



# LIVE MOVIES

A Field Guide to New Media For the Performing Arts

edited by

Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White

Documenting Multimedia Performance Studio's New Stage Technology Project



# HISTORY / THEORY

In the simultaneous use of the living actor and the talking picture in the theatre lies a wholly new theatrical art, an art whose possibilities are as infinite as those of speech itself.

— Robert Edmond Jones (1929)



Photo: Ioulia Kousskova.

SAINTS and SINNERS



Resort

MOTEL



KIRBY MALONE

# ROUTES TO ROOTS

some of the widely ranging, rhizomic, dialectically branching sources and inspirations of contemporary multimedia scenography and performance, a lateral and looping subjective genealogy

Balinese shadow puppetry and Kabuki theater;  
 Pre-Socratic cosmology and Plato's Allegory of the Cave;  
 Medieval stained glass windows and Mystery plays;  
 totem poles, wampum belts and cave paintings;  
 the paintings of Bruegel and Bosch;  
 Giordano Bruno's Memory Theater;  
 Piranesi's architectural dreamscapes;  
 Renaissance frescoes and Jonsonian masques;  
 18<sup>th</sup> Century automata;  
 19<sup>th</sup> Century panoramas, tableaux and magicians;  
 the films of Georges Méliès;  
 Kleist on puppets, and Wagner on "the total art work";  
 Jonathan Swift, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka;  
 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*;  
 Mary W. Shelley and Christopher Marlowe;  
 the montage theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov;  
 the stylized Constructivist/Cubo-Futurist theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Vladimir Mayakovsky, and the "Fantastic Realism" of Evgeny Vakhtangov, in Russia in the 1920's;  
 the cinematic, episodic Epic Theater of Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, and Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus Theater, in Germany, also in the 1920's;  
 the Federal Theater Project's Living Newspaper in the 1930's;

Dada cabarets and Expressionist cinema;  
the theatrical experiments at Black Mountain College;  
the revolutionary theater of Asja Lacin;  
film noir and documentary film;

Robert Edmond Jones's *Dramatic Imagination* and *Towards a New Theatre*;  
Mordecai Gorelik's *New Theatres for Old* and Lee Simonson's *The Stage is Set*;  
Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* and Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*;  
histories of performance by Margaret Croyden, RoseLee Goldberg, Jonathan Kalb,  
E.T. Kirby, Bonnie Marranca, Theodore Shank and John Willett;

Josef Svoboda's ground-breaking multimedia scenography and his *Laterna Magika*;  
the surrealism of Jean Cocteau's films and Joseph Cornell's boxes;  
*Victory Over the Sun* (1913): Malevich, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov and Matiushin,  
and *Parade* (1917): Cocteau, Picasso, Satie and Massine;  
the epic murals of Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and  
the illuminated manuscripts of William Blake;

Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters and Jean Tinguely;  
drawings by George Grosz and photomontages by John Heartfield;  
the sculptural tableaux of Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz;

the scenic designs of Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, Caspar Neher,  
Traugott Müller, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko,  
Warwara Stepanova, and the Stenberg Brothers;

the paintings of George Tooker, Frida Kahlo, and Komar & Melamid;  
Magical Realists and Situationists:  
the satirical documentary theater of Karl Kraus;  
the film fantasies of George Pal and Ray Harryhausen;

filmmakers Craig Baldwin, Kathryn Bigelow, David Cronenberg,  
Maya Deren, Terry Gilliam, Jean-Luc Godard, Peter Greenaway, David Lynch,  
Chris Marker, Walter Murch, Yvonne Rainer, Zbigniew Rybczynski,  
Eliseo Subiela, Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Stan Vanderbeek, and Wong Kar Wai;

Pink Floyd and David Bowie;

Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground;

Afrika Bambaataa, Thomas Dolby, Michael Franti, Front Line Assembly, Nina Hagen,  
KMFDM, Kraftwerk, Klaus Nomi, The Residents, Todd Rundgren and Sun Ra;  
dub reggae and musique concrète;

Ernie Kovacs, Monty Python and Max Headroom;

Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* and Patrick McGoochan's *The Prisoner*;  
*The Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*;

composers Robert Ashley, Brian Eno, Heiner Goebbels and R. Murray Schafer;  
Fluxus and Happenings;

the stylized theaters of Pina Bausch, Caryl Churchill, Rainer Werner Fassbinder,  
Dario Fo and Franca Rame, Elfriede Jelinek, Tadeusz Kantor, Charles Ludlum,  
Ariane Mnouchkine, Yuri Lyubimov, Heiner Müller and José Rivera;

the filmic art-theater of Robert Whitman, Carolee Schneemann and Nam June Paik;

Jeffrey Shaw's projection design for the band Genesis in the 1970's;

Wendall Harrington's projection design for  
*The Who's TOMMY*, directed by Des McAnuff;

the neo-gothic stop-motion animation of  
Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay;

Robert Smithson's theory of future ruins;

the 1939 and 1964 New York World Fairs;

Disney animatronics and Vegas sensurround;

arena rock and trade shows;

'60's light shows and planetaria;

dystopic science fiction (Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Orwell's *1984*,  
Huxley's *Brave New World*, Karel Capek's *R.U.R.*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*  
and the writings of Philip K. Dick);

fiction by J.G. Ballard, John Brunner, William Burroughs, Octavia Butler, Don DeLillo,  
Daniel F. Galouye, Ursula K. LeGuin, Marge Piercy, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut;

the Cyberpunk novels of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan,  
John Shirley, Rudy Rucker, Kim Stanley Robinson, Lewis Shiner,  
Ian Watson, Robert Charles Wilson, Jack Womack, Justina Dobson,  
Neal Stephenson and Wilhelmina Baird;

the writings of cultural critics including Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag,  
Erik Barnouw, Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, Donna Haraway, Allucquère Rosanne Stone,  
Avital Ronell, Michel Foucault, Scott Bukatman, Julia Kristeva, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen,  
Lotte Eisner, Mark Dery, Peter Zweibel, Timothy Druckrey, Mark Crispin Miller, Lawrence Levine,  
Brenda Laurel, Lisa Gitelman, Paul Virilio, Victoria Nelson, David F. Noble,  
Greil Marcus, Peter Lunenfeld, Susan Buck-Morss, Siegfried Kracauer,  
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jean Baudrillard.







KIRBY MALONE

# LIVE MOVIES: A PERSONAL (FUTURE) HISTORY OF MULTIMEDIA PERFORMANCE

Dedicated to the theater ghosts of Mark Harp, E.T. Kirby and David Stubenrauch

## GROUNDWORK

The business of workers in the theatre is, as I see it,  
to express a timeless theme by means of the tools of one's own time.  
And we are not using the tools of our own time in the theatre.

— Robert Edmond Jones (1941/1952)

...A film is a matter of a few miles of celluloid in a tin box.

— Bertolt Brecht (c. 1930)

While other writers in this book document and discuss many contemporary new media artists in the performing arts, this essay is concerned primarily with historical precedents for the current wildfire of new technologies making their way onto the stage, and how these new technologies change methods of, and approaches to, performance and production.

New technologies come, and new technologies replicate, mutate, malfunction, evolve, devolve, obsolesce, and go. When they first arrive, we tend to fetishize them, a feverishly melancholy act. This fervor for the machines can blot out what really matters...meaning, content, narrative, story...

The panoply of computer graphics and animation, video, data, film and slide projection, digital sound design, amplification and sound processing, and computer-control of scenic elements represents just some of the new devices and processes which are at the disposal of designers, technicians and other theater artists in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the profoundly new kind of theater, opera, concerts and exhibitions which can be crafted with these innovative tools comes a whole range of challenges in how to use them, and especially in how to integrate them with live performers.

The singer-actor in new media theater today learns to deal with a wireless microphone, to treat sound design as another character, to talk and interact with projected characters, become a projected character and transform back again, to lip-synch and digitally ventriloquize. They are not acting like they're

in a play. They're not acting like they're on film. They're acting as one does in a *live movie*, interwoven, interspersed with phantoms of the same insubstantiality in which we dwell in the technospheric mediascape.

Not only actors have a different task before them in new media theater. So, too, do writers, directors, designers, composers, producers, stage managers and operators. Writers compose "sampling scripts" in "synthetic fragments." New media (or multimedia, or projection) design shows up in the scenographic process and no one's really sure what to do, or what to do with it.

Multimedia designers are essentially filmmakers. The good ones are skilled not only in creating on multiple two-dimensional picture planes, but also in three dimensions, and in four, through time. Some set and lighting designers are skeptical, even territorial, toward this (once again) new force in the theater; some resist, some try to do it themselves. But it's a different medium and discipline than most are trained or adept in, so over the past ten years a growing number of artists now train (often themselves) to focus solely on multimedia design.

It is important to de-mystify so-called "new media," with the realization that they simply are tools, and will soon be assimilated by theater's production apparatus as were nautical rigging, electrical lighting, servo-mechanisms, film and slide projection, and sound sampling and amplification. Projections are simply another kind of light, and the set and the costumes form the screens. This interdependence necessarily leads to a unified, dialectical approach to scenography, and to the fabled *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total artwork, total theater.

Multimedia design, in American regional theater, experimental groups and grassroots companies, university-based theater, and even on Broadway, finds itself in much the same position that sound design was ten or fifteen years ago, struggling to unfold as a new, dynamic facet of the production apparatus. Today most directors and production managers don't ask *whether* a show needs sound design, but *what* will the sound design be? Ten or twenty years from now, multimedia design (with all the "new media" we can't imagine yet) will inhabit an integral place in the design spectrum. In the meantime, it's amusing and instructive to witness, and participate in, the growing pains, and the turf wars, and the experimentation and adaptation, and yet another new dawn of technologically-enhanced social and artistic change.

## LIVE MOVIES

The epic style...made use of dramatic devices which had already been discovered, but whenever possible added technical innovations from the world of industry...we used film projections as a kind of classical chorus. Furthermore, the film was not just used instead of a painted back-drop, but in order to create a dynamic, moving world for the action on the stage.

— Erwin Piscator (1934)

As a multimedia designer and director, I work to integrate new technologies into live theater, opera and performance. I write, design, and direct "live movies" that

synthesize theatrical, musical and cinematic elements. I also stage ideas from non-fiction sources that I think have important things to say, but which I am aware most people will never read.

My life in performance began in the urban collectives I co-founded in Baltimore—CoAccident, Impossible Theater (where we first used the term *live movie* in 1985), Impossible Industrial Action, Desire Productions. From these Baltimore companies, I expanded my work into collaborations with opera companies, regional theaters, and theater ensembles across the country, working first as a projection designer (creating systems of up to 18 computer-synchronized slide projectors), and more recently as a multimedia designer, employing show control systems, multiple video projections and digital sound. I learned this succession of technologies in the trial-and-error heat of production, and in concerted research sessions when they have been possible.

Today I work in two ongoing collaborative ensembles (which I co-founded with multimedia designer Gail Scott White in the Virginia suburbs west of Washington DC), Multimedia Performance Studio and Cyburbia Productions, creating commissioned designs and original productions. These collaborative productions feature multiple projected imagery as characters, settings, environments, dreamscapes, language, and other scenographic elements. They interweave cinematic and televisual technologies, techniques, and narrative devices (such as flashback, slo-mo, rewind, lip-synch and simultaneous action). Live performers interact with, become, and transform from, pre-recorded and “live” projected characters. In order to accomplish this symbiosis, the company of collaborating artists often operates simultaneously as a performance ensemble, a film and animation production house, a digital garage band and a stagecraft laboratory, all geared toward producing dynamic and critical multimedia performance spectacles.

The concept of a new stage form, a “live movie,” is based on the premise that theater, performance art, opera, music theater, concerts, dance, puppetry and other forms of live art should reflect the society for, and in, which they are created. As photography challenged many of the traditional functions of painting and printmaking, so film and television have done with theater and live performance.

New media operate like viruses in the theater, where they can change everything or wither in trivialization. They operate like a virus, an ambivalent one, like language, or the flickering image. Much new media theater employs new technologies, turning them in on themselves, to cast light on the ways they shape and re-configure our world. It is an experiment with new and traditional stage machines, developing imaginative approaches to the integration of these technologies with the live action and music of theater. While they may revel in the powerful beauty and narrative liberation which projections and cinematic techniques can bring

to theater, many artists resolve to learn new media and technologies, in part, so that they might use the machines to critique the machines. The result is a hybrid approach, part Luddite, part technophile.

If we stomp onto the stage, daubed in mud, and dance wildly with torches, chanting, “We hate computers! We hate computers!” who will believe us, or care? No one. But if we create sophisticated mosaics of new media and live performance, with the same tools used to sell and promote surveillance systems and SUV’s and predator drones and toothpaste and JawPhones and depleted uranium, then perhaps our critique achieves “credibility.” Textually or sub-textually we can encourage a collective investigation of humans and their machines, or even better, their *technics* (a great, fading, Lewis Mumford word which I take to mean not just the machines, but the systems we use to interact with them, and how we are attached to them). Is theater to be a palliative, a narcotic, a “time-killer”? Or, if not a call to action, at least a call to contemplation, research, analysis, imagining?

The “new media” entering the performing arts too often are greeted as something out of nowhere, a cool new thing to toss into the mix. But the hidden history of montage and projections and stylized performance and the incorporation of new technologies into the stage apparatus goes back (at least) about a hundred years, to collaborative experiments which arose in Russia and in Germany, and spread later to the United States in the Federal Theatre Project. The onslaught of WWII came down like a guillotine on these artistic experiments, and most of the artists and scholars in question found themselves exiled, imprisoned, tortured, executed, blacklisted or otherwise silenced. We emerged into the 1950’s with a limited (and limiting) mix of abstraction and realism that became the dominant aesthetics of the past half century.

## LOST GHOSTS

All my life I have been opposed to realism in the theatre.

— Robert Edmond Jones (1952)

The 1920s and ’30s, another time when “new media” showed up on the stage, gave rise to the Constructivist Theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the Fantastic Realism of Evgeny Vakhtangov, the Epic Theater of Erwin Piscator, the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspaper, and others who employed new technologies to cast light on social issues. They immersed themselves in searches for new ways to structure a show, and in how to perform it. These explorations led them to episodic construction (montage), and to new performance styles (stylization), ranging from over-the-top satire to radical juxtaposition to restrained “alienation.” They also rejected “realistic” scenic designs, and drew instead on new spatial and compositional ideas from the Dadaists, Cubo-Futurists and Expressionists.

We can graft decorative backdrops onto conventional productions, or, following the examples of our theatrical ancestors, we can use the introduction of new media into theater and performance to re-think and re-shape the entire way we compose and make productions, creating new narratives for times which oscillate between stupor and uproar.

The theater which grew to dominance (at least in the American arena) following WWII embraced and elaborated a psychological and scenographic realism, and the multimedia explorations between WWI and WWII drifted into hidden histories, inhabited by lost ghosts. But to try to foresee the “theater of the future,” we can look back to what Lawrence Levine calls “the unpredictable past.”

Rather than living at a time when we are making a wholly new theater, what we’re doing has its historical predecessors, whom we might consult, and from whom we doubtlessly have a lot to learn. We can talk with the dead. Or, at least, listen to them.

## FOUR POETS OF APOCALYPSE

Away with the author! Theatre shouldn't be written in the study, but built on the stage.

— Ilya Ehrenburg (1922)

As a poet (before I became a director and designer), I learned that early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were four poets in Europe who turned to the theater for something more — Antonin Artaud and Jean Cocteau in France, Bertolt Brecht in Germany, and Vladimir Mayakovsky in Russia. When poets turn to the theater it can mean that words are not enough, that perhaps these poets might even have grown to mistrust language. (The 20<sup>th</sup> century had a way of leading many writers to this conclusion.) In addition to gravitating toward theater, Artaud, Brecht, Cocteau and Mayakovsky also responded to the explosion of the moving image on the cultural radar screen — each of them even delved into film, “on the side,” with the exception of Cocteau, who plunged into the medium, taking Surrealism with him.

With Balinese inspiration, Artaud theorized some basic tenets of a theater of the future, in which narrative and (often multiple) focus move seamlessly among, through and from actor/singer/dancers, puppets, music and musicians, lighting, sculptural settings and objects, and, today we should include projections and sound design (these latter two diversely capable of serving as a kind of “Greek chorus”). It’s ironic that a theater theory envisioned by a poet should prove so central later in the Theater of Images, Environmental Theater, and many other avant-garde tributaries in which text and language took their place *beside* other elements of production, rather than *above* them.

This set the stage, so to speak, for a re-examination of the dominance of the “page-to-stage” approach to production which still forms the status quo of much theater today, coupled with a “simulated behavior” method of character portrayal (a method alien to the actor in Surrealist or Epic theater). In contrast to the psycho(logical) realist norm of conventional theater, poetic distillation and epic portrayal free the actor from the misconceived imperative to simulate “real world” behavior.

These theater poets, and their embroilment in the Surrealist, the German Expressionist and Epic, and the Russian Cubo-Futurist and Constructivist movements, encouraged me to seek and help create collaborative structures in which I might transform the solitary act of writing into the collective social experiment of making theater and live performance. They also inspired me to try to contribute to theater that is both cultural criticism and artistic criticism, hybrid collaboration, a utopian model in a dystopic world. Mayakovsky led me to Meyerhold, and Brecht, to Piscator.

## MYSTERY PLAY TO HISTORY PLAY

As the earliest influences on my theatrical and design philosophies were the works created in Russia and Germany in the 1920s, by artists such as Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Piscator and Brecht, I asked myself what led them to incorporate film and slide projections, moving scenery, loudspeakers, motorcycles and pyrotechnics into their stylized productions; I came to the conclusion that a central motivation for this approach was to assert and demonstrate that theater is a vital, contemporary force in the lives of the citizenry, and not a medium out of synch with its time.

Meyerhold and Piscator shared much in common: they rejected realism and saw theater as a force for social change; they worked with the best visual artists (painters and sculptors and photomontagists) of their day as designers; they possessed strong visions of what theater should (and could) be, but also established and encouraged dramaturgical and scenographic collectives, and explored collaborative writing projects; they explored new technologies and narrative forms appropriate to and arising from (and sometimes ahead of) their time.

Along with intensive research in contemporary technologies, these directors also embodied new and experimental conceptions of how theater is made and structured and presented. They drew on Commedia, Mystery Plays, Chinese and Japanese theater, music halls and boxing rings, as well as cinema, journalism and the circus, to create stylized, often satirical, stagings and portrayals, seeking a performance style that only could exist and flourish in the presence of a live audience. This new “epic” approach asked more of

the audience's imaginations and critical abilities, and was geared to depict not isolated inter-personal conflicts, but the rips and tears in history's social fabric.

We are ever in danger of losing sight of those in history who are of little use to the dominant culture. In our case, that culture has a vested interest in cultivating and maintaining the consumer (not the citizen) who is plugged in, overwhelmed, and feels relatively powerless to affect history, or even daily life.

## STYLIZED

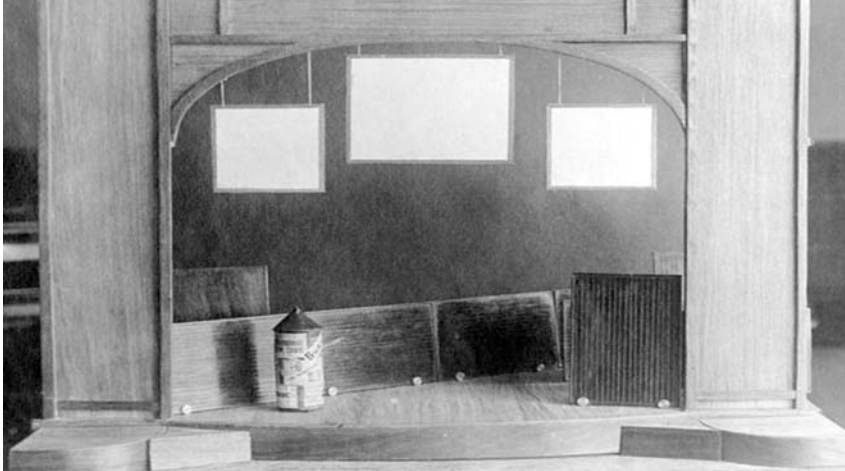
Now, I have seen a few things in my time... But not a single one can ever compare with the impressions made on me those three days of [Meyerhold's 1922] rehearsal for *The Doll's House* in that hall on Novinsky Boulevard. I remember shaking all the time. It wasn't the cold, it was excitement, it was nerves stretched to the limit...

— Sergei Eisenstein (c. 1940)

Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) was the Russian pioneer of a stylized "theater of the grotesque," of the "theater theatrical," in response to the Naturalism and Realism which dominated early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian theater. In 1905, he broke away from Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, and struck out on a theatrical journey, through Symbolism and Expressionism, to become closely allied with the poets and the painters of the Russian Cubo-Futurists, and the artists of Constructivism.

There was a time, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when realism was revolutionary, and Meyerhold's time was not it. Over thirty-five years, Meyerhold led many theater lives: from 1905 (when he broke with Stanislavski) until the Revolution of 1917, he maintained a dual identity, directing plays and opera for the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, while working, often on the sly, in studios and lofts, on experimental productions with students, artists and more adventurous souls from the theater. He cultivated satire, in which the volume was turned up, and social insanities were made literal, so that they might be examined, critiqued and, perhaps in time, dispelled.

Following the Revolution he intensified his collaborations with artist-designers, was assisted by Sergei Eisenstein (who was on his way to invent montage in film), and created the first works of Constructivist theater, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and *Tarelkin's Death*, with the artists Liubov Popova and Warwara Stepanova, respectively, in 1922. This was a theater of ramps, chutes, slides, staircases, wagon stages, windmills, exploding chairs and moving walls. Soon he would import projections, loudspeakers and motorcycles into the theater. He directed Mayakovsky's last two plays, the sci-fi satires *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House* (the latter designed by the sculptor / photomontagist Alexander Rodchenko), in the last year before the poet's suicide in 1930.



The D.E.Trust — *The History of the Fall of Europe* by Ilya Ehrenburg, directed and designed by Vsevolod Meyerhold: set model with moving walls and projection screens, 1924.

Meyerhold tore down the show curtain, revealed the back wall of the theater, and shattered the barrier between the stage and the spectator. Like Brecht and Piscator, he formulated a “presentational” (rather than “representational”) style of theater. For Meyerhold, theater was a *social art*, in both the bond with an audience, and in the collaborative production process it takes to make it. He changed the way classical opera was staged, and proposed a musical approach to the stage rhythm of plays; he rejected realism in its many guises, denied the possibility or desirability of any kind of “naturalism,” and espoused an episodic method of structuring dramatic material.

Ultimately, the stylistic method presupposes a fourth creator in addition to the author, the director and the actor — namely, the spectator. The stylized theatre produces a play in such a way that the spectator is compelled to employ his imagination creatively in order to fill in those details suggested by the stage action.

—Vsevolod Meyerhold (1907)

But his most valuable contribution to new theater with new media was his creation of a theoretical and practical approach to performance, to *stylization*, developing a flexible method that found its way in the rehearsal and production process, through his actor-training system, *biomechanics*. When he called his work a “Theatre of the Grotesque,” he didn’t mean the word in any kind of gruesome, gory, eyeball-popping-out sort of way; he meant a heightened, sometimes poetic, sometimes satirical, sometimes gymnastic approach that the actor takes to his or her material.

His closest compatriot in developing this kind of theater was Evgeny Vakhtangov, who, like Meyerhold, also left Stanislavski to discover and create his own work, which he came to call “Fantastic Realism.” In some ways, Vakhtangov surpassed Meyerhold (sometimes criticized as too much of a “puppeteer” with his actors) in the performance style he crafted, synthesizing Meyerhold’s



physicality, rhythm and visual composition with Stanislavski's insistence on the actor's personal connection with material. In Vakhtangov's Fantastic Realism, in productions such as Maeterlinck's *The Miracle of St. Anthony*, Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, An-sky's *The Dybbuk* and Gozzi's *Princess Turandot*, the actor knew why he or she moved erratically, or glided at an angle in a sculpted grouping, made his or her face into a mask, or wore costumes painted with shadows, because the director worked dialectically with the actor to create the stylization. He died "prematurely" in 1922, at the age of thirty-nine, just after the opening of *Turandot*. Meyerhold helped Vakhtangov's company survive after the death of their director.

Without Meyerhold, there probably would not have been a Vakhtangov as we (can) know him; the former's split with Stanislavski surely inspired the latter to do the same. Meyerhold and Vaktangov, along with their contemporaries, Tairov, Okhlopov, Evreinov, and Asja Lacic, transformed Russian theater, before many were hounded and crushed by Stalin's thought police. Meyerhold's wife, actress Zinaida Raikh, was murdered in their flat in 1939, and Meyerhold was arrested, interrogated, tortured and executed in 1940. He was erased from Soviet history until the '50s, and his "rehabilitation," when he was airbrushed back into the archive (with the latest photographic "new media," no doubt).

## EPIC PROJECTIONS

A complete revolution took place in stage design. By a free manipulation of Piscator's principles it became possible to design a setting that was both instructive and beautiful... The playwright could work out his experiments in uninterrupted collaboration with actor and stage designer; he could influence and be influenced... The integrated work of art (or 'Gesamtkunstwerk') appeared before the spectator as a bundle of elements.

— Bertolt Brecht (1939)

The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama and whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera — this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, bears most indelibly the traces of its sacral origins, has increasingly lost its significance.

The stage is still elevated. But it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth: it has become a public platform. Epic theater sets out to occupy this platform.

— Walter Benjamin (1939)

Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) was among the generation of Germans who came out of WWI feeling more solidarity with the Russian soldiers they'd fought against, than with the German business classes who had sent them to war in the first place. Piscator was associated with the Dada and Expressionist movements; in the 1920's, in collaboration with artists George Grosz, John Heartfield and László Moholy-Nagy, designer Traugott Müller, architect Walter Gropius, composers Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill, and the writers Leo Lania, Felix Gasbarra and Bertolt Brecht, he developed Epic Theater.

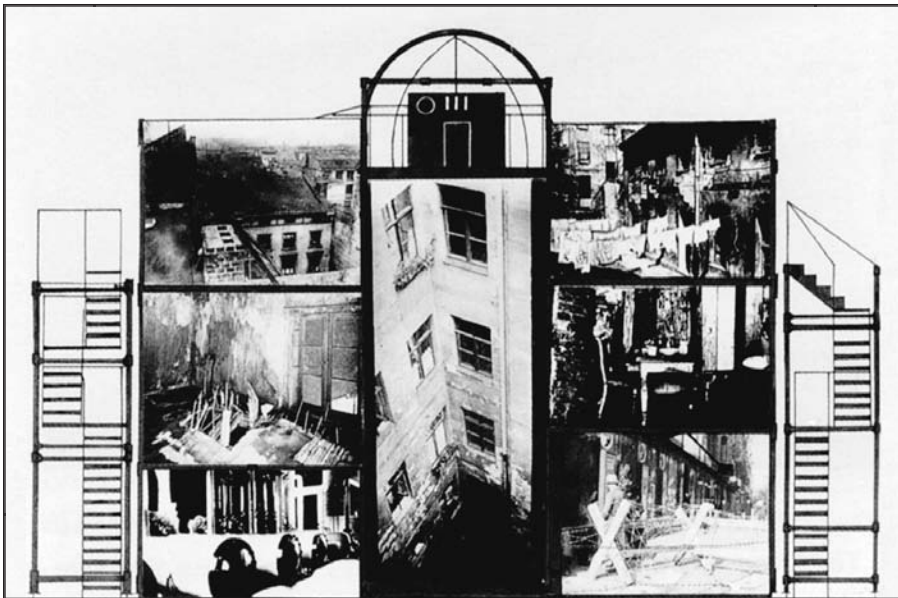
Piscator was the most radical, politically and artistically, of the other principal directors and designers discussed here. He used the tools of the Industrial Revolution to critique and oppose the injustices visited on the majority of society by the mercantile factory system, the growing “cities of strangers,” the alienation made inevitable in citizens bound up in the slow transformation from old-style imperialism to new-fangled “free market” global capitalism. Piscator’s generation of political artists imagined a social revolution in Germany to rival the Russians’.

Piscator pioneered documentary theater. He devised multi-level staging, and took advantage of improvements in stage lighting and mechanics. He introduced loudspeakers, film and slide projections, and industrially kinetic sets. Like Meyerhold he employed episodic narrative structure and montage methods of collective scriptwriting.

Epic theatre signified a performance free from the restrictions of realistic conventions, especially those of the tightly-knit well-made play...Piscator became well-known for his advocacy and use of any mechanical device that might help him. Unlike Victorian stage machinery, Piscator’s was used consciously to reflect a modern scientific society. From the beginning, it was the film used as an independent narrative device which enabled him to replace the lifeless scenery of the realistic stage, and he often projected more than one image simultaneously.

— J.L. Styan (1981)

As examples of the prodigious (almost stupendous) rate of production that Piscator generated in the 1920s, in one remarkable six month period (spanning 1927 and ’28), with his dramaturgical collective (Lania, Gasbarra, Brecht) and production company, he created three exemplary works in the history of proto-“new media” theater. The first was the pacifist Ernst Toller’s *Hoppla, We Live!*, staged on Müller’s revolving three-level set, with 3000 feet of film projected onto four screens.



*Hoppla, We Live!* by Ernst Toller, directed by Erwin Piscator, designed by Traugott Müller, multi-level set model with projection screens, 1927.

Next, barely two months later, came *Rasputin, the Romanoffs, the War and the People That Rose Against Them*, by Alexei Tolstoy and P. Shchegolev, this time with 6000 feet of film projected onto Müller's revolving hemispherical, multi-level set, framed by documentary screens.

And finally, three months later, the picaresque anti-war epic, *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik*, adapted from Jaroslav Hasek's comic novel by Max Brod and Hans Reimann; this production featured conveyor belts, or treadmills, to convey action and character movement, and George Grosz's life-size cut-out marionettes and satirical cartoons.

It is now possible to have a still, then a moving film and then a still again. Thus film can be used to support, or to take further, or even to run ahead of the action, or it can be used as reportage; or quite simply as living film scenery (photomontage)—to portray for instance the sea, a factory or a street. Or as George Grosz used it in my production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, with his excellent, grotesque animation film...

— Erwin Piscator (1933)

The scripts for each of these productions were re-fashioned and adapted by the dramaturgical collective. *Schweik* especially would prove to be a formative influence on Brecht, who soon left Piscator's company, and embarked on his radical re-envisioning of music theater with Weill, Lotte Lenya, Caspar Neher, Helene Weigel and Elisabeth Hauptmann, who headed Brecht's own dramaturgical collective.

As was the case with many progressive, leftist artists (and students and professors and writers), with the crumbling of Weimar Germany, Piscator went into exile, spent much of the '30s in Russia and France, and then emigrated to the United States. In 1940, he founded the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York City, whose students, bizarrely enough, included Harry Belafonte, Walter Matthau, Rod Steiger, Marlon Brando, Elaine Stritch, Sam Jaffe, Tony Curtis, Eli Wallach, Tennessee Williams, Judith Malina, and James Dean.

The 1950s found Piscator back in Germany, where he contributed to a sort of neo-Epic, documentary theater revival, directing Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* and Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*. He also staged an adaptation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* which featured armies of toy soldiers and a ghostly stage lit from below.

For us, man portrayed on the stage is significant as a social function. It is not his relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central. Whenever he appears, his class or social stratum appears with him. His moral, spiritual or sexual conflicts are conflicts with society.

— Erwin Piscator (1929)

To witness theater that depicts the harrowing tribulations one individual visits on another (or others) might inform us of the sorrows in our vale of tears, but does little to illuminate the social causes and conditions which form and feed those tribulations. The artists of Epic Theater wanted to change all that, to speak truth to power in a sense, by presenting characters in the throes of the social forces which shape and destroy their dreams. Rather than settling dilemmas with a cathartic resolution, these artists left the contradictions and tensions and conflicts unresolved so that they might continue in constructive reflection and analysis, unspooling in the mind of each theatergoer, on his or her way out into the street, and a future for them to envision and construct.

## MULTIMEDIA AMERICANA

[In a 1930s Living Newspaper] the scenic action was a mixture of different theatrical strategies... projected films, maps, and statistics... Satire, puppetry, visual projection, shadow-graphic acting, crowd scenes, and a fluid style of space-staging, in which characters were isolated by precise lighting plots, were all brought together within a single production.

— Stuart Cosgrove (1989)

Between the World Wars, American theater artists — among them Hallie Flanagan, Elmer Rice, Robert Edmond Jones, Mordecai Gorelik, Lee Simonson, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Joseph Losey — gravitated toward European (particularly German and Russian) theater. The momentum away from Realism and Naturalism, through Expressionism, resulted in a steely flowering of Constructivist and Epic theaters, harnessing (and experimenting with) the “new media” of their time, to create multimedia productions, sometimes documentary, sometimes satirical, and almost always stylized.

In response to the effects of the Depression on performing artists, Hallie Flanagan was recruited by Harry Hopkins to form the Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939), which put artists to work in a way not seen before or since, and emphasized the importance of live theater across the American cultural landscape. (The FTP was therefore, of course, a predecessor of the National Endowment for the Arts.) The FTP created and produced many kinds of theater — Marc Blitzstein’s folk opera, *The Cradle Will Rock* (richly documented, along with the FTP itself, in Tim Robbins’ film, *Cradle Will Rock*); Orson Welles and John Houseman’s “voodoo *Macbeth*” with the New York City Negro Unit of the FTP; Paul Green’s outdoor pageant, *The Lost Colony*; and simultaneous performances around the country (22 productions in 18 cities) of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, which speculated a hypothetical fascist takeover of the United States.

Among the FTP’s many programs, the one which embodied, and responded most to, European theatrical advances was the Living Newspaper.

Flanagan, playwright (and one of the few American Expressionists) Elmer Rice, and Morris Watson (co-founder of the Newspaper Guild) conceived the Living Newspaper, and turned to directors Joseph Losey and Arthur Arent to bring it to life. In their work, many of the new ideas in, and revolutionary approaches to, multimedia, documentary Epic and Constructivist theater first appeared on American stages.

Projections, masks, spotlights, loudspeakers, ramps, and characters in the audience were some of the devices used [in the Living Newspaper's *Triple-A Plowed Under*, directed by Joseph Losey and H. Gordon Graham, NYC, 1936]...The projections, still a new theatrical concept in America, could include dates, statistics, charts, maps and headlines, or they could be more visual: photographs, animated cartoons, and short film sequences...

— John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (1978)

In common with Piscator and Brecht, the Living Newspaper concerned itself with social forces rather than individual psychologies. Like Meyerhold, Losey and Arent conceived stylized performance in kinetic groupings who played on ramps, multi-level stages, and in the house among the audience. They created stage montages which investigated and depicted a panorama of characters in works such as *Triple-A Plowed Under* (on the economic crisis in farming), *One-Third of a Nation* (on the need for adequate housing), and *Injunction Granted* (on labor unions).

To frame and augment and dialectically complement their “American Epic” style of acting, the artists of the Living Newspaper plunged into the same technological experiments and discoveries that Piscator had pioneered a decade earlier. Living Newspapers featured multiple film and slide projections, amplified music and disembodied announcers, shadowplay, kinetic sets, and anything else they could concoct that would further their mission to engage timely ideas and issues with the newest artistic technologies of their time.

Of course it was too good to last. The Federal Theatre Project was brought to an abrupt end in 1939, in part in response to the Living Newspaper's scripts collaging excerpts from actual Congressional transcripts, but more generally as a punitive measure against a mass coalition of artists suspected as a hotbed of progressive thoughts and leftist leanings. Thus the Living Newspaper, like its European counterparts, came to a conclusion in the darkening political times heading toward WWII. Once the smoke cleared from that war, American theater emerged a different animal, and for the most part, it remained for future generations to (re-)discover the lineage of the Living Newspaper, and the European artists it had drawn upon.

## THEATER OF THE FUTURE?

Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954) was one of the leading American designers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He was among the designers who *wrote* — his own *Dramatic Imagination* (1941), Mordecai Gorelik's *New Theatres for Old* (1940) and Lee Simonson's *The Stage is Set* (1932) — thus providing us with a spectrum of glimpses into just what American designers were thinking between the World Wars, and how they incorporated (consciously and not) the influence of the theater revolutions occurring in Europe.

Jones was known for his theory of *cohesiveness* of design; he created artful, poetic, evocative, often breathtaking designs for Shakespeare and O'Neill. He worked with the Washington Square Players, the Greenwich Village Theatre, and the Provincetown Players (a laboratory for new and experimental, usually “non-commercial” dramas). His designs could be grand and spare at the same time, and often featured daring experiments with color and stylized lighting, influenced by Symbolist, Expressionist and Epic theater.

During the last twenty-five years of his life (until his death in 1954), in response to the growing importance of photography and cinema on the cultural and artistic landscape, he returned from time to time to an artistic/philosophical preoccupation, a speculation on a “Theatre of the Future.”

The drama of the future will deal, not with objective experience or subjective experience, but with both varieties of experience at the same time, expressing our essential duality in a new theatrical idiom, involving the simultaneous use of the stage and the screen.

— Robert Edmond Jones (1943)

Why care about a “Theater of the Future”? To help it get there? To be there when it arrives? What led this lauded designer, used to working in “real world” materials and theatrical lighting, to focus on a kind of theater he did not even attempt to make himself, but could see on the horizon as one of the fruitful directions in which production and performance might move? Jones wrote of this concept in 1929, and again in 1943.

And then, in 1952 he delivered a series of lectures at Harvard, *Towards a New Theatre* (now available in book form, edited by Delbert Unruh), one of which was “The Theatre of the Future.” In these lectures, Jones crystallized his thinking on a new form of live theatre featuring cinema as a central component. In this, he was an American theatrical prophet of “new media theater,” perhaps half a century before his time.

A theater of the future? Not just one which grafts on new machines and technologies, but brings along with it a new way of creating productions, cognizant of the possibilities that unfold from a stylized, montage-based approach to composition and production.

## SCENOGRAPHY

A dynamic, multi-layered notion of *convergence* can be found in the work and theories of the Czech designer Josef Svoboda (1920-2002), perhaps the original “scenographer,” and maker of “total theater,” who, much like Jones, espoused a unified approach to design. No doubt one of the reasons for this was Svoboda’s desire to blend and synchronize live and mediated performers, and “real” and projected, multi-planar settings. (These explorations are well documented in Svoboda’s *The Secret of Theatrical Space* and Jarka Burian’s *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda*, both indispensable titles in the library of any multimedia designer, or anyone headed for the crossroads of theater and film.)

Svoboda (along with a few others — Yuri Lyubimov, Tadeusz Kantor, Heiner Müller, Ariane Mnouchkine) provided us with a living link, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to the pre-WWII art-theatrical avant-gardes. In his work — in opera, theater, exhibition/exposition design, and in the *Laterna Magika* — some of the myriad ways projections and new media might contribute to new stage forms come to light.

For Expo ’58 in Brussels, with director Alfred Radok, Svoboda introduced the *Laterna Magika*, which combined live and filmed actors and settings, and, with the multiple-screened *Polyrekan*, he set a new standard for multimedia exhibits in world fairs and expositions. He also enjoyed an illustrious career designing more than seven-hundred productions in more traditional theatrical contexts. Trained as a cabinet-maker, and in architecture, his theatrical design career more or less began in the wake of WWII, at the Theatre of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, in Prague, and soon thereafter at the National Theatre, where he was head of design for almost fifty years. He also designed Goethe’s *Faust* with Giorgio Strehler at Milan’s Piccolo Theatre, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* with Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic, and opera sets for (fellow Czech) Milos Forman’s film, *Amadeus*.

Svoboda’s legacy is multi-fold: he elaborated, in practice, a theory of scenography which called upon theatrical artists to engage in heightened collaboration; he envisioned design as *revealing itself* as a production unfolds; he projected large, custom-made transparencies and closed-circuit video onto actors, mirrors, floors, staircases, scrims, fog and string; and he emphasized the importance of technical and historical research and experimentation in the pursuit of artistic breakthroughs. Like Meyerhold and Piscator, he dreamed of a theater designed specifically for new multimedia technologies, and his plans, too, were never realized.

## MONTAGE: CHANGING BRAINS

[Piscator and Brecht’s] Epic Theatre embraced certain elements...the principle of montage, which became the great new structural device of the 1920s; [and] the use of new technologies like photography and sound recording...

— John Willett (1988)

The brain has changed. Eisenstein changed it all, when, in the 1920's, he broke up the static frame of film (into which characters mostly had thus far walked), into a linear mosaic, an image language, *montage*, that perpetually unfolds in cinema time, a language that forms itself in the brain as the viewer watches. Every jump cut, close-up, long fade, and succession of images that creates a visual narrative, owes its existence, at least in part, to the work of Eisenstein. And Eisenstein studied with Meyerhold, from whom, many have suggested, he borrowed the episodic montage method from their stylized work in the theater.

We don't really know (let alone understand) what images flashing before our eyes at 24 or 30 frames per second might do to, and in, our brains. After almost a century of the flickering wraparound depictions in which we are increasingly immersed, we live in Guy Debord's society of the spectacle, among Jean Baudrillard's simulations, more real than what they simulate.

Recently I ventured to enlist the collaboration of a talented student digital artist for a production. His first response was, "You mean a play? I don't like plays. All they do is talk, talk, talk...I need something to *look at!*"

Young audiences today might easily focus on five things at once, but may have trouble engaging a single phenomenon in depth for an extended period of time. They seem to have no interest in pondering a stage outfitted to stand in for a kitchen or a living room, where they are expected to sit as voyeurs to re-enacted psychological terror. We drift and stagger into becoming a society peopled by children whose attention spans have been zapped by the rapid-fire military-entertainment complex, and whose adults have begun to find the drudgery of daily consumerist existence too depressing for anti-depressants.

We can bemoan the collective attention span deficit that our technosphere has engendered in a new generation of theatergoers, but if there is to be a "theater of the future," they will form the core of its audience. This transformation of multimedia sensibilities leads to a new kind of work for the stage. New media performance explores the traditional social and philosophical concerns with which most vital theater has always dealt, and seeks to transform the world, one roomful of engaged, imagining earthlings at a time.

Contradiction and paradox: theater artists using *film to save theater from film*, while the current immersive, manic social drive for mediated experience is fundamentally opposed to the *live* theater event. And the phantasm (mock/shock prophecy) of VR headset parties — partygoers alone together, and helmeted, nodding to and fro in the exurban "living room," like drugged, mutant insects — flickers and looms in the ruins of the future.

If film was *the* medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have no inkling yet of what it might be for the 21<sup>st</sup>. In the performing arts, will it be New Media Theater? Multimedia Performance? Live Movies? Cyborg Theater? No agreed-upon name yet to call it (a good sign, most likely), but it's alive, kicking and ticking.

For sources see Suggested Reading, p. 224.



RICK DAVIS

# FAUSTIAN BARGAINS AND BRAVE NEW WORLDS: TOWARDS A POETICS OF NEW MEDIA IN THE THEATER

Doctor Faustus stands alone, in a conjuring circle, at the center of a sixty-foot runway stage, surrounded on four sides by silvery-gray textured surfaces. At either end of the runway stand fourteen-foot walls, while down the length of both sides of the theater run narrower panels that float above the heads of the audience, which sits stadium-style on either side of the runway. Faustus conjures:

Now that the gloomy shadow of the earth,  
Longing to view Orion's drizzling look,  
Leaps from th' Antarctic world unto the sky,  
And dims the welkin with her pitchy breath,  
Faustus, begin thine incantations,  
And try if devils will obey thy hest,  
Seeing thou hast pray'd and sacrific'd to them.  
Within this circle is Jehovah's name,  
Forward and backward anagrammatiz'd,  
Th' abbreviated names of holy saints,  
Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,  
And characters of signs and erring stars,  
By which the spirits are enforc'd to rise:  
Then fear not, Faustus, but be resolute,  
And try the uttermost magic can perform. --  
*Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii! Valeat numen triplex Jehovahoe!  
Ignei, aerii, aquatani spiritus, salvete! Orientis princeps  
Belzebub, inferni ardentis monarcha, et Demogorgon, propitiamus  
vos, ut appareat et surgat Mephistophilis, quod tumeraris:  
per Jehovaham, Gehennam, et consecratam aquam quam nunc spargo,  
signumque crucis quod nunc facio, et per vota nostra, ipse nunc  
surgat nobis dicatus Mephistophilis!*

In front of him, on one of the taller walls, a serpent's head appears; the snake lunges, slithering to its full length across the side panels, leading Faustus's gaze (and ours) down the runway where, in a flash of light, Mephistopheles makes his surprise appearance, to his (and our) wonderment.

Kinetic visual imagery reinforcing textual truth, visceral impact, and snazzy sleight-of-hand stagecraft: this moment from *Doctor Faustus*<sup>1</sup> crystallizes, for me, the promise of deploying multimedia, or "new media," in the service of the theater. When driven by a strong text, placed in a context where all the collaborative elements of the theater (at the risk of redundancy, let me enumerate them: text, acting, the various design elements, directing, dramaturgy, and that final collaborator, the audience) are given their proper weight, multimedia becomes a powerful and distinctive tool, capable of profoundly expanding the imaginative possibilities of the stage.

When employed for its own sake, however (defined perhaps by a selective diminution, by omission or commission, of one or more of those "elements" above), multimedia runs the risk — as do any of the elements — of weakening the impact of the theatrical event. The keys to the kingdom marked "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" on the gilt-edged maps are found on the ring of proportion, order, and balance.

## Historical Excursus

Revolutionary moments in stage design and technology (for that is what we're really talking about) have come before, and they have always had a push-pull relationship with their contemporary dramaturgy. Without the winch, the treadmill, the chariot-and-pole machinery of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the great melodramatist Pixérécourt (he who famously said "I write my plays for those who cannot read") could not have conceived of, let alone staged, his famous rescues, such as that in *Le Chien de Montargis* (The Dog of Montargis), the 1814 prologue to *Rin Tin Tin* and *Lassie Come Home*.

We sometimes forget, as our own pendulum of taste and practice swings, that the Realists and Naturalists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (a heterogeneous group that includes, somewhat uncomfortably, bits and pieces of Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Antoine, Chekhov, Stanislavski), were the visual innovators of their time, taking us beyond the world of two-dimensional canvas (complete with painted furniture and glassware) and semicircular conversational tableaux. We should not forget that the fourth wall was once a radical idea in service of a higher truth.

And then along came AppiandCraig, that strange Swiss/English amalgam of revolutionary aesthetic theories, with a welcome call for (a return to? a discovery of?) atmosphere and poetry and metaphor in stage



Timmy Ray James (Mephistophilis) and Ed Gero (Faustus), *Doctor Faustus*, Theater of the First Amendment, 1998.

design. Appian and Craig brought a sense of the monumental and the abstract to their theories and applied them to Wagner, to Shakespeare, to Maeterlinck, even (and very usefully) to Ibsen. But the inevitable happened: designs for design's sake, such as *The Steps* and *Scene*, in which Craig (and here it must be admitted that they were two people, though always spoken of as an elision) seemed to declare his independence from text and even from actors: as Hamlet never said, the set's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

But Appian and Craig's work did start to clear the cobwebs of Realism, did make it possible for a theater of images and metaphors to emerge. In America, Robert Edmond Jones led a movement away from carpentered fidelity toward an Appian way of broad symbolic strokes and carefully chosen elemental details: a design aesthetic that perfectly matched (and perhaps encouraged) the emerging vigor of American dramaturgy in the voice of Eugene O'Neill. In this, he was helped beyond measure by a seemingly simple, taken-for-granted idea: the electric spotlight.

Once lighting became controllable (which, we must remember, initially meant the ability to use a lot *less* of it, concealing and revealing in purposeful, plastic ways that earlier technologies could not conceive) it became easy to

lead the spectator's eye around the stage; to pick out the significant detail; to accelerate the rhythm of the visual text through quick blackouts.<sup>2</sup> Lighting made sculptural approaches to design not only possible but almost essential, and brought new expressivity to the human face and figure. Lighting made the very air a poetic medium. Drop this book right now and pick up Jean Rosenthal's *The Magic of Light*<sup>3</sup>. She was, for a time, Orson Welles's lighting designer (a term she probably invented, along with many of the practices of the profession) and Graham's and Balanchine's, and to read her words about the emotional value of light in the world and in the theater is to see both with new eyes.

Welcome back to this volume. Though Jean Rosenthal lit her share of Broadway musicals (up to *Fiddler on the Roof*), I doubt that she would recognize the form today. Gordon Craig's dream of a design-driven, textless theater has come true, albeit in an ironically inverted paradigm. The ascent of the outsize tire, the descents of the chandelier and the helicopter, the dancing teapot, the pounding sound and the rock-show-style use of that oxymoronically-named tool, the "intelligent lighting fixture" (you've seen them — they're the ones that have the unearthly, penetrating color temperature of those new BMW headlights, and their beams sweep and swoop down on their hapless actor-targets, hunting them like the latest Air Force "smart bombs"): all of these impressive effects have been harnessed in the service of — what? Or have I got the question backwards? Who is serving whom?

Theater historians (when they're in a certain mood) like to chart the inverse relationship between the quality of the drama and the exuberance of the stagecraft in a given period. The Greeks and the Elizabethan theater made do with merely brilliant writing, and little or no scenic support beyond the architecture of the theater itself;<sup>4</sup> the spectacles of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (see Pixérécourt, above) made stunning use of perspective painting and machinery, but the dramas themselves do not stand up. The Broadway musical's pendulum reversed course in the early 1980's and hasn't stopped swinging toward spectacle. What happens? Do the big productions just *eat* the good scripts? Do audiences drive the transaction, seeking ever-stronger "hits" of this addictive drug, this uncontrolled lack of substance?

## Caveat Emptor

What does this have to do with the emergence of multimedia design in contemporary theater? Let the buyer beware: we must struggle to harness this powerful tool only in pursuit of a unified vision of the theatrical event, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total work of art" that Wagner named and that still stands as both a theoretical ideal and a practical litmus test.

The appeal of projected images, these luminous, shape-shifting, seductive plays of color and light and shadow, is such that if we're not careful, the "little people"<sup>5</sup> whose task it is to enact the living story in their midst may become secondary players. Their contributions may go unattended, both in the creative phase of the production, and by the audience, sitting dazzled in their seats, cosseted by the charms of the moving image, now made reassuringly familiar by its sheer pervasiveness in every facet of public and private experience.

In a variety of experiences as a director, dramaturg, and spectator I have been reminded that, in a contest between the live actor and a projected (or televised) image of that actor, the image wins every time. Sometimes this is exactly the point; the framed simulacrum is by definition a more highly artficed object, and we willingly surrender our freedom of focus to it. The interplay between these layers of remove from reality becomes part of the action, either reinforcing or commenting (often ironically) on what we choose to believe and where we place our perceptive confidence.

Yet all too often the irony is absent, or unintentional. The image is there for its own sake, towering over (actually or metaphorically) the live actor, and the increased difficulty of concentration<sup>6</sup> experienced by the audience is finally a barrier to experiencing the totality of the theatrical event. Even though this tends to happen in productions with a high level of intellectual and aesthetic ambition, is the effect really different from that achieved by the feline make-up and the crashing chandelier of the thematically innocuous Lloyd-Webber canon?

## A New Poetics in Two Old Bottles?

Aristotle, master taxonomist and natural philosopher, set some difficult expectations for all who have attempted to define dramatic developments since the time of *Oedipus*. His "six elements of tragedy" in fact still cover the subject pretty well, though they are subject to endless argument about the order of importance. Here, as a refresher course, are the elements in their original hierarchy: Plot, Character, Thought (or Theme), Language (or Diction), Music, and Spectacle. That's right, plot comes first and spectacle last.

This neat device can be used as a club with which to beat the Broadway mega-musical about the ears; but is it applicable to a poetics of theatrical multimedia? What if the Spectacle *is* the Thought (or Theme?); what if the Language of the production actually lives in its Spectacle (with the assistance of Music)? Can Spectacle be a vehicle for Plot and Character? Such heretical hierarchy-jumping is an intellectually attractive parlor game, but it may not pass the pragmatic test, the "know it when you see it" test applied famously to

art (by critics), pornography (by Supreme Court Justices), and productions by all theater folk everywhere in the phrases “that *works*” or “that *doesn’t work*.”

So let me jumble up Aristotle’s sacred six a little bit differently, recognizing that drama has, in fact, changed a bit in 2,500 years; that society has changed even a little bit more; and that human nature has changed perhaps the least of all. The scheme is to take the six elements and pour them into two bottles, one marked Load and one Delivery<sup>7</sup>. Into the Load bottle flow Plot, Character, and Thought (or Theme), in whatever order and in whatever proportion is desired. Ibsen’s Load bottle is a different color from Chekhov’s; Kaiser’s from Brecht’s; but all are full. The bottle holds the “stuff,” the “quiddity,” of the dramatic event. How does it go, who’s in it, what are they like, and what’s it about? would be the relevant questions to ask and answer while filling up the Load bottle. The answers do not presuppose any particular world-view or style; the only mandate is to fill the bottle.

Into the Delivery bottle, we pour Language (or Diction), Music, and Spectacle, all the expressive tools of the trade. Again, the proportions will vary, and an almost infinite range of combinations is possible. August Wilson and Lanford Wilson and Robert Wilson, David Hare and David Edgar and Caryl Churchill, Shakespeare and Schiller and Wole Soyinka: compare authors (or *auteurs*) of real substance and, as with the Load, you’ll find full Delivery bottles with distinctly different mixtures.

My modest proposal for a new poetics of multimedia-in-theater comes down to this: balance the bottles. Be sure that Load=Delivery. Too much Load plays like lead. Too little Load plays like *Cats*. This great new tool, this brave new world of theatrical possibility is too beautiful to spoil through lack of rigor in its application. We need the great plots and characters and thoughts (or themes) to be delivered anew. We need new stories (events, characters, experiences) of our own devising that play with and around the new technology, that are inspired and enabled — but not dominated — by it.

## Where Things Stand

One of the exciting and important things about this multimedia handbook, I believe, is its appearance at this moment in the history of theatrical production. I think multimedia-in-theater today stands in the same place as the Robert Edmond Jones/Jean Rosenthal-era practitioners did relative to their theater: holding new tools, already changing their worlds, on the verge of greater discoveries.

Multimedia design stands ready to be the “Leko” — the famous ellipsoidal-reflector spotlight that made Rosenthal’s poetry possible — of today in its ability to transform our image of the stage environment. Just as it took some years for stage lighting practice to be codified, written about, taught, and transmitted — demystified and brought to market, if you will — so multimedia design for the theater will emerge over the next decade as something that mere mortals can use.

Just as we assume that all productions today will be set and lit (though we make room for a vast range of styles and functions for scenery and lighting), we will begin to visualize the contribution of media as a consistently available and increasingly integral design element. The equipment must become even simpler to design with and operate, better able to coexist with stage lighting, more flexible in making changes in the fast-paced process of technical and dress rehearsals, and above all less expensive. All these things are happening, of course; I hope that in my lifetime as a director the process will speed up enough so that this lad who cut his theatrical teeth in the late 1960s on first- and second-generation lighting technology will be able to work as fluently with these incomparably powerful new tools.

And I hope that when that happens, the Two Bottles will both be full.

<sup>1</sup> *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, Theater of the First Amendment, Fairfax, Virginia, 1998. Directed by Rick Davis, set design by Jason Rubin, lighting design by Martha Mountain, costume design by Howard Kurtz, multimedia design by Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White.

<sup>2</sup> Whether playwrights should ever have been given access to that latter tool is a subject for a different essay, but I contend that the inability of many modern writers to complete the arc of a scene is due to the easy availability of the blackout switch.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal, Jean E.; Wertebaker, Lael: *The Magic of Light*, New York, Theatre Arts Books, 1972

<sup>4</sup> I am reminded of a remark by the great Russian émigré designer, Alexander Okun, with whom I had the pleasure of working as dramaturg on a couple of projects at Center Stage in Baltimore in the 1980s. As he was designing *The Tempest* for us, he said that he stared at his blank sheet of drafting paper one day and “felt Shakespeare all the time sitting on my left shoulder, whispering, ‘Alex, who... needs... scenery?’”

<sup>5</sup> A memorable coinage by one of multimedia’s pioneering practitioners.

<sup>6</sup> This time you needn’t put the book down right this second, but sometime this week, go find and read the Václav Havel play of the same name.

<sup>7</sup> For these oppositional terms, I am indebted to a wonderful voice teacher, John Koopman (emeritus of Lawrence Conservatory), who used them to describe two equally important components of balanced vocal production.





SUZANNE CARBONNEAU

# LOOKING AT PERFORMANCE ART

Performance art is a term that often causes confusion if not fear, conjuring images of out-of-control artists thumbing their noses at both traditional arts practices as well as at the society from which these practices emerge. Much of the misunderstanding about the form has arisen as the result not only of the ways that performance art has challenged traditional arts and theatrical practices, but also by the way it has been characterized in the media. Performance art was singled out by political opponents of federal arts funding almost from the very inception of the war against art (a potent subdivision of the larger “culture wars”) that is still very much with us today. Almost immediately following the brouhaha over photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano instigated by critics of the National Endowment for the Arts, it was performance art that became the preferred target and favorite whipping boy of conservative commentators. The so-called “NEA Four” — Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck — who successfully fought in court the rescission of their grants on the grounds that these decisions had been political were all performance artists. As a result, performance art became characterized in the media in sound bytes created for maximum sensationalism and infused with ridicule. Finley, whose evocatively heartbreaking works were written and performed with equal parts pain and anger, was reduced in the media to “the woman who smears her naked body with chocolate”; Fleck, the creator of resonant work of depth and urgency, became simply “the man who urinates on stage.” In having its elements presented out of context, performance art came to be thought of in the popular imagination as ridiculous, childish, tantrum-filled acting out, characterized by a lack of rigor and form.

Photo: Iouliia Kouskova.

The cultural imbroglio over performance art has largely hinged on misunderstandings surrounding the goals, concerns, and methods of this genre, which, like any art form, has developed its own aesthetics, styles, and practices that operate within a recognizable tradition. Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the form and the wide variety of activity it encompasses, however, performance art has always been loosely defined. By its very nature, it has aimed at experimentation, and like all avant-garde art, performance art has challenged the values of the mainstream in out-of-the-way venues. In fact, even within the precincts of contemporary art, performance art has often been seen as pushing the outside of this already-stretched envelope, and has even been referred to as “the avant-avant-garde.”

So what exactly is performance art? By its devotion to experimentation and its working at the boundaries, interstices, and cross-breeding of traditional artistic disciplines, performance art has been particularly elusive to define. It is, however, possible to draw some generalizations that distinguish it from other modes of performance. In her history of performance art, *Performance: Live Art from 1909 to the Present*, Rose Lee Goldberg defines performance as “the expression of artists who wish to challenge the viewers’ perception of art and the limits of those perceptions.” The work is, in fact, almost always deliberately provocative, unconventional, and even assaultive in its stance. In its first stages, it was done mostly by visual artists who wanted a larger canvas for their ideas — the canvas of action — and who wanted to take a stance in opposition to the political establishment in its dedication to traditional values and ideas, and against the artistic establishment in its commercialization of art. These artists were raising questions about their roles as artists, about the role of the audience, and about the nature of art itself. In testing the boundaries between art and life, performance art has traditionally centered in the expressiveness of the individual body, rejecting logical speech and thought, as well as exposition, symbolism, and psychologizing.

In the main, performance art has been concerned with reality rather than with the creation of illusion, the domain of traditional theater. It rejects notions of plot, character, setting, and dramatic text that can be performed by any number of interchangeable performers. Performance art is different from traditional theater in other respects as well: scripts are not as important in defining the work as are movement and visual imagery; there is typically a more direct relationship with the audience; the work is usually not performed on a proscenium stage; an implied “fourth wall” is often missing; and the artist very often appears as a “real” person. Performance artists do not usually create characters as playwrights do, but base their work on their own bodies, life stories, and experiences in personal identity. If we take acting to mean the attempt to imitate life in a realistic manner, then performance artists are rarely

acting. They do not usually impersonate, represent, or simulate a character, nor are they pretending to be in a time and place different from the viewer.

Typically, performance art is a solo form, and there is not usually an elaborate set that attempts to create a simulation of reality. Instead, there might be a few props or bits of furniture and whatever costume might suit the situation, which sometimes includes nudity. The aesthetic has traditionally embraced a “Do It Yourself” ethos, so that the homemade and handmade look of these productions must be seen as a deliberate choice rather than as the result of amateurishness or carelessness.

Autobiography is central to performance art, including concerns with identity and with the exploration of alternative “selves” and the investigation of a transmutable psyche. Even when removed from the strictly autobiographical realm, performance artists do not present themselves as “characters” in the traditional theatrical sense. Rather, they employ self-transformational strategies that explore alternative, imaginary, or mythic aspects of the self. Artists working in this vein who have achieved widespread attention include Anna Deavere Smith, Eric Bogosian, Sarah Jones, Danny Hoch, and even Whoopi Goldberg.

In her history, RoseLee Goldberg traces the form to its links in the European avant-garde and its “isms,” including dadaism, futurism, and surrealism. The contemporary American form that we know as performance art, however, can be traced back to the 1960s when happenings, environmental performances, action art, and body art drew visual artists away from the canvas and gallery to set their ideas in action by way of the body and other means associated with dance, theater, cabaret, and new media and technology. In the 1970s, performance art began to emerge as a discipline in its own right, and toward the end of the decade, it became more visible and fashionable. At this time, performance art moved away from the cerebral concerns of Conceptual Art to quasi-narrative presentations that embraced more traditional performance values from vaudeville, dance, cabaret, television, and stand-up comedy. It also began to marry its high art origins to popular culture and employed and infiltrated mass media, while it also drew artists from other disciplines — dance, theater, poetry, and music — into collaborative experiments.

Performance art moved into the mainstream consciousness in 1980 with Laurie Anderson’s *United States*, which combined the two strains of performance art that had developed over the previous decade. The solo autobiographical work that had evolved from visual art origins was cross-bred with the second strain of performance, sometimes called “The Theater of Images.” This variation on the genre was devoted to the assemblage of aural and visual images not based in text or the individual psyche, which culminated in elaborate spectacles embracing technology and mixed media. Sometimes, as in the “operas” of Robert Wilson, this work was performed

in theaters, but it also included site-specific or environmental performances, works made for and about the places where they were performed. In its hearkening back to traditional variety entertainments emphasizing physical achievements and skills such as mime, juggling, and clowning, another subcategory of performance art came to be known as "New Vaudeville." New Vaudevillians including Bill Irwin, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, David Shiner, and Paul Zaloom performed in their own shows, created group efforts, and even took to the airwaves, film, and traditional drama as their gifts came to be appreciated in the mainstream. Yet another mode of performance art has absorbed the new poetry movement known as "spoken word," where poetry has become a performative endeavor as well as a literary one. Such pioneers as Miguel Algarin and Miguel Piñero paved the way for the resuscitation of this oral tradition, which was also given a tremendous shot in the arm by hip hop culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has termed the current generation of Nuyorican poets "rap meets poetry."

In the last decade, embracing more traditional theatrical techniques, performance art has turned away from its emphasis on the body to re-embrace language and text. Performance artist Jacki Apple has written that performance artists today are functioning as poets, storytellers, preachers, and rappers using "image at the service of the text." And as language has emerged as a central technique of performance art, the content of the work has shifted to political and social concerns, especially the performance created by individuals of marginalized status in American culture, including people of color, women, and gays and lesbians. Class, race, gender, and sexuality have emerged as the primary concerns of contemporary performance. Performance artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Coco Fusco, Ron Athey, Rachel Rosenthal, Diamanda Galás, Ishmael Houston-Jones, John Kelly, DANCENOISE, Lydia Lunch, and Robbie McCauley insist on self-definition that challenges the status and image that have been imposed on them as they explore a wide range of social, political, economic, and ecological concerns through the use of a vast array of performance activities and strategies.

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JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK

MUSINGS  
ON MULTIMEDIA:  
THE CYBORG THEATRE  
AND BEYOND

I begin this essay with an intentional provocation: *There is no future but the cyborg theatre*. Certainly the classics will continue to be done earnestly, unmediated by external forms of obvious technology (excluding the now familiar conventional technologies of lighting, sound, even props), but if there is to be a future theatre, a legacy for upcoming generations, a new direction in live performance, it will be a cyborg theatre. Elsewhere I have laid out the parameters of *cyborg* theatre, a conceptual mode of analysis for a performance style that blends live bodies with technologized, digitized, and/or mediatized images in a re-imagining of the human subject: the cyborg theatre looks beyond binaries such as human/non-human, live/mediated, abled/dis-abled to construct new post-human models capable of blurring these distinctions.<sup>1</sup> The cyborg, a “cybernetic organism,” a blend of live/organic material and technology, has held a vivid place in the fictive imagination from depictions of the Golem to Frankenstein’s monster to the Terminator. Placed alongside automata and robots, cyborgs have often been feared and/or misunderstood, and all three have stood in for anxieties about technology and the diminishing human agent.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the cyborg took a radical turn in the mid-1980s when Donna Haraway’s now famous manifesto proposed a feminist, politicized cyborg that captured the imagination of scholars and theorists like myself.<sup>3</sup> The manifesto, originally a feminist response to Reagan-era politics in the U.S., served also as an imaginative site for rethinking masculinist and militaristic appropriations of technology. Inspired by Haraway’s thinking and the later follow-up in which she writes, “I believe we must transform the despised metaphors of both organic and technological vision to foreground specific positioning, multiple mediation, partial perspective, and therefore a possible allegory for antiracist, feminist, scientific, and political knowledge,”<sup>4</sup> I position the

cyborg as a productive metaphor for a new form of performance that makes possible a reconceptualization of “human” immersed in technologies that both enhance as well as trouble societies across the globe.

On a purely pragmatic level, a turn to cyborg theatre may facilitate a future of performance for generations glued to their gameboys, computer games, email, video games, screens; it may lure them out of their boxes, their I-pod solitude, their chat rooms and re-integrate them into the intersubjective space of the live theatre, the space of the face-to-face encounter. The cyborg theatre can blend the best of both worlds, allowing the continued development and growth of the live theatre while simultaneously interrogating and facilitating ongoing human integrations and interactions with technologies. The cyborg theatre explores how the virtual and the live merge on stage, serving as a staging ground, a rehearsal for inevitable mergings such as: implanted scannable microchips in the body (already commonly done to animals), desirable and “smart” bodily replacement parts (corrective eye surgeries might offer possibilities for extra-ability), and those perhaps more desirable mergings such as super high speed physical transport (“Beam me up Scotty”). The live theatrical site provides a space to rehearse not only these possibilities, but the anxieties of these possibilities as well.

As Kirby Malone has discussed in his introductory essay, “technological,” or “multimedia” theatre, as it is sometimes called, has a long history, and depending upon the definition of “technology,” can be traced in a multitude of ways: from an object/prop-based integration with the live body (the use of puppetry for example), to the artistic use of lighting (Appia and Craig), to the integration of projected images onto the stage (Piscator, *Living Newspapers*, Svoboda), to name just a few trajectories. Until perhaps ten years ago, these integrations were, for the most part, discretely discussed, in that they were looked on as individual forms to analyze (see, for example, volumes dedicated to lighting techniques, puppets, accounts of individual artists/innovators). Only in the past decade has there been an attempt to theorize the increasing use on stage of technologies that have rapidly infiltrated daily life — from the now “old” mediums of television and video to newer ones such as digital images, computer-generated images, web-based technologies, and forms of medical technologies — in terms of the integration with the body on stage. From authors who imagined high-tech science fiction scenarios, such as William Gibson, Octavia Butler, and Philip Dick, to Marshall McLuhan’s reading of media as an extension of the body, theorists have engaged deeply with the implications of technology and its impact upon what it means to be human in a given moment. In the realm of drama, theatre, and performance studies, technology has often been a given, framing the spaces and effects of production, providing perspective and light, and providing melodramatic

and spectacular thrills and effects. After about a decade of engagement with the ideas in Baudrillard's *Simulations*, the science fiction of William Gibson, Teresa de Lauretis's feminist critiques of technology, Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, then on through Laura Mulvey's analysis of the gaze in film, and Donna Haraway's cyborg, in the mid-90s in-depth explorations of hyper-text, cyber-space and computer technologies began to appear in works by Brenda Laurel, Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, and Allucquère Rosanne Stone to name a few. These technological analyses made room for the further gender-driven work of Anne Balsamo, Elizabeth Grosz, Sue-Ellen Case, and Lisa Cartwright, *The Cyborg Handbook* edited by Chris Hables Gray, Katherine Hayles's ideas of the posthuman, and the positing of "liveness" by theatre and performance studies scholar Philip Auslander, which may be a turning point back into the realm of theatre studies.<sup>5</sup> Technology was no longer a "given" but something changing the face of live performance as it has done in feminist criticism, media studies, and cultural studies. A new genre of performance had emerged alongside the emergence of new computer and digital technologies. Mine is one of a few voices attempting to analyze and understand this new genre, this increasing form of "live" theatre and performance that is not fully live.<sup>6</sup> Although I have theorized multimedia work around the ideas of the cyborg theatre because it specifically draws attention to the ways in which the integration with technology can frame and re-shape ideas of what it means to be human in a mediatized age, I have also observed several trends developing, both woven through my concept of the cyborg theatre and within a more generalized "multimedia theatre," that I briefly highlight here. These categories are in no way meant to be fixed or conclusive, in fact they often overlap and filter into each other; the number of artists experimenting with multimedia in live performance is ever-growing, and with this growth yields unpredicted possibilities. However, trends are emerging and certain themes, techniques, and visual effects are being explored. The following outlines some of the trends, possibilities, and examples that the integration between bodies and technology has yielded in recent years.

## I. New Scenography

One of the most commonly used applications of evident multimedia on stage is in stage design and scenography. Emerging from such innovations as Erwin Piscator's use of documentary film and large scale projections on stage and his conceptions of a "Total Theatre" as well as from Josef Svoboda's masterful compositions blending ideas of lighting and scene design, contemporary practitioners are increasingly allowing multimedia to stand in for "old

fashioned" painted flats, design and texture, and even actual physical objects such as doors, cupboards, or staircases. Translating the language of film and photography to the stage, scenery can shift rapidly on stage, scenes can abruptly switch from place to place in a seamless fashion, the colors and textures of a space can shift, mutate, and transform with a click. Corresponding in frequency to the decrease in actual costs, a scenographic use of multimedia on stage is often delivered by artists without critical attention to its reading *qua* multimedia and lately, in show after show, appears randomly as moving backdrop, projected texture, text, or tableaux. However, when executed with calculated thought, scenic projections can be both effective and visually exciting. For example, Laurie Anderson's multimedia pieces, from her *United States I-IV* in the early 1980s to the more recent *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* in 1999, have long featured a densely complicated array of projected still and moving images that saturate the space almost as "synesthesia," or "visualized sound," foregrounding both abstract and concrete inner workings of characters as well as providing mere visual integration with her unique sound compositions. In contrast, Robert Lepage realizes deliberate, slow and haunting projections which evoke in images what words cannot to create a landscape through time and space. Often understated, Lepage's multimedia is such an integrated aspect of his dramaturgical spaces, providing spaces of memory and depth that are impossible to separate from the non-mediated images. Ridge Theatre/Bob McGrath and Laurie Olinder have also created a visual aesthetic using large scale projections that create stunning composite images, such as in their piece *Jennie Ritchie*, based on work of "outsider" artist Henry Darger, in which entire scenes of his drawings were replicated using projections and an ensemble of live actors.

Introducing languages of film, video, and computer imagery has provided innovative and flexible approaches to scenographic demands, as well as providing the basis for a new genre of multimedia, or cyborg performance, to which I return in point #4. (The examples I include here highlight some of the more memorable scenic possibilities, which also open up through further integrations with specific dramaturgical frameworks to provide a more challenging site for analysis.) The 3-D experiments of San Francisco-based director George Coates use a combination of computer projections, 3-D films and slides, and live actors, to draw viewers from location to location as if in a film, from rain forest to desert, from literal to abstract location. The British company Forkbeard Fantasy inverts classic cinema tricks and animates the live space with, for example, films of locations such as a long corridor with doors on each side through which actors enter and exit simultaneously on screen and off. The young company Big Art



Group uses cinematic backgrounds that sweep by as live actors integrate their bodies into the moving scenery. These are but a few of the more imaginative applications of a multimedia-based contemporary scenography.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Transformations of the Body

Increasingly, practitioners are using technology explicitly to comment on the body's relationship to technology. Concerned with isolation, fragmentation, and alienation, artists literally depict these concerns through the manipulation of the very technologies that cause these anxieties. In the contemporary moment, a time Katherine Hayles and others have called "posthuman," the body is variously being questioned, augmented, made obsolete, transformed, and challenged in relationship to existing and emerging technologies. The term posthuman remains ironic in many ways, as the body is still at the center of these concerns, and instead, as Hayles formulates it, the posthuman can be read as a condition in contemporary society, one that "offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines."<sup>8</sup> Artists such as the Wooster Group, or New York based dancer-videographer Cathy Weis have repeatedly created *mise-en-scènes* full of fragmented body parts, sometimes live, sometimes prerecorded, larger than life, or out-of-focus to call attention to a diverse range of societal concerns, from the fragmentation of bodies to ideas of what it means to be "able-bodied" in society.<sup>9</sup> Screens and televisions contain images of the live bodies on stage as trapped in these frames, exploring issues of isolation, medical imaging, or simply our increased computer time. Playing with the possibilities of new software programs, the collaboration between Builders Association and **motiroti**, *Alladeen*, dealt with questions of projected identity within Indian call centers as actors' faces were projected on screens above their heads and morphed into characters from the television program *Friends* as they answered the phones with made up "American" names such as Rachel Green.<sup>10</sup> Using these varied technologies, bodies can disappear, body parts can transform, and identities can merge, providing a space for the questioning of the relationship between body and technology — how has technology invaded or distanced the spaces between bodies? To what degree does technology aid and augment the body? Do cyborgized bodies threaten to displace notions of the "human"? What are the possibilities for technologies of alienation and separation; what are the disadvantages? The Wooster Group's long standing relationship with technology exemplifies many of these concerns. Using photographic negatives to expose the technologization of race and gender issues in their version of *Emperor Jones*, or the use of multiple images on screen in *House/Lights* as representative of the fractured identities created by mass

media and internet technologies, as well as exploring the screen-imposed isolation of lead character Phèdre in *To You, The Birdie*, the Wooster Group has created a hybrid theatrical form intertwining technological, visual, and dramaturgical texts.<sup>11</sup> Technological fragmentations and transformations to the body as seen on these innovative stages present thought-provoking stimulus and in turn, present possibilities for new visual and intellectual forms of dramaturgy for further expansion and exploration.

### 3. Linking Bodies

New technologies have always been integrated into the stage, from the latest forms of lighting, to pulleys, hydraulics, cars, conveyor belts, the list goes on — artists use the live performance site to question, expose, examine, and re-imagine the new technologies in a given contemporary moment. It is within this framework that artists are experimenting with VR technologies, infrared and other military derived technologies, and more commonly, internet and web-based technologies. The proliferation of personal computers and broadband internet connections has inspired many practitioners to develop work around the possibilities of these technologies. Used to connect home computer audiences to live performance, such as in some of the work of Stelarc and Orlan,<sup>12</sup> or to link live audiences in remote locations, in such examples as Cathy Weis's LIPS project, Yubiwa Hotel's *Long Distance Love*, or the recent Stationhouse Opera's *Live From Paradise*, these now pervasive technologies are being investigated on stage as both tool and plot device. In the telepresent productions I have been a part of as an audience member, the application of internet or linking technologies, while not yet perfected, has attempted to generate connectivity between communities, cultures, and locations that expands the boundaries of what it means to be an audience, as well as raising important issues of archiving such multi-sited performances. These performances often take place in different time zones and cultural contexts; for example Cathy Weis's *Not So Fast, Kid!* took place between Macedonia at 3am and New York City at 9pm; Yubiwa Hotel's *Long Distance Love* connected a site under the Manhattan Bridge called RedLab Theatre to a club Club AsiaP in Tokyo (which I saw just after 9/11 when phone lines to NYC were still down but through the computer connection audiences and performers could share and exchange experiences). Performances also take place by simply stretching audiences across several cities within a country — in Stationhouse Opera's *Live From Paradise*, audiences in the London audience could recognize friends from their position at the Birmingham Fierce Festival location,<sup>13</sup> and provide as well new choreographic possibilities for live and

telepresent performers to “dance” together, as in Weis’s piece, creating a form that is becoming a productive tool for new modes of spatio-temporal performance. Perhaps as an extension of Philip Auslander’s argument that “live” is not recognized and understood as a concept until placed alongside the “mediatized,” in terms of space, in this analysis the distance between communities has never been so visible, because of the connective technologies that foreground this very divide. However, artists making use of web-based technologies are exploring new modalities of connection that diminish the physical space and offer potential for political, intra-cultural, and artistic exchanges.

#### 4. Deconstructions/Reconstructions of Film

Sometimes called “Live Film,” some of the most sophisticated multimedia based work being explored today falls into this category. Rather than alternate between one medium or the other, artists such as Builders Association, George Coates, Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White’s Cyburbia Productions, Big Art Group, and the UK-based companies Stationhouse Opera, Forkbeard Fantasy, The Chameleons Group, and imitating the dog (to name only a few) are working to integrate the techniques of theatre/performance and film in ways that continue to foreground the live qualities of the theatre. These companies facilitate integrations between the two forms that surpass the development of new scenographic techniques and propose a new genre of cyborg theatrical performance.

One distinguishing feature of this category is an examination and often a deconstruction of working film and video techniques and their translation into the live performance space. The artists transform the languages of the mediums they are working with to the stage — often quite literally. For example, in the Builders Association’s *Xtravaganza*, blue screen or Chroma Key techniques used in the creation of special effects in film and video are visibly exposed on stage. Actors standing downstage, before a large blue screen, create a scene that is simultaneously mixed into footage of a black and white film on a larger screen upstage, creating a living film in front of the audience. The use of multiple cameras on stage provides an experimental space for the development of techniques such as mixing images, as in Big Art Group’s *House of No More*, which in one instance highlighted an effective moment between two actors who stood at either end of a long narrow stage, acting their individual part in front of exposed cameras that then blended the two seamlessly into one impeccable kiss on screen. Big Art Group’s work, hi-tech, glossy, and slick, explores the mechanics of such techniques and

develops this new genre of liminal work, somewhere between what could be called either theatre or film, and due to the quality of the work emerges as a powerful cyborg theatrical form.

The UK-based Forkbeard Fantasy often uses cinematic techniques to discover the depth of possibilities on stage — for example, the audience watches as a person, projected upon a full-screen, braves a wind-swept terrain and approaches a house only to, in the moment of entry into the house, become a live actor on the other side of the door, entering into the live space as the projection shifts to a sliver of outside space, glimpsed behind a “flat” of the door on stage. Alternatively, an immersive form of “live film” can be traced through the trajectory of the work of George Coates Performance Works 3-D multimedia spectacles, especially throughout the 1990s, in which the layers of projection, film footage, objects, scenery, and actors were all blended together for the audience through 3-D glasses and the audience becomes immersed within a world in which objects “project” over your head, or into the scene from where you sit. Akin to this work, but without the 3-D glasses, is the *trompe l’oeil* composite images created by Cyurbia Productions, which often blur the distinction between the live and the mediated, incorporating live action with highly saturated moving imagery that draws the spectator into a new intermedial terrain.

Within the framework of these brief categories often runs the theme of technology itself. As practitioners shift their knowledge of technology to a hands-on approach, questions of technology’s deployment often come into focus within the content of the work. Beyond the examples mentioned here, many other artists explore themes revolving around television, film, computers, computer games, cell phones, virtual reality, military, or medical technologies. From individual pieces created by artists whose work does not always focus on technology, such as *Miss Mobile*, in which Slovenian performance artist Emil Hrvatin performs with a cell phone and asks his audiences to call their friends and have them call him to create the improvisatory performance, or Richard Maxwell’s *Joe* tracing seven stages in a man’s life and ending with an actual robot on stage as a projection into the future, to the ongoing interrogation of technology by the Builders Association whose *Jet Lag* contemplated media and relationships to the traveling body while *Xtravaganza*, and *Alladeen* examine the technologization of bodies from Ziegfield Follies performers to Indian call center workers, artists are increasingly weaving technology through their work both conceptually and via practical application.

These practitioners are all experimenting with diverse methods to expand, blur, and reintegrate the boundaries of theatre and film, thereby creating new working genres of cyborg theatre. The provocation with which I began is only half in jest. As the twenty-first century progresses technology

will become more pervasive, from technologies that continue to aid and enhance — cures for diseases, artificial replacement parts, filtration systems for pollutants, to those that destruct — those that do the polluting, war machines, excess disposable machinery that will not biodegrade. While it is not the responsibility, or most often within the power of the artist to solve political problems, within the live space of performance some of these issues can be addressed, entertained, explored, and ultimately, faced. The cyborg theatre *is* the future.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am currently working on a book project developing the theories and ideas of the cyborg theatre entitled, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia*.

<sup>2</sup> The human fear of being dis/re-placed by technology has a varied historical trajectory, as seen in the following few examples: in literature, E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1815/16 *Der Sandmann*, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *Tomorrow's Eve*, or *L'Eve future* (written between 1877 and 1879), in drama, Karel Čapek's 1923 *R.U.R.*, and in film, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, all stand out as key sites for the expression of human displacement.

<sup>3</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150. Originally published as "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s," in *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65-107

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Actors Are Cyborg, Nature is Coyote, and the Geography is Elsewhere: Postscript to 'Cyborgs at Large,'" *Technoculture*, eds. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Although this list excludes many voices, it is an attempt to trace what I feel has been an important chronology to my own work. It is a guide and a suggestion; there are many other examples in theory, science, and fiction that enhance this brief trajectory and make it possible. In alphabetical order see: Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*. Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), Chris Hables Gray, ed. *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993), Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), Marshall McLuhan, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).<sup>6</sup> See also:

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Günter Berghaus's *Avant-Garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Johannes Birringer's *Media & Performance: Along the Border* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), Gabriella Giannachi's *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), Michael Rush's *New Media in Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* (Thames & Hudson, 1999), David Saltz's "Live Media: Interactive Technology and Theatre," *Theatre Topics*, 11, no. 2 (September 2001), as well as the forthcoming work of Matthew Causey, *Theatre, Performance, and Technology*, London: Routledge, and Steve Dixon's *Digital Performance: New Technologies in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art and Installation* (with Barry Smith), MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on these companies and in some cases examples of their work, see: <<http://www.georgecoates.org>>, <<http://www.forkbeardfantasy.co.uk/>>, and <<http://www.bigartgroup.com/>>.

<sup>8</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 287.

<sup>9</sup> See my chapter on Cathy Weis, "Shifting Strengths: The Cyborg Theatre of Cathy Weis," in *Bodies in Commotion*, eds. Philip Auslander and Carrie Sandahl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> I have written about this production more extensively in, "Global Friends: Alladeen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music," *PAJ: A Journal of Art and Technology* 77 (May 2004), and the forthcoming, "Disembodied Sites: The Builders' Association and the Performance of Globalization," for *Performance and Place*, eds. Leslie Hill and Helen Paris, Palgrave Macmillan, April 2006. Also see their web site at: <<http://www.thebuildersassociation.org/flash/flash.html?homepage>>.

<sup>11</sup> See my chapter, "Framing the Fragments: The Wooster Group's Use of Technology," in *The Wooster Group and its Traditions*, ed., Johan Callens, Peter Lang/Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, in series "Dramaturgies: Texts, Cultures, and Performances," edited by Marc Maufort, 2005, for an in-depth analysis of these issues.

<sup>12</sup> See: <<http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/>> and <<http://www.orlan.net/>> for more information on these two artists.

<sup>13</sup> This is an ongoing project that has also included locations in different countries. See: <<http://www.stationhouseopera.com/>> for information on their current work.



THOMAS STANLEY

SIX IS NINE, NOW WHAT?  
NEW MEDIA.  
NEW MINDS.  
NEW BEINGS.

*If all the hippies cut off all their hair...*

Modal realism, according to its founding theorist, David Lewis, is the proposition that we must conceive of an infinite plentitude of alternate worlds in addition to the world or universe we inhabit. Each of these possible worlds we are to understand as varying from our own cosmos in an infinite gradation across every detail. In Lewis' words, "absolutely *every* way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world *is*." In some worlds you exist and in some worlds you do not. In this world, you may wear the blue t-shirt, while in this world the green sweater, and in this world, no shirt at all. Lewis demands that we accept the ontological equivalency of each of these worlds, that is we must accept that the blue shirt, green shirt, no shirt, and every other of the infinite variations on reality, some quite far-fetched and bizarre, are every bit as *really real* as the world in which we share this article. Lewis goes on to ask that we accept that these worlds are not temporally or spatially relatable to our own world. They are not later or sooner, nor over there or over here. Each simply *is* a complete universe sealed unto itself and causally isolated from our own world.

This infinite plentitude of alternate *universes* is very much like what jazz poet/philosopher Sun Ra had in mind when he spoke of an *omniverse* — the largest possible set of possible universes. Isn't this exactly what we're talking about when we talk about New Media? If the term has any seriousness at all, it must denote something much more than the exploration of new tools and techniques aimed at rehabilitating novelty in the studio

arts or even serving as the basis for new modes of expression. At its best, the whole thrust of artistic activity can be seen as a sophisticated exploration of possible worlds, a virtual mapping of Sun Ra's omniverse.

My medium is sound and music — music not as a particular habitus constraining the organization of sonic events, but music as a particular phenomenological stance in relation to auditory experience. Music is usually thought of as a special instance of sound. We may argue about what separates the good from the bad, but we are usually pretty sure when we are listening to music. Sound, likewise, is easy enough to talk about at its most generic and physical level. Pretty displays of sine waves with their microscopic fuzz of overtones, and demonstrations with vibrating strings, make for good classroom presentation. Over time, however, my attention has been less focused on what sound is, than the more obscure question of what *a* sound is and how this definitional chess game might be relevant to the meaning of the music of my time and its role in the evolution of human consciousness.

Just what is *a* single sound? From the vantage point of perceptual psychology a sound is a discrete compressed air event that falls between 20Hz and 20kHz above a certain energy threshold. Within the performance practice of western music, single musical tones are usually construed as individual sounds, but no orchestral instrument sounds a pure tone, an unadorned sound wave, each, even when sustaining a single note is actually presenting the ear with a complex of fundamental and secondary tones. Is this really one sound? Would a semiotician regard an anthem or a hymn as a single sound? It's not an easy question, and of course its answer hinges on whether the ear you are using to make the distinction is a social-historical one or a physical-perceptual one. Sounds in this singular way are the atomic units of sampling. And sampling is one of a very small number of major developments in musical performance that separates today's musical culture from most of prior musical history. Whether we're talking about DJs biting records or synthesists reshaping waves through digital processors, sampling is about postulating possible worlds through a sonic code and subjecting them to a kind of reality testing that is visceral and intellectual, aesthetic and critical. If we are to speak cogently about a contemporary musical stratagem that is based in the reorganization of pre-existing sounds, then we should probably have some idea of what *a* sound is.

### *If all the mountains fell in the sea...*

Why would anyone want to embrace David Lewis' crazy ontology or ponder the limits of Sun Ra's omniverse? Lewis offers his possible worlds theory as a means of systematizing and bringing analytic clarity to one of philosophy's



most sticky arenas — that of modal logic. Modal logic is in play whenever we are asked to speculatively consider scenarios that differ from things as they actually are, which, if you think about it, it is our nature as a species to do almost constantly. Human will is metered out by the careful and not so careful parsing of counterfactuals. Statements of the *if...then* variety are our navigational equipment for translation through the complex interstices of individual and collective will, time and space.

Sampling as a *modus assemblage* for mass musical culture started out in a highly localized context driven by the functional necessities of youth dance culture. Innovations sketched out with phonograph records in the Bronx during the seventies collided with digital information technology a decade later to yield an entirely new idea about the how and what of music. The first objective of pioneers like Clive Campbell (Kool Herc) and Joseph Saddler (Grandmaster Flash) was to technologically isolate and extract the “break” from soul records. That is to sample from recorded performances (both popular and obscure) a particularly beat-heavy, funky-sweaty section, often just a few bars in length and release it from its original context to serve in repetition as the basis for a fresh musical experience. The breakbeat represented a distillation and recovery of black musical essence at a time when disco (i.e., integration) and other changes in the political economy of African-American music were seen by many as diluting this essence. By alternately backspinning and re-cuing each of two identical records containing the break, a DJ with a pair of turntables could extend the funky apex of black diasporan musical realization, in theory, forever. Out of the protean skills of the first generation of turntablists, a new way of thinking about musical creation and musical time emerged alongside a new awareness of recorded music as a random access historical archive.

No sooner had hip hop escaped its birthplace in New York’s uptown slums than some artists began expanding sampling’s plunderphonic methodology while at the same time buffering and subverting the nationalistic and nostalgic goals that had spawned the approach. The Bomb Squad — Norman Rogers, Hank Boxley, Bill Stephany, Keith Shocklee, and Eric Sadler, the production team for political hip hop unit Public Enemy — found early success in using the basic model of sampling not simply to rehear the musical past, but to disturb the sonic present. In the mid-eighties, they set PE’s black power rap against apocalyptic soundscapes that roared with the discontent and doom that characterized black urban experience of the Reagan era. Their bed of samples was rich in the sources it appropriated from, adding sound effects and environmental sound to thick beats mined from the grooves of old soul records.

But no other artist has been as influential in defining the avant-garde horizons of sampling as Paul D. Miller a/k/a DJ Spooky. Miller a critical theorist and media artist whose sonic constructions in the mid-nineties

opened up an underground musical movement called *illbient* that pointed the logic of sampling and its powerful arsenal of tools towards the future. Spooky's other nickname, *That Subliminal Kid*, is borrowed from the hero in William Burroughs' *Nova Express*. In that story, human society is being bombarded with a stream of reactionary propaganda being beamed to earth. These destructive transmissions are seriously stressing humankind. So, according to Miller, the Subliminal Kid who inhabits a phantasmagoric world of disembodied sound "takes his electromagnetic scalpel and cuts the loops so the future can leak through."

### *Got my own world to live through...*

Sampling as the quintessential postmodern art form has attracted most of its critical attention for its facility in recontextualizing the sonic past, that is, its archival or conservative function. It is, however, the ability to create sonic fissures where "the future can leak through" that drew me into the game. As a consumer and student of music, I've never found the musical past to be anywhere near as interesting as the musical future. As a solo artist under the name *Bushmeat* and as a member of the trio *Mind Over Matter Music Over Mind (MOM<sup>2</sup>)*, I've been applying the futuristic paradigms of sampling and digital sound production with the specific aim of poking holes in consensual consciousness and in so doing, redraw the boundaries of mental health thus (hopefully) creating an opening for the ingression of a posthuman reality.

Sun Ra used his cosmic circus of a big band as a platform to advocate for human pursuit of what he termed our "alter destiny." If something called human nature is responsible for our most incorrigibly vile behavior (e.g., violence, greed, waste), he argued, then perhaps we have reached a point in history where we are ready to try another path for ourselves, a way out of our humanity. Maybe we would do better as something else. Unlike visual stimuli, sound embeds its presence in the same intimate recesses where the inner speech of thought refracts awareness and translates the jumble of experience into the portability of narrative. Tantric wisdom conceives of sound as a powerful agent for disciplining the mind. Science has confirmed the capacity of shamanic drumming, chanting, and mechanically produced binaural beats to induce the entrainment of brainwaves.

Ra called his attempts to use music to mold minds "tone science." He was the first African American musician and among the first musicians of any background to avail himself of the unique timbral possibilities of

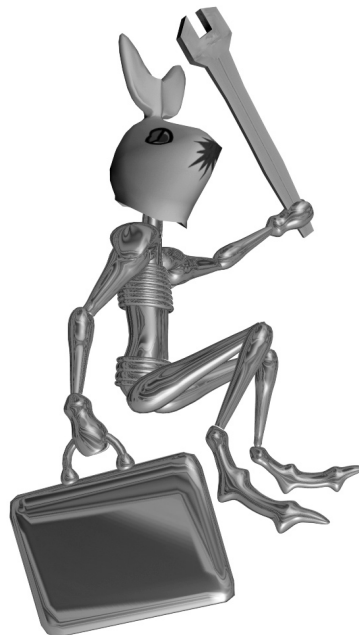
electronic instruments. In my own work, I am attempting to build on many of the basic laws of Sun Ra's tone science within the limitations of my skill sets and chosen instrumentalities. My tools and methods are conducive to a sound product that is more a hypothesis about music. According to what mathematician John L. Casti calls the "science of surprise," any such simulations of complex possible world scenarios are prone to extravagant and unexpected results due to paradoxes, instability, uncomputability, connectivity and emergence built into the problem and the tools applied to its solution. Paradoxes abound in my instrumentality. For example, I've programmed certain voices into my synthesizer in which the register suddenly reverses itself in the middle of the keyboard. In a similar fashion, my deliberate, exhaustive, but less than systematic efforts to de-temper the piano keyboard interface of my electronic synthesizer has resulted in a stubborn absence of computability or playability in the conventional sense. Rules are accrued slowly and are usually as tentative as they are vague. Indeterminacy can be reinstilled in sampled material with the application of secondary effects that are themselves unstable and unpredictable. Oscillating material can be overlaid in a way that takes advantage of the serendipitous gifts of audible and subaudible interference patterns without pretending to be able to bring such patterns under conscious control. My methods force me along a tightrope suspended over an ugly pit of disarticulated noise. And yes, I do fall a lot, but other than my pride, it doesn't hurt much anymore.

My i-pod weighs a ton and yours probably does too. In practice, we modern folk have become quite accustomed to deliberately manipulating our private sonic worlds in a blatant effort to condition our consciousness. Music (and sound art presented in the same space as music) become less object for aesthetic contemplation than prosthetic struts inserted directly into the tissues of consciousness to achieve effects otherwise unattainable. We change the mix and we change our minds, literally. The new media I'm most interested in performing creative operations on is the mind of my listener. The samples and effects in my laptop and keyboards are a kind of pre-palette. What's unique in their arrangement and deployment has everything to do with their immediate and transient impressions on consciousness and very little to do with how they reference or recapitulate any aspect of our shared sonic culture. To speak post-culturally, is, of course, to run a very high risk of mumbling or otherwise being misunderstood. It is, however, the only way to speak to the posthuman lurking in us, waiting to leak through.

### *Fall mountains, just don't fall on me...*

It's not at all unexpected that African-Americans should have a lot to offer to the project of discovering a posthuman destiny. We have been on a trajectory towards just such an ontology ever since arriving on these shores defined by statute as prehuman. (What else would you call 3/5 of a human being?) It is the only authentic emancipation. What if the energy of moving out of a prehuman status was necessarily so intense that we are currently being catapulted right past human and into the posthuman? And as black culture has always led American culture, maybe this great liberating energy can pull others (those who have never enjoyed the benefits of prehumanity) along in its wake.

Modal logic. Counterfactuals. We already know what would happen if you built a city twenty feet under sea level between a massive river, a big lake, and the sea. In truth we live in a civilization that was built well below sea level and now the swollen surf of history's impeccable failure to forget is crashing against the sea wall. Possible worlds theory kicks in: We'd like to find a Lewisonian world where we survive the flood, but to survive as the bloated beings we've become, well, we'd need a much bigger ark than even old Noah could muster. So, the secret in my samples is that we can all claim our alter destiny and become subliminal kids using our electromagnetic scalpels to hack little nicks into the levy. When the waters come, relax. These cursed streets will finally be clean and we posthumans will happily find something like gills have been added to our new morphology and that swimming with friends can be so much fun. What a surprise.



WHIT MacLAUGHLIN

TOWARDS A  
COMPREHENSIVE  
MEDIA METEOROLOGY

## Images Propelled into the Night Sky

I was in Northern Michigan — I think it was in 1988 — and I was on the kind of solitary vacation I liked to take in those days. I heard that a community of poets near Elk Rapids had readings every Friday and Saturday night in a big field with boulders arranged in concentric circles around a bonfire. The public was invited so I went.

The group fittingly called itself the Stone Circle Poets. The six members had gathered around an old-styled, itinerant labor-organizing/hobo poet named Max who had settled down to a life of horticulture in the region. Horticulture and poetry were their way of life. The community, under Max's guidance, had paid tribute to the oral tradition by committing thousands of poems to memory. Now Max was dead, but the remaining poets, each a formidable individual force, kept the Friday/Saturday tradition alive.

This is how it worked. At sundown, the Stone Circle Poets began to recite — all from memory. They started with a couple of sets, but eventually serendipity and free-association were the rule. The evening moved on and the booze kicked in — poems came in daisy-chains, one leading to the next. Pathways of association became streets became boulevards became superhighways. In the course of an evening, hundreds of poems and thousands of images sprang into the space over our heads in a meandering, surging river of imagery.

I passed in and out of sleep, awakening to another poem and then another — I remember Pound, Eliot, Plath, and, well, the illusion was that every poet was present, gently but insistently waiting in line for inclusion into an almost forgotten oral tradition. I remember labor chants, an ancient

Greek self-tribute, a South American pygmy funeral poem, African-American slave poems, improvised poems, surrealist poems — the Stone Circle folks were a living encyclopedia of *ars poetica*.

After about five hours of this, lying under the stars, I was intoxicated by the onslaught of images. (I assure the reader that I was completely sober in a chemical sense.) The effect was convulsive. I was lying under a constellation of rhetoric. I could pick and choose my favorite topics for consideration: politics, musings on mortality, metaphysical speculation. All were alive in a ravishing swirl of voice and imagery and, well, sex, written large on the landscape of northern Michigan but secretly communing only with my interiority. The night sky *became* my interiority. Miniscule breezes, bird sounds, hovering insects, the other bodies lying similarly close by, the *images*; all of it unified into a sort of vibrant and subtle *weather system*, one with a marked and singularly symphonic effect.

By the end of the evening I was pretty much glutted and gone — shit-faced in a storm of oral tradition. I began to wonder why many of my experiences in the theatre seemed a little wan in comparison.

## A Brief Discussion of the Phenomenology of Weather

For our purposes here, a weather system is a series of natural phenomena that mark shifts in atmospheric conditions. The effects of this process of weather can be subtle or profound. They are certainly ephemeral. People captured within the boundaries of a particular weather system feel affected, as a community, by shifts in the weather. The changing of weather reminds us of the passage of time, and serves to synchronize our general experience with the vicissitudes of nature. Weather phenomena have a momentary, but sometimes momentous effect on the people contained within them.

A thunderstorm approaches and a series of subtle and not so subtle changes accrue. The barometric pressure drops, the humidity increases, the sky fills with clouds, the wind shifts, the birds stop chirping, the character of the light changes, the ionization in the air changes polarity, the leaves turn upwards, or inwards, the wind ups in speed, we begin to hear the distant sounds of thunder, the sky darkens more fully, rain appears in the distance, which slowly (or quickly) advances on us, and finally, we are in the midst of a storm — a host of atmospheric changes that have a profound effect on everything from our mood, to our ability to produce enough food for a population. I enumerate these aspects at length to underscore the depth and layered dimension of the event. And these phenomena occur as processes, some on a timeframe that is difficult for us to perceive. Many of them pass unnoticed into our subconscious awareness. But

perceive and notice we do, sometimes with a sense of awe. We feel swept up and fascinated, when we pay attention, impressed with our smallness, but also with our agency — minute, but significant — within the complexity and scale of the forces which surround us.

Combining these effects, we might imagine that, metaphorically, the “weather” of a human situation is the sum total of particularities surrounding the life of a community. Such a thing might also function on the stage as a way of imagining how the particularities of sight, sound, and story interact to create a performance experience. I like the way this allows both subtle, subconscious phenomena and grand, very conscious phenomena into consideration.

## Murky Thoughts About the Ancient Greeks

It's 1974 and I'm very lucky as a college student to be visiting Epidaurus, one of the main theatres of ancient Greece. I'm young and in love with the idea of the old Greek tragedies, though I can't really imagine their much heralded and semi-well documented dramatic effect. Truthfully, I barely know how to read the things, but I'm all weak in the knees over the ancient theatre itself. I am enthralled by the exotic grandeur of the landscape, the sun, the crystal-clear air, the mountain panorama that formed the backdrop to every performance. It was a college cliché in those days that the Greek plays had a kind of power that our present theatre lacked and I sat there on the ancient bleachers trying to understand that power.

I knew that the Greek dramatists told stories that everyone already knew in some way. So their narrative threads were not new. Those playwrights were not concerned with convincing the audience of some “original” narrative — they told a story which already reverberated with the audience in some provocative way. The plays might boldly refer to someone who was alive in the day, someone likely to be in the audience during the run of the show.

For instance, I knew of the famous and controversial General Cleon, who was pointedly referred to through the character of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. He was apparently sitting in the audience on opening night. I certainly got how that would have generated some heat — imagine an American president present and publicly visible at a production of a play dealing with current events (fat chance — we might get to see something revealed inadvertently on his face).

And I knew that the productions of the plays had some sort of liturgical significance in a broader sense within the culture where they were performed. And I understood that myths were stories that somehow reverberated as templates within the psyches of the receivers of the stories — but all these ideas, though captivating, were impossible to comprehend, much less put into action, except in the most romantic of terms.

And Aristotle bugged me. His mode of dramaturgical analysis illuminated the structure of the tragedies, but came up short in accounting for their vaunted effect. I didn't recognize *catharsis* either as an aesthetic goal or as something I had experienced in an aesthetic situation.

## A Glimmer of Insight

*It was after the Stone Circle Poets concert that something clicked.* The effect of that night could be described as a compendium of sight, sound, thought, and action; included in the glossary of necessary elements were serendipity and the unpredictability of nature, the formalized word-craft of the poems, along with the personalities of the speakers. Most important, though, was the comprehensive nature of what was expressed, the layering, the rhythm, the onslaught of words, words, words. It was the rock and roll of the event that swayed me. Everything conjoined to create a sort of compelling weather system — a meteorology of meaning that was, in that particular moment, generating an aesthetic thunderstorm. I could describe the effect as ecstatic, or, if not ecstatic, at least pleasantly stupor-making.

I got something about the Greeks. It was the way the Greeks constructed constellations of thought in the presence of “nature” that gave the plays some of their mysterious cultural power. They were born out of a physical dramaturgy that brought organized thought systems into contact with the unpredictability of a reverberant natural world and then introduced the result into the public sphere. They operated in a sizable and comprehensive phenomenological grid that was appropriate and stimulating to a kind of reverberating cultural feedback that gave tragedy, say, a psychic boost and rendered its effect personal and pertinent in a kind of symphonic and transporting way.

Over time it became clearer to me why the modern day theatre seemed wan and thin in comparison to that night in Michigan and what I imagined for the Greek theatre. Conversation, monologue, traditional story-line, and even non-linear narration, static lighting systems, music playing before and during the show — all of this together did not comprise “a sizable and comprehensive phenomenological grid.” We hadn't conceived of the right spontaneous weather system — we had not assembled a meteorology of meaning for our era. And so, there wasn't sufficient cultural reverberation in our compendium of sight, sound, and action to manufacture aesthetic ecstasy.

Which brings us to a point where we can discuss media in general, and approach a full media meteorology.



## But First, a Couple of Comments about Intoxication

Technically, almost anything can be intoxicating — anger, anxiety, confusion, the defiant asking of questions in the face of permanent ontological uncertainty, sexual anticipation, the energy of scandal, the breaking of taboos — all can get us drunk; all can contribute to a transporting, symphonic effect.

You'll notice that I'm assuming that getting aesthetically drunk is good. Or, at least, an antidote to all that might be considered stultifying and unnecessarily proscribed in the social realm. So, let's be a little more specific there as well. As a viewer I want to teem with ideas when I leave the theatre, with images that I have to sort through; I want the frisson of unresolved questioning. Critics often seem to hope for the equivalent of a good meal in their theatre viewing — they want to feel satisfied. I appreciate a good meal as well, but I expect more from the theatre. Not only do I want to fly high when I leave, I want a piece to come along with me, to provide companionship. I want, at the very least, to feel tipsy and unhinged with a few glasses of figurative champagne or whiskey in my belly. This also assumes that the aesthetic equivalent of a triple hit of LSD might not be a bad thing either.

And I am assuming without critique, that this is a proper goal of theatre — this ecstatic, superego-defeating effect. Ecstasy interests me, because pleasure and beauty interest me and if art isn't going to examine pleasure and beauty in the deepest sense, who is? The male magazine industry?

Anyway, when the great subjects of the theatre coalesce, become polyphonic, and explode, a potential is created for the emergence of some sort of psychologically and spiritually transformative event. It's like the BEST music, the BEST visual art, the BEST vibe, the BEST crazy, captivating and/or liberating thoughts, wrapped in the rock-and-roll of a well-poured theatrical boilermaker.

## What Do We Mean Here When We Say “Media”?

In this case, when you see the word medium, think “something in between that transfers meaning”. I like the pre-“multimedia” use of the term, insofar as it refers to, say, visual artists who work with “mixed media.” It would be useless, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to imagine a culture without electronic media, so, of necessity, we want to include it here as another tool in the kit. And, if we are to conceive of a “proper phenomenological grid” we are going to have to use our wits to include every ounce of our understanding of electronic media as it relates to our comprehension of time, space, and each other.

But I want to stress that an artist's inclusion of electronic media into a theatre work does not necessarily mean that the artist has comprehended and evoked the modern phenomenological grid in that work. On the contrary, electronic media are often used simply as decoration. The hard part is

understanding the meaning and content of what we now call “multimedia effects” on a dramaturgical level. We must see how life, love, and thought are transformed by these new-ish media before we allow that their inclusion in a work heralds the appearance of something truly new.

I finally state something now that may feel repetitive: a theatrical weather system is an interlocking web of constellated thoughts that hover above, around, and through the actor’s bodies; these thoughts create the context for the actors’ physical lives and allow for our metaphysical framing of the actor’s physical life as we perceive it. So, see “multimedia” as elements of a weather system conceived in this mode.

## A Short Glossary Of Theatrical Media

These media elements are intertwined and cross-referential.

They include but are not limited to:

- the bodies of the actors;
- the stuff that fills and animates their bodies — their experiences, personalities, psycho-neurological wiring, their physiognomies, etc. — along with their thoughts, words, dreams, gesture-style, habit; in other words, their souls;
- the sum total of physical life, gesture, rhythm, and physical architecture in a piece insofar as these elements contribute to the perception of a complete and present universe of meaning; this material comprises the object meaning of a piece for the stage;
- the voices of the actors;
- the subject matter of a theatre piece, as it manifests itself in story, verbal expression, and cultural reference; and insofar as it contributes to reverberation within the individual viewer;
- the architecture of environment that surrounds the actors in a piece and locates it in a hierarchy of spatial relationship;
- the primary musical text, or music accompaniment;
- and yes, the way that electronic-based expression — projections, animations, internet networking, cell phone calls, LEDs appearing like starry nights, switchers, computer screens, RP screen — all of this broadcast live or pre-recorded — is woven into the work.

All of these elements form the raw materials out of which the metaphoric weather system of a piece begins to form; the effects, signifiers, conceits, metaphor generators, narrative strands are the expressive tools that comprise the understanding of media I wish to refer to here.

Please note that, traditionally, theatre begins with the word. I've subverted this hierarchy by way of a concept I call **physical dramaturgy**. It is the ever-present, but oft ignored physical subtext to every text. It is the anchor for all discourse that emanates from the stage. It is the soup we all simmer in, but often ignore because we've gotten used to its temperature.

## I Have A Company Called NEW PARADISE LABORATORIES

We come at last to the point where we may consider my company, New Paradise Laboratories (NPL), and its 10-year exploration into the nature of media weather systems. I convened NPL, or it was convened for me as a gathering storm, in 1996 in the midst of work on a graduate degree in directing at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia. The program conferred a unique sort of mid-career MFA. Candidates for the program were head-hunted, and were invited to propose a course of study suited to their individual priorities; then they were given resources to bring some sort of exploration to fruition. I chose to lay the groundwork for a new company to explore the weather system idea.

The company is comprised of seven member actors, six who have worked with me since those earlier days, and one who has come into the process more recently. Their names are Lee Etzold, Rene Hartl, McKenna Kerrigan, Jeb Kreager, Mary McCool, Aaron Mumaw, and Matt Saunders. We now reside and work in Philadelphia PA, and have created nine original works together since the founding of the company. We have developed a pedagogy and, subsequently, a meteorology that is unusual, I think, and very specific to our work.

In general, we like to deal with subjects that connect modern popular phenomena with their classical antecedents. There are many reasons for this, but the main one refers back to the stories at the beginning of this article: we want to make work that has a sufficient density in its weather system to generate ringing image reverberation — something akin to acoustical feedback — in the audience.

As an example, I want to mention a series of three pieces called *The Loverboy Trilogy*. It deals with male pop-culture figures that managed to endure the American pop culture mill to survive through to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

The first piece in the series was GOLD RUSSIAN FINGER LOVE, which was a metaphysical James Bond exegesis. Next came THE FAB 4 REACH THE PEARLY GATES, which posited the Beatles at the end of time. Finally, we created THIS MANSION IS A HOLE: HUGH HEFNER THROWS A PARTY AT THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE, which held as its premise the conceit

that Hefner was a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher worthy of serious consideration. I will talk mostly here about THE FAB 4, because it does its work in ways that are more easily describable. I'll refer also to THIS MANSION.

The three pieces have some elements in common:

- Much like the Greek dramas which they posit as antecedents, these pieces start with figures which pre-exist in the audience's imagination. They trade on images that have a history and currency in each individual viewer. The pieces assume that these reference points will reverberate differently in each viewer, in accordance with his/her personal associations. The pieces leave wide open a latitude of potential interpretation. They purposely create meaning and then dissolve it. And pop figure subjects, whether emanating from a fictional or non-fictional source, are carefully constructed systems of sign and symbol. Thus, each piece starts with a figure whose primary features are allusive in addition to being actual.
- All three pieces evince an invented gesture world as the basis of communication that plays off of and against audience expectation. In this sense, each piece practices some degree of relationship to Brecht's estrangement techniques, but not in the usual sense. For instance, the fictional afterlife of the Beatles in THE FAB 4 REACH THE PEARLY GATES is expressed through a gesture system invented out of paintings by Joan Miró mingled with stage violence choreography.

The *mise en scène* of FAB 4 pits three Catholic school girl/Beatlemaniac angels against the boys from Liverpool. The angels tenderize the boys psychologically, spiritually, and physically through punches, kicks, and flips as a counterpoint to actual interviews with the Beatles quoted, with hallucinatory changes, throughout the piece. In this way, the piece pits the semiotics of celebrity against a recognizable shared pleasure on the part of confirmed Beatles fans to somehow see the Boys "get the shit kicked out of them in the most delicious way" (in the words of one of the viewers of the piece).

- The environments created by company member, actor and scenic designer Matt Saunders, are geometric, architectural, and abstract. They mimic the formal intentions of the Greek amphitheatres, and seem, through their peculiar way of capturing space, to invite errant and obscure energies into the room. They tend to imitate geography.



Rene Hartl (Ringo), Aaron Mumaw (George), Matt Saunders (Paul), Jeb Kreager (John), New Paradise Laboratories' *The FAB 4 Reach the Pearly Gates*, directed by Whit MacLaughlin, the Southern Theatre, Minneapolis, The Walker Art Center "Out There" Series, 2003.

Furthermore, they combine recognizable elements — an interview table and wrestling mats in *FAB 4*, with unrecognizable elements — a halo circle of lights and hundreds of hanging paper scrolls, to create an alien word of potential association. They are, in some way, also related to the Stone Circle Poets' field of concentric circles of cyclopean boulders.

- The pieces all have an elaborate, very loud musical underscoring, comprised of samples from existing music related to the piece, cut, spliced, looped, and combined with drones, and other loops, to create a collage of musical "mantras" that recall music very familiar to most viewers. The effect is both alienating and reassuring. It is also an erotic tease, always dangling the potential resolution of familiar melodies and cadences in front of the audience without actually delivering on the promise. The purpose of this musical idea is to create a sort of running commentary of associations that moves both parallel and perpendicular to the direction of the piece. The underscoring rarely explicates the action of the piece, but, instead, brings it into high relief. It stands in, in some ways, for the forces of nature.

- There is no effort made to impersonate the well-known personae represented in each piece. Always, the intention is to highlight the difference between the actor portraying the character and the character him/herself. For instance, the four actors portraying the Beatles wear appropriate wigs and facsimiles of the Pierre Cardin suits made famous by the original Beatles, but they are clearly simulacra. There is no Beatles Tribute Band.

No attempt is made to submerge the personae of the actors into their roles. In many ways they evince their own personalities accurately while still referencing the signs and symbols of their characters. For instance, Matt Saunders was the actor in the company most McCartney-like in his overall affect — he played Matt Saunders playing Paul McCartney. The effect was both distancing and intimate. We see Matt, with his gently sympathetic personality, peering out from inside the elaborate semiotic mask of his portrayal. In this way, the mode of characterization mimics the effect of literal masking.

- There is text in every piece. In FAB 4, it springs from doctored pre-existing Beatles interviews. In GOLD RUSSIAN FINGER LOVE, it is doctored text from the movie, *Goldfinger*. THIS MANSION includes short, pornographic encounters as if written by a phenomenological philosopher.

In no sense is the text of these pieces deathless prose. On the contrary, the text provides continuity and connective tissue to the body of the work. The text functions very much like screenplay, where the visual component of the film supercedes the meaning and structure of language.

- There are a number of references in each piece to classical/historical antecedents. These references are made without irony. For instance, Jeb Kreager plays John Lennon in FAB 4. At one point in the piece, he is wrestled to the ground in an erotically charged bit of fight choreography by Mary McCool, who plays the Pink Angel. Blindfolded, she reveals a slit in Lennon/Kreager's inner thigh from which she pulls a tiny baby. She then hands the baby to him — he views it with curiosity and flummoxed awe. The musical accompaniment is insistent and gigantic. It is a tender, funny, and strange moment that clearly refers to the birth of Dionysus, but stands alone on its own as an unprecedented moment.

Another example: at the end of THIS MANSION IS A HOLE, seven actors, male and female, with pipes, are dressed in satin dressing gowns in a simulation of a sort of pan-gendered Hugh Hefner. They sit on a

wrestling mat to hear a bedtime story — it's Christmas Eve and Bing Crosby is repeatedly singing the looped phrase "Do you hear what I hear?" from the "Little Shepherd Boy" Christmas boy. This musical scoring is intermingled with riffs from Miles Davis. The bedtime story tells of a man who preserves a strange masochistic propensity for public voyeurism by burying himself in a concrete sidewalk in order that he might feel public footsteps on his body forever. As the story draws to a close, the seven Hefners are tucked into bed by a professional eunuch in a blue monkey head — he covers each Hefner completely with the grey wrestling mat. It is a very tender image combining memories of childhood with suffocation and mortality. Then, a nude actress in a Santa hat and beard enters the space through a fifteen-foot-high fireplace in order to place little wrapped gifts/headstones on the individual lumps of the bodies under the large mat.



Mary McCool (The Pink Angel) and Aaron Mumaw (George), New Paradise Laboratories' *The FAB 4 Reach the Pearly Gates*, directed by Whit MacLaughlin, the Southern Theatre, Minneapolis, The Walker Art Center "Out There" Series, 2003.

The effect is beautiful — ravishing really — gently satiric, and genuinely sympathetic rather than ironic. The moment is a constellation of competing semiotic messages; the audience is left with an indelible meteorological zen koan that intoxicates with its simultaneous availability and impenetrability.

The overall experience of each piece, I think, is greater than the sum of its described elements. The pieces work best with an audience when the image density of the work reaches a critical mass and the elaborate distancing techniques in the piece unite into an effect that is very strongly experiential. The overall effect is not cool and ironic, but supercharged and involving. It verges, in some viewers, on the spiritual. It's not just that questions are evoked, but a questing spirit is engendered in the viewer; a sensation that answers are just around the corner, but that fulfilling interpretability is dangling just out of reach. Viewers feel drawn forward into the piece not by traditional narrative suspense, but by a desire to resolve ontological mystery in general. The sensation and experience of the pieces is exotic, erotically charged, and ravishing.



The cast of New Paradise Laboratories' *The FAB 4 Reach the Pearly Gates*, 2003.



## Finally.

It is important to note, for our purposes here, that each of these pieces brings forth strategies that are drawn from a variety of contemporary media — and we come to why this is critical. Remember that we started with a discussion of a potential relationship between weather, geography, and image. We wanted to seek an elusive “proper phenomenological grid” that would somehow unlock a full spectrum of meaning so reverberant that it would engender a kind of intellectual and spiritual feedback in the viewer.

There is much more to be explored in understanding the relationship of bodies in space and time to grid in general. It has been noted that we function in a series of metaphor-laden grids: for instance, “up” into the space overhead generally signals aspiration. We move “up” in the world. Important thoughts hover overhead. “Up” is equated with goodness, and light. It is the source of emanations from God. “Moving forward” signals having somewhere to go. “Going” is equated with vitality and purpose. And on and on.

But in this study, suffice it to say that there is a grid formed by the sum total of communicative tools that hover, like weather, around the body in space. We can’t invite the winds of the Arkadian mountains around Epidaurus to blow across our stage, but we can simulate that sense of natural grandeur with a media equivalent. In a sense, the scale of our media environment simulates nature. We cannot conceive of our current phenomenological grid without including the metaphoric weather system of our media environment.

New Paradise Laboratories sees the body as a nexus where structures of meaning converge. The body represents an intersection, an accretion of metaphoric and perceptual effects. The body stands upright, alive and vibrant, but vulnerable in the face of a buffeting media storm.