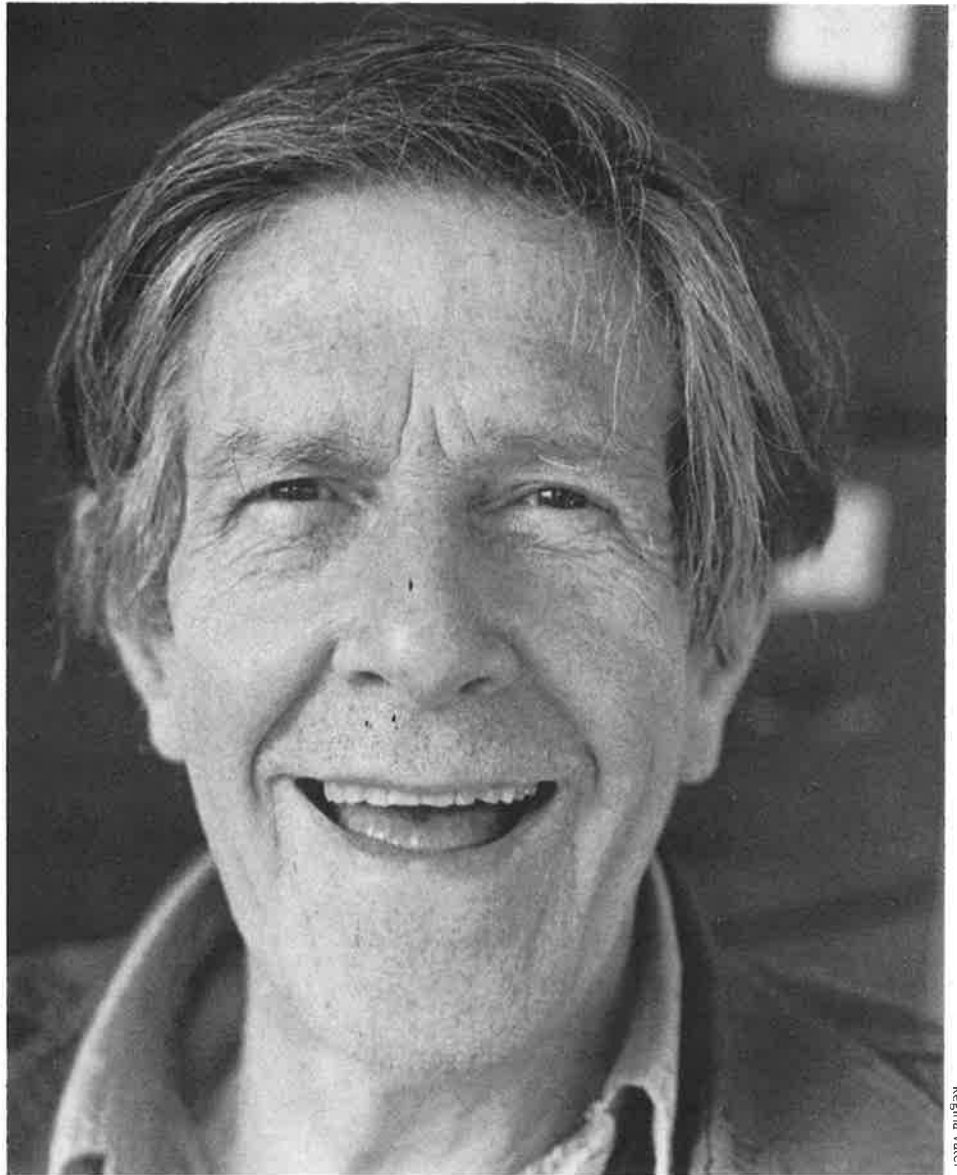
The Wooster Group is an experimental theater collective made up of seven members: Jim Clayburgh (designer), Willem Dafoe, Spalding Gray, Elizabeth LeCompte (artistic director), Peyton Smith, Kate Valk

The Road to Immortality: Part One (Route 1 & 9)

mance from anyone like a conductor. Instead, what I want the opera to be is a collage of sorts, of a pulverized sort, of European opera; and my title, I think, is excellent. It's *Europera*, which is the words "Europe" and "opera" put together.

Originally I thought to have the music be the music in the repertoire of operas of that particular opera house. So that both the sets and the costumes would already exist. They would simply be collaged in a different way than conventionally. So instead of having one opera, you'd have them all in one evening. And it's a very nice idea and relatively practical, but it turns out that opera . . . I was told, as I never go to the opera, of course . . . I was told that the opera had become quite modern, the sets were not what I imagined, and the costumes too were often not what I would think they had been in the past. Furthermore, the conductor who had asked me to accept the commission is going to be a new conductor, and he didn't want my work to reflect on the previous conductor, which it would, if you took the costumes and sets you see that they had. So he wants it to refer to opera in general, rather than his predecessor. In that way, my first idea had changed a great deal, and I find as I travel about, for instance yesterday evening, I got another idea from going to a dance concert, about what I would like to do with the lighting. Rather than have the lighting focused on the activity, I would like to have the lighting done by means of chance operations. I'll probably find out what is the minimum lights, so that the singers won't fall down or something. And what would be the maximum lighting. Then to play between those, with what must be very good technology now. And that won't be too difficult. I'm disconnecting not only the lighting from the singers but the costumes from the roles and the background from the activity, and I'm going to introduce a number of what I think of as stage effects, things happening, so that the whole performance will be like not a choreography involving dance, but still a kind of movement in this space without benefit of a plot.

I was on my way to Frankfurt to tell them I wouldn't do it, and I went to sleep on the plane. When I woke up, it was just dawn, and seeing the dawn was so marvelous, and that struck me as being the right backdrop for the opera. So that instead of being a single day, or act or one performance, there will be two performances, two *Europeras* 1 and 2. There will be a series of days, days of different lengths, that is they go from dark to lightest to dark. And there will be through chance operations a determination of different effects of weather. Then I'm going to have many of the dancers dressed in black, helping the singers around—suggesting that, even though the subject is European, the conventions are Oriental (Ellsworth Snyder, 1985). □



John Cage, c. 1981

Regina Vater

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York Berlin*, 1/1 (1984). German translation, *Zitty*
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and Ron Vawter. During the 1986/87 season, the Group performed a retrospective of its second trilogy, *The Road to Immortality. Part One (Route 1 & 9)*, first presented in 1981, was originally subtitled *The Last Act* as the fifth in a series of works that began with *Sakonnet Point. Part Two (... Just the High Points ...)* was first presented in 1984 under the title *L.S.D.* During April 1987, the Group presented work-in-progress performances of *Part Three (Frank Dell's Saint Antony)* at the Performing Garage.

In May 1987, the Group embarked on a tour throughout North America to present its trilogy. *Part Three* was officially opened to the press in early May at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Later that month, *Part Two* was presented as part of the Festival of the Americas in Montreal, Canada. In June, *Parts Two and Three* were presented during the Group's residency at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. Finally, following a West Coast tour in early September which will include the Los Angeles Festival, *Part Three* will be officially opened in New York.

The "politic" of the Wooster Group is situated within the theoretical framework of postmodern political performance, namely, resistance. In "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," Hal Foster suggests that culture be seen as "a conjuncture of practices, many adversarial, where the cultural is an arena in which active contestation is possible." Enter the postmodern avant-garde of resistance. Resistance, as defined by Foster, is a process in which the political artist investigates the processes and apparatuses that control and encode given representations and forms. Furthermore, Foster urges the political artist to directly confront the operations that control and encode hegemonic (capitalist) representations "by means of 'terroristic' provocation—literally to make such operations as surveillance or information control vividly public—or, conversely, to deny the power of intimidation its due."¹

In his essay "Toward a Concept of the Political In Postmodern Theatre," Philip Auslander builds upon Foster's theoretical prescription for resistant art. Auslander explains that resistant theater acknowledges the "problematics of presence." Presence is a modernist theatrical concept based on charismatic, "actorly representation." Auslander indicates that, in both traditional and experimental modernist theater, presence is derived from either one of the following two approaches to acting. One notion of acting holds that presence is obtained through "the actor's embodiment of, or even possession by, the character

In (... Just the High Points ...) mall torsos manipulate female legs.



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defined in a play text, from the (re)presentation of self through the mediation of character." The other approach to acting—as exemplified in the works and theories of Artaud, Grotowski and the Living Theatre—perceives presence as deriving "from the archetypal psychic impulses accessible through the actor's physicality."²

Auslander points out that much of the American experimental theater movement in the 1960s did not acknowledge the now "apparent collusion between political structures of authority and the persuasive power of presence." Furthermore, I submit that much of the political theater in the '60s—the most eminent example of which is the Living Theatre—did not (want to) understand that presence upholds hegemonic representations and forms. For presence is grounded within "actorly representation" which is itself historically an operation of bourgeois theatrical realism. Political performance that does not question the ideological basis of acting risks the danger of collusion with hegemonic (capitalist/patriarchal) "signs" and representations. In other words, by not acknowledging the ideological problematics of both presence and (re)presentational acting, political performance remains (at least unconsciously) situated within the hegemonic system it attempts to counteract.

Auslander states that undermining presence also means resisting "identification as the [charismatic] Other and the power relations implied by that identification." But the Other is more than a mere implication of "power relations." Presence of the charismatic Other is itself a form of hegemonic appropriation. Moreover, as Hal Foster explains in "Readings in Cultural

Resistance," consumer capitalism needs to identify asocial or counterhegemonic representations—*difference*—to appropriate them. The Other is thereby "socially subjected as a sign and made commercially productive as a commodity."³ Therefore, postmodern political performance must undermine presence and its inherent representation as the charismatic Other to resist ultimate hegemonic appropriation.

Within this theoretical framework, the Wooster Group can be examined as resistant theater. Although Auslander refers only to a section of the second part of the trilogy, my analysis will extend to the trilogy as a whole. For *The Road to Immortality* exemplifies two deconstructive operations of resistant theater: one implodes presence and representation; the other undermines them.

The Road to Immortality: Part One (Route 1 & 9) juxtaposes a Pigmeat Markham blackface routine, "The Party," with Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*. Only part of the second act and all of act three of *Our Town* are presented, focusing on the play's white Protestant views on death. These sections of *Our Town* are presented on four video monitors raked above the performance space. The acting style emulates perhaps the most extreme example of theatrical realism—soap opera.

"The Party" is a reconstruction of Pigmeat Markham's vaudevillian routine (circa 1965). In his interpretative book *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking the Rules*, David Savran explains that Dewey "Sweet Papa Pigmeat" Markham (1904-81) was a black vaudevillian who often performed in blackface almost exclusively for black audiences. Savran suggests that a black reading of this particular use of blackface differs from a white reading. A white reading reinforces racist stereotypes; a

b y k e i t h p u g l i e s e i s e n

Ultimately, for "Route 1 & 9" to succeed, it must fail; in other words, its success as resistant theater depends upon each spectator's resistant reading.

black reading turns this racist metaphor "against the ideology that created it." Savran concludes that Markham's blackfaced vaudeville used "laughter to ridicule and undermine the images of oppression."⁴

In the retrospective version of *Route 1 & 9*, five white performers take this theatrical "mask" inverted by Markham and apply it on themselves.⁵ In other words, the Wooster Group appropriates a black vaudevillian's appropriation of blackface—itsself originally white vaudeville's appropriation of a racist stereotype.

There is no attempt to undermine presence in *Route 1 & 9*. In *Our Town*, starkly realistic faces fill the video screens. This soap-opera form is modeled on (bourgeois) theatrical realism and its style of charismatic, emotive acting. In "The Party," there is no attempt to demonstrate the process in which the theatrical "mask" of blackface is appropriated by Markham and then re-appropriated by the Wooster Group. Moreover, the uproarious slapstick reinforces the charismatic Otherness of the blackface.

In and of itself, the piece does not attempt to resist its own hegemonic representations. No authoritative commentary is offered (as in Brechtian theater). Rather, the responsibility of authority is displaced from artist to spectator. The mere juxtaposition of these cultural stereotypes seems to force a spectator to rigorously "read" the performance piece. If (and this is an enormous assumption) a spectator becomes self-conscious of his or her own repression of racism, then he or she *might* resist identifying with the charismatic images of both *Our Town* and "The Party."

And if a spectator denies these hegemonic representations their persuasive power, then presence is made arbitrary and thereby loses its political significance. Presence implodes.

Of course, this form of resistant experimentation assumes that a spectator will follow through the necessary steps towards this implosion of presence. This assumption proved detrimental. In 1982, the New York State Council on the Arts cut its funding of the Wooster Group by 40% for exploiting racist representations in *Route 1 & 9*. Certainly, there is the danger that if a spectator does not resist the presence empowered to the representations of *Our Town* and "The Party," then his or her reading might reinforce these racist stereotypes. Ultimately, for *Route 1 & 9* to succeed, it must fail; in other words, its success as resistant theater depends upon each spectator's resistant reading.

The Wooster Group investigates the problematics of reading—the process of perception and interpretation—in *The Road to Immortality: Part Two* (. . . *Just the High Points* . . .) (formerly entitled *L.S.D.*). This piece reflects on the history of the Beat Generation and its flowering into the countercultural movement of the 1960s—a time in which this theater collective was first formed. Originally, . . . *Just the High Points* . . . contained a deconstructed version of Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*. In 1985, Miller instructed his lawyers to threaten legal proceedings against the Group for its unauthorized production of his play.⁶ The retrospective version of . . . *Just the High Points* . . . substitutes *The Crucible* with *The Hearing*, a play written by Michael Kirby, an associate member of the Group.

Kirby has structured *The Hearing* on the rhythms and themes of the Group's deconstructive version of Miller's play. *The Hearing* calls forth the subtext of the *The Crucible*—the hysteria of the McCarthy Era. Moreover, the Group's performance of *The Hearing* recalls Miller's power of authority by incorporating "accidental" references to *The Crucible*. Each time a performer "slips" by speaking a line or referring to a character from Miller's play, a buzzer sounds. The Wooster Group resists Miller's threat of hegemonic censorship by appropriating it.

. . . *Just the High Points* . . . examines the relationships between acting (representation) and not-acting (presentation). The Group performs a series of readings that become increasingly engaged in character representation throughout the piece. The first act includes a presentational reading of Beat writers such as Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. In the second act, the Group performs *The Hearing* as a reading "in character." The third act is largely a reconstruction of a videotape in which the Group attempted to perform the

second act on acid. Although the third act may appear to be improvised, it is actually the most tightly scored and acted section of the piece.

Philip Auslander notes some examples in which presence and representation are undermined in the second act of . . . *Just the High Points* . . .⁷ In the earlier *Crucible* version of the piece, Kate Valk performed both Tituba, a black slave from Barbados, and Mary Warren, a white townsgirl. Kirby's *Hearing* translates Tituba as Kitty Toliver, a cleaning lady, and Mary Warren as Marie Washington, a schoolgirl. Valk performs both characters (Kitty Toliver [Tituba] and Marie Washington [Mary Warren]) in blackface. Auslander points out that this politicizes the use of blackface, "for it is when the arbitrary character of the sign is asserted that the significance of its imposition on one group by another stands out most clearly."

Ron Vawter and Willem Dafoe counter-act presence from two opposite approaches. Vawter garbles the text by speed "reading" with high-power emotion. I interpret this effect as implosion: Vawter literally strips presence of its authority and thereby renders its power as arbitrary. Dafoe adhered to the text, but "s(t)imulated tears" by placing drops of glycerin in his eyes. Auslander observes that Dafoe undermines presence by performing the apparatus that encodes his representation of emotion.

The second act ends with three women standing on a platform and "dancing" their torsos, heads and arms. Sitting behind the women, three men dangle their legs in the trough directly below. The illusion of the "dancing doll-woman powered by male legs" is simultaneously undermined by revealing the apparatus through which this representation is encoded. Furthermore, Auslander asserts that the Group's eschewal of charismatic projection "discourages the spectator from endowing either representation or representor with authority and encourages the spectator to focus instead on the process of representation itself and its collusion with authority."

The piece ends with a similar mock-dance that foregrounds a reading of a G. Gordon Liddy-Timothy Leary debate. Valk, Vawter, Dafoe and associate member Matthew Hansell impersonate Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos. In cartoonish Latin American style, Kate Valk dances on a platform while Vawter and Dafoe stand below in a trough on either side of her, "dancing" a pair of sneakers tied to Valk's legs. Then Hansell, barechested and smirking, sits on top of Valk who lifts and spreads her legs. In contrast with the dance in the second act, three male torsos manipulate one pair of female legs. During this dance, one line appropriated from *The Crucible* projects on two video monitors and is echoed by another performer as well:



The Road to Immortality: Part Three (Frank Dell's St. Antony)

Ken Kobland

"What is this dancing." This questioning reverberates throughout the piece: What is acting? What is representation? What is theater?

Frank Dell's Saint Antony, the third part of the trilogy, includes dancing sections choreographed by guest collaborator Peter Sellars. The piece juxtaposes several texts including Gustave Flaubert's dramatic poem, *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Magician*, biographical material on Lenny Bruce (Bruce used "Frank Dell" as a pseudonym), and Geraldine Cummins' book, *The Road to Immortality: Being a Description of the After-Life Purporting to be Communicated by the Late F.W.H. Myers*. Underlying this textual montage of apocalyptic visions, disillusioned insanity and sexual repression is the subtexture of the Group's autobiographical narrative about a theater troupe's troubles with "authority."

Frank Dell's Saint Antony is still a work-in-progress. Performances that I have seen are incomplete, and parts are being changed and restructured in the piece.

The piece begins when Ron Vawter instructs the technician to play a video that the Group modeled after a cable TV, "Channel J" nude talk show. Wearing jeans and a bathrobe, Vawter stands between two video monitors in front of the steel platform set (the same structure used in . . . *Just the High Points* . . .) between two video monitors. Usually, the video's soundtrack is turned off. The audience "hears" the video through Vawter's mimicry of each role, including his own. Wearing a portable headset, Vawter listens to a tape recording of the video soundtrack. As he listens to the

recording of this script, Vawter delivers each line in a matter-of-fact style of reportage. Vawter differentiates each character on the video by slightly altering his voice through inflection or change of accent. Of course, it soon becomes apparent that Vawter cannot exactly synchronize his verbal action with the visuals on video.

As the piece progresses, Vawter takes on multiple roles: In addition to Frank Dell, Vawter is referred to as Saint Antony, the Magician and Doctor Del Fuego. Vawter becomes increasingly engaged in other textual strands that occur simultaneously in the piece such as the theater troupe's rehearsals and the presentation of magical "feats." For example, at one point, Vawter-as-Dell places his head next to the "head" of a rubber-tube and wire sculpture of a human figure lying on a bed. Then Peyton Smith inserts swabs of cotton in Vawter's nostrils, while speaking lines from the screenplay of Bergman's *The Magician*. Using Vawter's hand as a palette, Smith applies theatrical blood to Vawter's nose and mouth. Then Vawter reveals a "bloody wound" on the palm of his hand, referring to Saint Antony's atavism of Christ's Passion. Performing representation along with its encoding apparatus thereby undermines the matrix of charismatic presence.

As a work-in-progress, *Frank Dell's Saint Antony* is a rehearsal of a performance of a series of rehearsals. Through repetition of (re)presentation and deliberate adherence to text, the performance is the making of the performance.

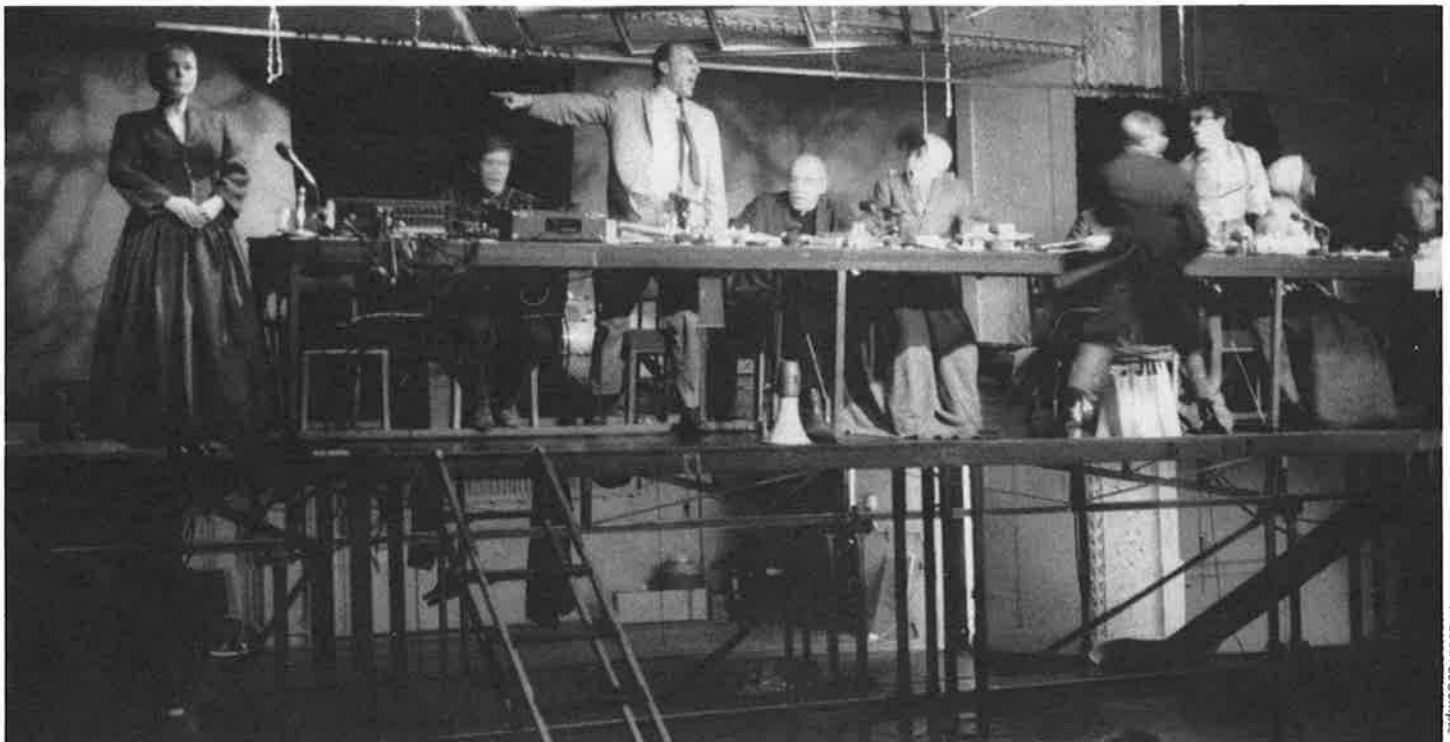
The Wooster Group's theater of resistance is reflexive as well as ideologically "open." This theater questions incessantly

but does not assert a particular viewpoint or argument, for the politic of resistance is not didactic. This theater resists one authoritative reading. Theoretically, there are multiple, equivocal readings. In and of itself, however, this resistant process is "closed." Resistant theater is not a two-way conversation. Moreover, how much recurrent questioning and rigorous reading can theater endure? To what extent can theater resist itself? □

FOOTNOTES

1. Hal Foster, "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1985), p. 153.
2. Philip Auslander, "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 39, 1 (March, 1987): 20-34. All references to Auslander are cited from this essay.
3. Foster, "Readings in Cultural Resistance," *Recordings*, pp. 166-7.
4. David Savran, "The Blackface" from "Part I: *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act): The Disintegration of Our Town*," *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking the Rules* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986), p. 30.
5. Originally, *Route 1 & 9* had four performers in blackface. Just before the opening of the retrospective at the Kitchen in New York City, Ron Vawter fell ill. Associate member Jeff Webster was included in the piece to relieve Vawter from some of his role's physically demanding tasks.
6. For a detailed account of the controversy between Arthur Miller and the Wooster Group, see Savran, "Attempting to Secure Performance Rights for *The Crucible*," *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking the Rules*, pp. 188-95.
7. In his essay "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," Philip Auslander examines only the earlier *Crucible* version of *Part Two* of the trilogy.

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Elizabeth LeCompte

The Road to Immortality: Part Two (. . . Just the High Points . . .)