

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE

FILM

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

Reservations: 255-5793

The New York Times

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 1986

GOING OUT Guide

LOOKING BACK

The primacy of New York in experimental theater is exemplified by such companies as the Wooster Group, one of that hardy group of iconoclastic units whose challenge of traditional concepts of drama began in the tumultuous 1960's. The Wooster Group may have been more hardy than most that burgeoned in those years because it is still around and is today starting a retrospective that will carry it into early next year.

This series opens at that other hotbed of experimentation, the Kitchen, at 512 West 19th Street (255-5793), with a revival of its "Road to Immortality — Part One (Route 1 & 9)." This first in a trilogy, assembled in the group's tradition, deals with contrasts between black and white people, between high and low art, between "reality" and theater. It employs four actors, choreography, videotape and the music of Charles Ives and rhythm and blues. It is directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, who, with Spalding Gray, established the Wooster Group in 1980 when it broke off from Richard Schechner's Performance Group, which was founded in 1967. The Wooster Group still works in the Performing Garage, in SoHo at 33 Wooster Street, near Grand Street.

When this production ends at the Kitchen on Dec. 6, the retrospective moves over, through March, to the Performing Garage, with, in order, "North Atlantic" and "The Road to Immortality — Part Two (... Just the High Points)," concluding with a premiere of the final part of "The Road" trilogy.

At the Kitchen, at 8 P.M. Mondays to Saturdays through Nov. 29, then at 7 P.M. same days through Dec. 6. Admission: \$12 (\$15, Fridays and Saturdays).

Weekend

The New York Times

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 1987

Cultural Collisions on 'Route 1 and 9'

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

IN "Route 1 and 9," the dramatic collage by the experimental theater collective the Wooster Group, blindfolded actors in blackface put up a tin house. Once the house is constructed, the gathering turns into a raucous party in which the cast re-enacts a scatological routine by the veteran comic Pigmeat Markham. As the party progresses, a very different sort of drama unfolds on video monitors. Ron Vawter, impersonating the author Clifton Fadiman, delivers a stuffy exegesis on the symbolism of Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town," scenes from which are portrayed soap-opera style, with the actors weeping glycerin tears. The piece culminates with two home movies, one of which portrays a journey away from New York City on the dilapidated New Jersey thoroughfare that gives the piece its title, the other an erotic film of indecipherable couplings.

"Route 1 and 9," which the Wooster Group created in 1981 and is being revived at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street) through Jan. 13, is the first part of "The Road to

Immortality," a retrospective trilogy by the seven-member collective that will continue into the spring at the Performing Garage, the ensemble's regular performing space in SoHo. The second part of the trilogy, "Just the High Points," featuring the group's dark, semi-documentary exploration of the 60's drug culture, paranoia and social persecution, will run from Jan. 22 to Feb. 1. It will be followed in March by the premiere of "Part Three," a collaboration between Elizabeth LeCompte, the Wooster Group's artistic director, and the experimental director Peter Sellars. The new work, initiated by Mr. Sellars, is based on Flaubert's "Temptation of St. Anthony."

The Wooster Group's retrospective comes at a moment when several in the company have begun gaining recognition outside the collective. Two of the group's longtime members, Spalding Gray and Willem Dafoe, have become national stars. Earlier this season, Mr. Gray performed his autobiographical monologues up-town at Lincoln Center, and he has also appeared in the movies "The Killing Fields" and "True Stories." Mr.

Dafoe has lent his Mephistophelean magnetism to several movies, most notably "Streets of Fire," "To Live and Die in L.A." and "Platoon." And Mr. Vawter has become an increasingly sought-after television actor.

With an artistic point of view that unflinchingly contemplates psychic disintegration, chaos and violence, the Wooster Group represents the darker vision of New York's theatrical avant-garde. Unlike Robert Wilson and Martha Clarke, who explore relativity, irrationality and evil in the context of beautiful eye-pleasing tableaux, the Wooster Group's theatrical collages present the violent inexplicable collision of cultures and artistic materials without prettification or overt moralizing, although the work resonates with a post-countercultural despair.

Because of its use of blackface and old-time black vaudeville, "Route 1 and 9," has itself been accused unfairly of racism. Performed with a frenzied, shocking energy, the work is an extreme juxtaposition of ideas of color, culture, community and ways of looking at death.

Ways to Tell a Story

"When I put together a piece, I take ideas either randomly or intuitively and don't impose a thematic structure," Ms. LeCompte said recently. "I've also always been interested in finding ways of telling a story theatrically that are unrelated to Stanislavsky-based acting. Having studied American comedy for years, I came across Pigmeat Markham in the late 70's and started collecting his records. Using only the records, we tried to re-create the routines as

closely as possible. I was interested in the way he improvised his routines on the spot. Out of that idea came the notion of the ensemble constructing the piece at the same time that they performed it.

"During the same period that we were working on the Pigmeat Markham routines," Ms. LeCompte continued, "we were doing readings from 'Our Town.' While working on the play, we got involved with teaching films from the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which we reproduced exactly. Initially I had no thought of putting Pigmeat Markham together with 'Our Town,' but they gradually came together in open rehearsals over many months. Slowly, the images and symbols began to reverberate."

Ms. LeCompte likened her technique to that of the collage sculptures made of rubbish created by the German Surrealist artist Kurt Schwitters. "He envisioned a total work of art, which would embrace all the arts in a single unit, but rather than a Wagnerian fusion, it was Dadaist," she said. "Most of it remained in the realm of theory." Some of the ingredients assembled in "Route 1 and 9" include music by Charles Ives, Shaker processional dances, and rhythm and blues.

The Wooster Group was founded by Ms. LeCompte and Mr. Gray in 1975 together with several members of Richard Schechner's Performance Group and in the last 11 years has produced eight major pieces. Out of experiments with structured improvisation, the group evolved its first piece, "Sakonnnet Point," an evocation of childhood that became the first part of the trilogy "Three Pieces in Rhode Island." Many of the Wooster Group's pieces interact with

well-known American plays. "Nayatt School" used a scene from T. S. Eliot's "Cocktail Party," and "Point Judith," the epilogue to the trilogy, quoted from Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

Arthur Miller Objects

The Wooster Group ran into trouble two years ago when the playwright Arthur Miller halted performances of "LSD," for unauthorized usage of excerpts from "The Crucible." "LSD," now known as "Just the High Points," is the second part of the current retrospective. Since the brouhaha, Mr. Miller's text has been replaced by an original play, "The Hearing," written by Michael Kirby, and a gibberish language. In constructing one scene in the piece, according to Ms. LeCompte, the performers took a collective LSD trip, videotaped the experience, watched it and reproduced as closely as possible every detail.

That kind of uncompromising rigor courts danger, and the Wooster Group has encountered more than its share of hostility and misunderstanding — from critics, authors, and the New York State Council on the Arts, which denied financing for "Route 1 and 9" after the charge of racism was raised.

"We've been critically treated very well in Washington, D.C., in Boston and all over Europe," Ms. LeCompte reflected. "It's funny to come home where we've been treated more equivocally. But I think we thrive on it in some way. I think it's important to do it in this atmosphere."

Performances of "Route 1 and 9" are Thursday through Sunday at 8 P.M. at the Kitchen. Shows are at 8 P.M. and tickets are \$15. Reservations: 255-5793.

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The New York Times

ARTS AND LEISURE

Sunday, January 11, 1987

Avant-Garde Stage: From Primal Dreams To Split Images

By ROGER COPELAND

What is most unique about the theater? What can happen there that can't happen at the movies, or in literature, or while standing before a painting or a work of sculpture? The answer — no matter who provides it — almost always has something to do with the fact that it's live, that it can put us in the presence of other living, breathing human beings. To be sure, the movies can cut instantaneously from Chicago to Rio, they can fill up the big screen with closeups of objects too tiny to register in a proscenium theater, or pan past vistas too vast to be contained on any stage. But they can't rival the face-to-face encounter of actor and audience that constitutes the theater's unique glory. That, at least, is the traditional argument.

Until recently, both the mainstream theater and the avant-garde agreed on this point. Indeed, during the late 60's and early 70's, vanguard companies such as the Living Theater, the Open Theater and the Performance Group demonstrated just how direct the actor-audience relationship can become: physical interaction between performers and spectators was a primary goal of the work. Nudity often functioned in this theater as a symbol of unmediated truth — a peeling away not just of clothing, but of all social traps and trappings.

Jerzy Grotowski, founder of the influential Polish Laboratory Theater, also stripped his work of technological elements — lighting, décor, pre-recorded sound — eliminating everything except the unmediated encounter of actor and spectator. Theater groups that incorporated microphones, film and video into their work were accused by Grotowski of "artistic kleptomania," a stealing from other media — which had the effect of obscuring

the theater's true source of power.

But much of the avant-garde of the 80's has moved in a very different direction. Some of the more striking differences between today's avant-garde and that of the late 60's and early 70's are vividly illustrated by two productions currently being performed in New York: the revival at La Mama of Andrei Serban's "Fragments of a Greek Trilogy" (originally presented in the early 70's) and the Wooster Group's "Route 1 and 9" currently at the Kitchen (to be followed later this season by two other installments of the company's trilogy, "The Road to Immortality").

The Wooster Group production is in keeping with work of the past few seasons by such fellow avant-garde groups as Mabou Mines and Squat, such directors as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, and performance artists like Laurie Anderson. All use a variety of technological media to mediate the relationship of performer and spectator.

Consider, for example, Mabou Mines's 1981 "Wrong Guys," a modernist meditation on hard-boiled detective fiction directed by Ruth Maleczech. This theater piece was originally performed in a tiny space within the Public Theater. Clearly, there was no need to amplify the actors' voices. Yet the performers wore microphones, producing an eerie disassociation of voice and body.

According to Lee Breuer, a founding member of Mabou Mines, "Traditionally, miking and amplification on the stage have just bounced up the volume of a performance that retained all the essential qualities of live performance. Our work incorporates a new esthetic — a media esthetic that draws on conventions created by television, film and radio."

Much the same can be said of Laurie Anderson's work. Her live monologues are often filtered through what she calls a Vocoder, an electronic device that transforms her light, flat, voice into a deep throaty rasp. This distortion creates an ambiguous form of presence that seems both spontaneous and pre-recorded.

Roger Copeland is co-editor of the anthology "What Is Dance?" and author of the forthcoming book "Cunningham's Legacy."

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 1987



The New York Times/Sara Krulwich

Images as well as sounds are mediated in recent experimental work. In Mabou Mines's 1983 "Hajj," Ruth Maleczek sits with her back to the audience facing a makeup table whose paneled mirrors have been replaced by video screens. Although the actress is no more than a few feet away from us, we see her most clearly — most intimately — on the closed-circuit video images that magically appear on her triptych of mirrors. Similarly, in Squat Theater's "Andy Warhol's Last Love" (1978), events that we know to be taking place on the street just outside the thea-

ter are made "present" to us through the mediation of video.

Squat Theater's most recent work, "Dreamland Burns," performed last year at the Kitchen, begins with a long film featuring performers who will later appear live. But even after the live actors make their entrances, much of the dialogue is still mediated. Filmed close-ups of the actors speaking, accompanied by sync sound, are projected on the blank faces of mannequins, creating a disquieting blend of stillness and motion.

John Jusurun's "Deep Sleep," which pre-

Members of The Wooster Group in "The Road to Immortality," the trilogy whose first part, "Routes 1 and 9" is currently being performed at the Kitchen.

miered last year at La Mama, set up an explicit tug of war between the mechanically precise and unchanging nature of film versus the perishable, spontaneous nature of live performance. Characters who appeared only on film conducted a ping-pong-style exchange of dialogue with characters who appeared live. By the end of the performance, the celluloid phantoms had persuaded all but one of the live characters to join them on the silver screen.

In contrast to this "mediated" approach, Mr. Serban has attempted to cut away all manner and mode of mediation — including that of translation and language itself — in his radically condensed versions of "Medea," "Electra," and "The Trojan Women" currently at La Mama. The plays are performed in an amalgam of ancient languages. As a result, sound dominates over sense; and often the sounds are of a distinctly preverbal sort (shrieks, cries, moans).

Mr. Serban wants us to experience emotions at their very source, before they become mediated by language. Furthermore, in much of the work, the audience is enveloped by the actors and the action. There is no architectural barrier — no mediation, in other words — between performer and spectator. In the excerpt from "The Trojan Women," the actors often forcefully herd the audience about, decreasing the distance between them and the performers who portray conquered, humiliated women of Troy.

Twentieth-century theater technology is virtually absent. Candles and torches provide much of the stark, shadowy, lighting. Striking visual images are achieved choreographically: dead bodies roll down slanted boards, twisting grotesquely, but beautifully, in extreme slow motion. Exiles from Troy board a ship represented with elegant simplicity by two wooden planks. Mr. Serban has chosen plays that often strike us as distant and unreachable — the Greek classics — but his strategy is to strip away the many layers of linguistic and historical mediation that can blind us to their power.

By contrast, the Wooster Group's "Route 1 and 9" is a radical reworking of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," a play that seems utterly familiar and accessible. But the group employs a variety of techniques that mediate

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Avante-Garde Stage

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and complicate our relation to the play. Scenes from "Our Town" are never performed live, but always over video monitors, often in juxtaposition with material that would raise more than a few eyebrows in Grover's Corners.

In one particularly complex section, the work juxtaposes varying degrees of mediation that alternate between live performance, telephone conversation and televised images. A scene from "Our Town" in which George courts Emily is performed on a series of video monitors. On stage, below the television screens, two actresses dial telephone calls to what sound like actual restaurants, claiming that they want to order fried chicken for a birthday party. We have no way of knowing whether these conversations are live or prerecorded; but the quality of the sound we hear is clearly mediated, as if we'd picked up another phone extension or tapped into the line.

The only unambiguously "live" activity is also — in a sense — mediated as well. Two white actors in blackface perform an outrageously lewd Pigmeat Markham routine in which every conceivable stereotype of black ghetto behavior is viciously parodied. Clearly, in this case, the live component of the performance brings us no closer to the "truth" than the technologically mediated sections. In fact, the most authentic (or least histrionic) performances are those of the restaurant employees whom we never see, but only hear over the phone lines.

"Route 1 and 9" opens with an utterly deadpan parody of a pedantic lecturer (on video tape) analyzing Thornton Wilder's play. His intention is to show us "how the play fits into the humanities in general." But the remainder of the performance serves to undermine what humanists have traditionally defined as the theater's *raison d'être*: the live, unmediated, relationship of actor and audience. And the group's most recent work, parts two and three of "The Road to Immortality," carry this project even further. But why would anyone want to do this?

According to Elizabeth LeCompte, artistic director of The Wooster Group, "I'm a child of the information age. I'm excited about the ex-

mendous amount of information coming in from various media and I want my work in the theater to reflect and make use of that data. The theater of realism is based on a much more hermetic view of the world which excludes these sources. I love and honor the old realist tradition, but I also subvert it."

On one level, these theater groups are simply acknowledging the fact that, like it or not, technological mediation has become an inescapable part of our lives. While much information was always obtained second-hand, today we rely to an unprecedented degree on television and other mass-communications media

Scenes from 'Our Town' are never performed live, but on video monitors.

to inform us of the great public events that shape our collective consciousness. And with a medium like television, we have no way of automatically distinguishing between a live event, a taped replay, and an outright simulation. The "instant replay" must be identified as such if we are to distinguish it from the televised original.

A number of recent performances are explicitly about technological mediation. Mabou Mines's 1980 "A Prelude to Death in Venice" is about a character (portrayed by a dummy for whom the actor Bill Raymond acts as ventriloquist) whose only contact with other human beings is over the telephone. Laurie Anderson's talk-song parable, "New York Social Life," is about life lived entirely on the telephone. And much of her work explores the unintentional irony in Ma Bell's insistent urging that we use the telephone to "reach out and touch someone." (Anderson is particularly fascinated by the ways in which communications technology, which purports to bring us closer together, actually increases our sense of social isolation.)

But ironically, there's no reason to believe that "being there" is always

preferable to the omniscient detachment provided by advanced technology. Certainly we've all had the experience of watching on television as a government official arrives in some distant land. And given the sophistication of video technology, it's not uncommon for the news anchor in New York or Washington to have a better view of who's getting off the plane than the poor "eyewitness" reporter there on the ground.

Indeed, many of the theater artists whose work uses microphones and other media are quick to point out that their goal is not mediation *per se*, but paradoxically, a greater sense of intimacy. In a high-fidelity world of woofers, tweeters and compact disks — where the average citizen is rapidly becoming an auditory connoisseur — the ultimate sense of "intimacy" is achieved while wearing a stereo headset.

Lee Breuer uses microphones to achieve what he calls "an intimacy unrealizable in real life... the auditory equivalent of a close-up in film." In Mabou Mines's recent adaptation of Beckett's "Worstward Ho," a long monologue performed by Frederick Neumann, the use of amplification created the eerie sense of being enveloped by the actor's voice. In Robert Wilson's "Golden Windows" (1985) and Richard Foreman's "Chore" (1986), the actors wore body mikes, allowing the director to musically orchestrate their voices into the sort of delicate sound mix Robert Altman creates in his films. Whether or not the practitioners of mediated theater are successful in achieving such intimacy, they are convinced that it is even more futile to assume that a few hours of "live" theater will somehow restore a healthy sense of "being there." In fact, they contend, we've already internalized the process of mediation. The unconditioned eye no longer exists. Thus one of the self-imposed tasks of the avant-garde theater is to unmask the process by which technological mediation shapes our most fundamental perceptual habits.

What is novel about this work isn't the technology *per se*. "Multi-media" after all, is a phrase that came into vogue in the 60's. But now the technology isn't being used to massage us into a hedonistic trance, but rather to make us aware of the way in which technological mediation comes between us and the directness of experience.