

Elizabeth LeCompte in Rehearsal: An Intern's Perspective

By Matthew McMahan

The date is August 25th, 2009, and after touring their production of *Hamlet* in Gdańsk, Poland, the Wooster Group resumed rehearsals for Tennessee Williams's *Vieux Carré*. I am an intern, sitting quietly in the back of the Performing Garage surrounded by rafters, metallic totems, trusses, wooden platforms (many on wheels), computer screens, microphones, folding chairs, assorted props and costume pieces strewn about the floor. On several of the LCD screens hung around the set, there is a paused clip from the Andy Warhol produced film *Flesh* – an image of a tan, muscular, and naked Joe Dallesandro. This image remains on the screens for the entirety of rehearsal, unacknowledged by the denizens of the Garage.

When LeCompte finally arrives, carrying a few books and a bottle of Australian Malbec, she greets the crew with three pieces to consider. The first is a film clip from *Farewell My Concubine*, where a Peking opera actor dazzles the audience with meticulous control of his hands and gestures. While the movie is playing, LeCompte mocks the clip and the actor for his facile, unrefined gestures. Scott Shepherd agrees, noting, "I wasn't all that impressed with the thing he's doing with his fingers there. That doesn't excite me." It was the performer's lack of precision they found so deterring.

The second piece LeCompte shares is Ben Brantley's review of JoAnne Akalaitis's production for Shakespeare in the Park, *The Bacchae*. Brantley starts, "I saw a wonderful raccoon at the Delacorte Theater the other night. It appeared, as serene and silent as a rising moon, at the far edge of the open-air stage in Central Park," and then criticizes the production for lacking everything the raccoon possessed: "mystery, grace, charisma and (though they didn't bare them) teeth.

Finally, LeCompte doles out the third piece from her morning inspirations: a quote from recently deceased literary critic Richard Poirier. The most powerful works of literature, Poirier insisted, offer 'a fairly direct access to pleasure' but become 'on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable.'" It is this last line that LeCompte repeats methodically, "On longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable," before she casually resumes, "So, I just wanted you guys to think about that."

These three pieces of inspiration are very telling and mark what I discovered to be three defining qualities of LeCompte's rehearsal process. The rehearsals require the utmost precision, followed by the willingness of her cast and crew to take bold risks (what I would define as "teeth") in order to bring works that are "strange and imponderable" to the stage. The following is a series of reflections about my experience working for Elizabeth LeCompte's company at 33 Wooster Street for a period of six months. After first describing what it is to be a Wooster Group Intern, I will describe LeCompte's rehearsal process through the concepts of precision, teeth, and the imponderable, and reflect on how these concepts help us characterize LeCompte as a director.

The Internship

While I had already learned a great deal about LeCompte's process from the seminal texts by David Savran and Andrew Quick, my experience at the Performing Garage offered me the unique position to compare what I had learned about LeCompte in the

library with what I saw in the flesh. I began working for the Wooster Group as an intern in early May, 2009, a few months before the company was set to present *Vieux Carré* at the *Théâtre national de Strasbourg* and the *Festival d'Automne à Paris*. As an intern my primary duties consisted of answering phones, filing paperwork, running errands, and cleaning the facility. In return, however, I had free access to most of the company's archival material and permission to sit through rehearsals, which afforded me the opportunity to document what I saw while the company was rehearsing. While generally I sat in the back of the Performing Garage and watched quietly, sometimes the company needed me to operate a videorecorder to document the "accident tapes." This involved a careful annotation of all that went on during rehearsal, so that later –if needed – the cast and crew could review the tapes to see if there were any moments from previous rehearsals that could be recreated and used in performance.

Like most theatre companies in New York City, the Wooster Group both fosters education for and relies on the cheap labor of interns. It is important to note that many past interns have found themselves as permanent fixtures in the company. For example, Ari Fliakos started as an intern in 1995 before he found himself cast in *A Fish Story*. My supervisor Jamie Poskin began as an intern just a year or two before me. One intern who served the same time as me, Raimonda Skeryte, found herself cast in *Vieux Carré*. Yet, by and large, 33 Wooster Street is a revolving door of interns: college students, wannabe actors and directors, who float in and out, who exist like ghosts in the room, that accept every bit of rehearsal time and artistic inspiration as worthy compensation.

However, the internship is perhaps one of the most valuable ways for the young scholar to get into the room. A little *quid pro quo* and the scholar has access to real, breathing, primary evidence: the happenings in rehearsal, both mundane and dramatic. While I often felt the work was beneath my pay grade, I was glad to take out the trash, field phone calls, and take Scott Shepherd's jock strap to the Laundromat because it afforded me the opportunity to sit in the room. I reveled at the opportunity to be a ghost, an unacknowledged observer, one who could scribble down every platitude and banal detail, mining for any incidental aphorism to spill from LeCompte's mouth. It allowed me the opportunity to see the process stripped bare, uncensored, and unapologetic.

Precision

At first I was quite surprised to see what degree of precision LeCompte calls for even early in her rehearsal process. For whatever reason, I imagined the rehearsals would have a chaotic, "anything goes" kind of atmosphere. Reading LeCompte's thoughts on her own process, "chance work. . . throwing a bunch of beans in the air" as she once described it (qtd. in Savran, *Breaking the Rules* 51), made me think that each day would be dynamically different, that one would walk into the space not knowing what to expect. Some part of that assumption is accurate. But all that occurs in the Performing Garage functions under a highly structured system. This meticulous attention to detail creates a culture of precision.

I would compare the rehearsal process more akin to a film shooting than rehearsals for a stage play. Each scene is carefully set, minutely refined and repeated until perfection. Even when a scene is performed to LeCompte's liking, she rarely lets the actors continue for more than three to four minutes at a time. Once the moment is

perfect, LeCompte may ask the company to perform it again two to three more times. Every minutia is analyzed, dissected, and once everything is set, the cast and crew move on to the next moment. A three to four minute segment of the performance might take an entire day to master. The Group's process is so meticulous that traditional "run-throughs" rarely happen. They would rather spend their time perfecting specific actions or gestures than finding cohesion through running the entire show, even the night before a performance.

And just like film, the technicians are highly involved in every moment of rehearsal. The sound, lights, and video technicians are very much actors in the performance taking shape. They change, adapt, and experiment right alongside the actors. Frequently, LeCompte will be struck with an idea and the sound or video technicians will be asked to "splice something up" at a moment's notice. This sometimes demands complex, on-the-spot editing which the crew executes without hesitation. Kate Valk compares the task to sewing a dress while, at the same time, making alterations.

Because so much of what LeCompte wants creates an environment for the piece, the cast and crew must synchronize to avoid any hazard or missed cues. The stage manager, Teresa Hartmann, has the momentous task of coordinating this complex system which requires extreme patience and vigilance. Before every scene, rather every "take," she calls out specific cues to both video and sound technicians and then warns the entire company, "Everyone ready? Everyone ready? Ok, go!" If one piece of the puzzle is missing, if one actor or one crew person misses the mark, Hartmann stops the scene immediately, and the entire company reassembles to recreate the moment.

Coordination is paramount in this situation, and if a moment fails to come together, LeCompte is liable to cut it and move on. About a month out from when the Group was slated to present *Vieux Carré* in Strasbourg, I witnessed a rather tension-filled rehearsal where the cast and crew were at discord with LeCompte because she wanted to quickly try a new video cue and gave the crew very little time to execute it. After they tried and failed, LeCompte became frustrated and decided to cut the cue entirely. The crew was upset. LeCompte did not give them enough time and patience to get the cue right. They complained that since they were constantly editing, splicing, and adapting cues, she should anticipate hang-ups during rehearsals. This moment is very telling. It illustrates how the ever increasing influx of technology governs the structure and pace of the Group's rehearsal process.

The tension-filled rehearsal between LeCompte and her crew also illustrates the high degree of pressure and expectation under which the company operates, and the precision they require every rehearsal, especially with a showing at two very important international theatre festivals just around the corner. At this point in rehearsals, the Group was not afforded the "dead time" Richard Schechner calls "theatrical pregnancy" (35). They only had a month before they had to present the piece in France where it had been commissioned by *Théâtre national de Strasbourg* and the *Festival d'Automne à Paris*. And even though the Group developed *Vieux Carré* for almost a year before they performed it in front of an audience, this process was interrupted by economic realities that require the Group to constantly perform, tour, and showcase their work while they devise. Consequently, this combination of technology, coordination, and deadlines means that a great deal of emphasis must be on product over play, even though play and

experimentation are still very much a part of their rehearsal process. This balance inevitably creates tension.

Teeth

Part of LeCompte's insistence on precision requires teeth. When LeCompte asks that her cast to bare their teeth (via Brantley's dismissive review of Akalaitis's *Bachae*), she is challenging them to possess the same qualities found in a feral raccoon: a tenacious willingness to react impulsively, to explore, and to be indomitable amidst (seemingly) overwhelming circumstances. Part of the rehearsal process is turn the Performing Garage into an arena for both the actors and the technicians to develop a survival instinct, or what LeCompte calls a "reactive impulse" -- a sixth sense that keeps the performer conscious in the moment of performance. The reactive impulse is meant to give performances a sort of presence and immediacy that LeCompte feels is lacking in most theatrical performances. She opposes "this little thing, this patronizing thing, that [actors] are always one little second ahead of the audience, telling them what they should feel and what's coming next. I don't want performers to be responsible for this. This should be the responsibility of the piece as a whole" (qtd. in Quick 266).

Her fears echo Gertrude Stein's words on the dynamic of theatre, which is likely why the Wooster Group quoted Stein in the supplementary libretto sold during performances of *House/Lights*: "Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play" (Bussman 7). By quoting Stein the Wooster Group acknowledges their goal to create immediacy in the performance, and in turn make the performer and audience hyper-aware of the moment.

This is why LeCompte employs games like badminton or has actors improvise large portions of a performance. In fact, for a long time, the Group tried to incorporate basketball techniques into their performance of *Vieux Carré*. With such elements, the actor cannot fully anticipate what is going to happen any given night and, therefore, cannot affect their reactions to what is occurring on stage. Consequently, the audience experiences a performance that has never happened before and will never happen again. The technicians become increasingly involved because LeCompte often uses technology to hone the actor's reactive impulse. These include, but are not exclusive to, the company's use of televisions and in-ear devices.

Just as performances can be frenetic and at times sensorially overwhelming, all of this technical equipment can make rehearsals feel this way too. Not only must actors compromise with sound and light cues, but they also have to perform alongside extracurricular media, such as televisions or external audio. Much like other recent productions, many actors in *Vieux Carré* wore in-ear devices. The device is often used when the action on stage is too chaotic for an actor to keep up with the score of the text.

In *House/Lights* in particular, the complexity of the score is so dense that it would be a near marvel for an actor to keep up without the in-ear device. However, Valk says the device does provide clarity, but also creates a sense of anxiety that puts the performer in a "state of awareness" (qtd. in Quick 216). Earlier in *Vieux Carré* rehearsals Ellen LeCompte, Elizabeth's sister, was playing the role of Ms. Wire. While not entirely a new comer to the Group (she performed in *Sakonnet Point* in the 70s), she

was new to the in-ear device. At one point in rehearsal, Ellen was fed dialogue from an Andy Warhol film. However, she found the device frustrating and had great difficulty calibrating it into her performance. While the device is meant to liberate the actor from having to make impulsive choices, much like all the other technology, it can be debilitating and restrictive, as well. Thus rehearsals are an opportunity for actors to become acquainted and develop synchronicity with technology.

That is not to say the company lacks any of its trademark impulsiveness. Experimentation still happens. One day I was brusquely ushered away from my desk without a word of explanation as LeCompte began rearranging the furniture frenetically, hanging orange plastic netting above my desk, and grabbing this and that and throwing it around the room. What was once my office now became a film studio where Kaneza Schaal in wild makeup began sprawling around the room in an effort to recreate Ryan Trecartin's anarchic film *I- BE AREA*, a fragmented and psychedelic view of over-the-top, loud, and shallow teenage girls engendered by an "instant action," multimedia-driven age. Some of the girls, including Trecartin (who plays a girl named Pasta), are covered in bright, smeared makeup and wear loud, incongruous wigs. The video is filled with jump cuts, noisy music, and surrealistic imagery, which create an uncomfortable experience both humorous and frightening to the viewer. Schaal recreated this video, make-up and all, and her performance of *I-BE AREA* wound up in fragmented pieces on several of the on-stage televisions throughout *Vieux Carré*. The filming was conducted with a high degree of urgency, a sort of "strike while the iron is hot" immediacy.

For the Wooster Group, "teeth" not only references the sort of impulsiveness required during rehearsals and performance, but the responsibility of the cast and crew to persistently maintain focus throughout a rather frenetic performance schedule. Rarely does one Wooster Group production end and another begin. The boundary between shows is extremely porous, as one show bleeds into the rehearsals of another. The performance schedule for 2009, for example, included a tour of *Hamlet* in Gdansk, Poland in June, while *Vieux Carré* was in rehearsal; followed by a tour of *Vieux Carré* in France in November. When the cast returned, several went to London to perform *Emperor Jones*, while others remained in New York to prepare for the 2010 revival of *North Atlantic* in March.

For such a small company, this kind of revolving-door performance schedule must be daunting. The troupe is forced to juggle many pieces simultaneously. The gestation period for one show is frequently interrupted by the performance of another. The accident tapes that the interns document help the company maintain focus and return to pieces with greater efficiency. For example, on the first of September, 2009 Scott Shepherd asked to watch some of the *Vieux Carré* rehearsal tapes from the previous December so that he could remind himself how he performed a specific dance. That September rehearsal was the first time *since* December that the Group had even performed that scene.

Finally, part of the Wooster Group's survival instinct is seen in the necessity to hoard as many props and set pieces from previous shows as possible. Since one show never "ends," but evolves into the next, the Wooster Group recycles a great deal of what has appeared in other performances. These recycled pieces become traces of the previous shows and enter all of the Wooster Group's past productions into the conversation. With traces from past productions literally found in every corner, it is almost impossible for the cast and crew to avoid recycling old props and materials.

While often incidental, this is sometimes quite methodical. On one of my last days I was asked to ship a bench to Strasbourg for the Wooster Group's showing of *Vieux Carré*. The shipping cost was exorbitant, so much so that it made little sense to me why LeCompte would insist on having *that* bench when she could have easily purchased another in France and saved hundreds of dollars. Later that day, I was watching a taping of *To You, the Birdie* and lo and behold, that bench, that particular bench was on stage staring me in the face.

The Imponderable Vieux Carré

Amidst all these challenges, from technology to traveling, LeCompte is steadfastly concerned with solving the play, of unraveling and exalting what makes it – in this case *Vieux Carré* -- both strange and imponderable. LeCompte's first impulse to explore the work of Tennessee Williams was inspired by a program brochure printed in Hong Kong where they were performing *The Emperor Jones* at the time. The brochure credited Eugene O'Neill as America's premier dramatist. LeCompte found this to be a very intriguing statement and deigned to consider who else could claim such a title. Shepherd suggested Tennessee Williams, and from there the Group contacted their cineturg Dennis Dermody for film versions of Williams work. While *Vieux Carré* was never made into a film, Dermody recommended the play to LeCompte because he thought it would be a good fit for the group.

Williams's *Vieux Carré* takes place at a boarding house at 722 Toulouse Street in New Orleans where Williams lived in the late 1930s. It is a dream play of sorts centered around the Writer (who Williams acknowledges as a younger version of himself) as he experiences the story and character of the play "through the lighter areas of my memory" (5). As one of the last published plays from this storied playwright, *Vieux Carré* is a confessional on how Williams learned his craft through living with and observing the dilapidated and seedy denizens of New Orleans. *Vieux Carré* is not a narrative play but, rather, an episodic one, devoted to showing a series of interrelated events highlighting the personalities and individual stories of its inhabitants. In the course of the play, we become intimately acquainted with several off-beat characters— all of whom seem to be on the end of their journey.

Though *Vieux Carré* is one of Williams's minor works, it is very well suited to the Wooster Group for several reasons. First, its loose structure and lack of story arc give the company a great deal of space to play with its order and content. Second, the play is maudlin and over-dramatic in tone. As the characters wax poetic about their desires, it reaches a level of feverish melancholy that is easy to explore and exploit. Third, the play is thematically rich. Not only is Tennessee Williams one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century, whose name alone provides a myriad of resonances, but this play in particular brings up many issues that are ripe in the American conscious. *Vieux Carré* brings forward subjects such as New Orleans, abandonment, sexuality, guilt, illusion, and deception. Ultimately, what the Wooster Group has is a play weak in structure but strong in character and theme – a magic combination of elements that compliment their body of work.

Perhaps the key innovation to LeCompte's delivery of *Vieux Carré* is through the Writer. Fliakos performs the character of the Writer as more than just narrator. He actually conducts much of the performance, cueing entrances, reading lines, typing scenes as they are being performed, almost conjuring the landscape of play *à la*

Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At the beginning of the second act, the Writer (both narrator and Williams' voice in the play) is seen at his typewriter, and as he types, he dictates these words to himself: "Instinct it must have been directed me here, to the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, down country as a – river flows no plan." Almost immediately he cuts himself off and curses, "Exposition! Shit!" (69). During the first read through of this scene, LeCompte drew contention with this line, mostly because she found it ironic that Williams himself wrote far too much exposition in the second act. In their initial read through of the second act, LeCompte instructed the actors to jump most of the exposition. If they caught themselves reading a line that was dictating too much, that was not progressing the action, they were encouraged to mumble over it or skip it entirely.

What they found in this exercise is that Williams's text is littered with exposition. Suddenly the play became a riddle for LeCompte to solve. How were they to overcome all this exposition, all of this bad writing (as the company saw it) to keep the play dynamic, vibrant. Initially LeCompte's inclination was to restructure the play entirely – perhaps by playing the scenes in a less episodic way or even keeping focus on one character at a time. Neither of these thoughts bore much fruit further than conception, however, and would likely have angered the Williams' estate anyway. In the coming weeks the Wooster Group solved the problem by driving into the storm and delivering the exposition as unapologetically as possible through the Writer. The Writer in Fliakos's hands became a sort master of ceremonies for the production, a conjurer; dictating and typing what the characters would say and do next, veritably creating the world as it appeared around him. This decision was a watershed moment in the rehearsal process and greatly improved the pace and energy of the performance. Furthermore, the Writer's narration bolsters the "dream" motif of the play: all that occurs on stage is being conjured by the Writer's memory, all the characters are elusive ghosts willed into existence by the Writer's somber thoughts. It elevates Williams's prose beyond the maudlin exposition that dominates the text.

LeCompte as Director

It almost goes without saying that the concepts of precision, teeth, and the imponderable do not simply dictate the structure of the rehearsal process, but also determine the structure of the Wooster Group's performances. Since the company's emergence through *The Rhode Island Trilogy*, *Route 1 & 9*, and *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Point. . .)*, the quality and structure of their performances has shifted drastically. Much like the Wooster Group performances of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* or *The Emperor Jones*, their production of *Vieux Carré* maintains a remarkable fidelity to Williams's text. This has been an ever growing trend with the Wooster Group and should be of note. In the 80s, the company generally presented only fragments of plays or texts combined with other sources to create a patchwork collage on stage. After the company performed a version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in the early 90s, however, they have been increasingly focused on adapting dramatic texts as the center piece of their performances. With the O'Neill pieces, *Phèdre*, *Hamlet*, and now *Vieux Carré*, the Wooster Group has developed a growing repertoire of performances that are by and large faithful to the playwright's text and structure. The company now seems more geared towards creating refracted performances of classical texts and far less concerned with creating collage.

Since the productions have moved from a performance of multiple centers to a singular one, so too have the rehearsals. This marks a significant trend in the American avant-garde since the 60s, when a decentered, perhaps Marxist, approach determined the process of devising work. After the 60s, however, auteurs, central visionaries, such as Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, began to emerge and personified the tone of creation. They controlled every aspect of their productions, typifying the Stage Manager à la Edward Gordon Craig. This shift is especially evident in the formation of Mabou Mines, which at first strove to devise works as a community, but eventually became a “company of directors” instead, each the chief, the boss, the centrifuge of their own works. Mabou Mines evolved from one extreme to the next in less than ten years.

The Wooster Group’s operations were quite anathema to this trend throughout the 70s and 80s, however. Like Mabou Mines, the Group had no clear leader from its inception. LeCompte was the director, but the vision, the artistic gestalt, belonged to the group. In a 1984 interview with Mindy Levine, LeCompte defined her role as the “functionary center,” where all things “must pass through,” a sort of filter for the artistic process. To talk about the Wooster Group was not to talk about the work of one person. Now, however, the analogy is far less apropos. Around the time the Group began centering performances on a singular text, LeCompte evolved into the indisputable leader. She became the *metteur-en-scène*, the locus of the Group’s creative process. When I watched her in rehearsal I did not see someone who assembles or filters, but a director who dictates, sometimes jumping on stage and showing actors exactly what she wants. One rehearsal, LeCompte repeated an action for Kate Valk, even saying the line for Valk, a total of four times. What I saw in rehearsal was far more than a functionary center, but a director who actively prompts what happens on stage.

If LeCompte may appear particularly scrupulous in rehearsal, it is important to note that this quality is what helped transform the Wooster Group into one of the country’s most important theatre institutions. When LeCompte took over the Performance Group (TPG), the company’s overall debt was above \$100,000 and was on the verge of imploding. LeCompte offered to adopt both the space and original title of Schechner’s company, The Wooster Group, and in turn seized all TPG’s accumulated debt. Schechner calls LeCompte a sedulous business woman, slashing and cutting wherever necessary: “She brought in new managers, instituted very strict budgetary controls, and lowered the deficit in part by cutting salaries” (55). And apparently, given the Wooster Group’s longstanding reputation in the American theatre (almost forty years now), LeCompte’s adjustments were enough to sustain a once floundering company. She took a fledgling theatre company, whose debt hovered around \$100,000 in the 70s and made it into one with an annual budget around \$3,000,000.¹ Not many companies, avant-garde or otherwise, have both sustained and thrived in the economic, highly commercial scene of New York City. The Wooster Group’s longevity owes itself, in no small part, to the grit and doggedness of LeCompte’s leadership.

Through my internship I learned a great deal about the quality of the Wooster Group’s process, which I find based on values found in the three pieces of inspiration LeCompte shared with the cast and crew -- precision, teeth, and the imponderable. I would attribute these three qualities to LeCompte, herself, as artist, director, and theatre manager. Her rehearsals are filled with risk and pressure, while she simultaneously

¹ This was a ballpark figure offered to me by General Manager Edward McKeaney.

demands experimentation and exploration. Her use of technology, along with a very busy performance schedule, produces very fragmented rehearsals, yet she strives for and achieves cohesion throughout her body of work. She is fastidiously devoted to very specific moments in rehearsal, rarely running shows, yet her *oeuvre* bespeaks a large, overarching vision. Her work, her company, and her process are filled with precision and teeth, and can be characterized as nothing less “on longer acquaintance, strange and imponderable.”

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