

# THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

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

Reservations: 255-5793



## THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

One Norway Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

ARTS • LEISURE

### Videos from Wooster Group

By David Sterritt

New York

As an independent filmmaker, Ken Kobland has directed such memorable efforts as the deeply personal "The Communists Are Comfortable (and 3 Other Stories)" and the more abstract "Landscape and Desire."

He has also been associated with the Wooster Group theater company, meanwhile, contributing film segments to their mournful "Point Judith" and their explosive "Nayatt School," among other pieces.

That troupe has slated a major New York retrospective to run from this month through February, and to help launch it the Kitchen arts center is screening three of Kobland's videotapes daily (through Nov. 29) in its video viewing room. Each was made to be part of a Wooster Group mixed-media collage, yet each has artistic interest of its own.

The simplest and most touching is a tape that's usually seen on TV sets dangling from the ceiling in "Route 1 & 9," a bizarre but powerful Wooster essay on life, death, and racism. Interrupted by static views of urban landscapes, the performers give earnest speeches on homey

topics like marriage and farming, always seen in extreme closeup. Their voices are deliberately flat, yet the feelings they express are so urgent that their words become unexpectedly moving.

#### VIDEO

"Miami Man in Landscape," from the Wooster show called "... Just the High Points," again features urban vistas and people dislocated from a sense of normal environment, this time with a more formal and less emotional effect.

Also shown is "Flaubert Dreams of Travel But the Illness of His Mother Prevents It," made for a new Wooster piece due early next year. It depicts an assortment of arbitrary actions, some grisly in tone, sleepily performed by a weird crowd of people (and a pig) in what seems to be a mysterious motel room.

The deliriums of Flaubert's prose poem "The Temptation of Saint Antony" apparently inspired the dreamlike doings, which are long on atmosphere, short on logic and good taste.

Perhaps it will take on new meanings when seen as an integral part of "The Road to Immortality," the trilogy of new and revived works that's the main event in the Wooster retrospective.

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 1987

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

**ARTS • LEISURE**

## Wooster Group trilogy packs sizzling moments

By David Sterritt

New York

Once again, controversy is swirling around the Wooster Group, perhaps the most brilliant—and most ornery theater troupe on the current scene.

The flap has a familiar ring, since it focuses on a work first performed six years ago.

Its title is "Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)," and its alleged crime is to mimic a comedy routine originally done by black comedian Pigmeat Markham.

Some critics take offense at the blackface makeup worn by the Wooster actors, and at the verbal and visual crudeness of the routine itself.

At one point the group lost a major chunk of its state-supported funding on grounds that the show was racist in effect, if not intent.

A less feisty troupe might have dropped a theatrical hot potato like this as quickly as possible.

But the Wooster company thrives on au-

dacity and experimentation. This season director Elizabeth LeCompte has given "Route 1 & 9" fresh life by making it Part 1 of "The Road to Immortality," a newly designed trilogy now in progress here.

And the nay-sayers have revived their attack on the work, which also includes a mock-educational film on Thornton Wilder, a nightmarish party in a suburban house, and live phone calls to take-out food establishments.

I strongly disagree with the reviewers and bureaucrats who take "Route 1 & 9" to task.

I have watched the disputed blackface scene many times, in rehearsal and in full production, and it seems to me self-evident that the group is ridiculing and lamenting racial stereotypes, not exploiting or abusing them.

Such ludicrous racist images are their own worst enemy, in any case. Merely to exhibit them — especially in the context of a dense multimedia commentary on American attitudes and values — is to expose their self-destructive idiocy.

Looking beyond this to "Route 1 & 9" as a whole, it doesn't stand as one of the group's best works. Its energy flags at times, and some of its images are so murky that it's hard to make them out, much less make sense of them.

Yet director LeCompte is enormously gifted, and her troupe includes some of the most imaginative performers around, including longtime colleagues Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, and — fresh from the movie "Foolish Things" — Willem Dafoe.

There are moments when they make stage sizzle, especially when their bleak, sardonic view of American domesticity slides head-on with a Thornton Wilder play that's performed soap-opera-style on sets dangling from the ceiling.

"Route 1 & 9" recently opened "The Road to Immortality" at the Kitchen arts center. The trilogy enters its next phase today with "... Just the High Points ..." at the Performing Garage, through Feb. 8. It will conclude with a new work based on Flaubert's "Temptation of Saint Antony," codirected by LeCompte and Peter Sellars.

**THEATER**