

Interview with The Wooster Group's Artistic Director Elizabeth LeCompte

The Wooster Group had its origins in The Performance Group, the ground-breaking “environmental” theatre company founded in 1967 by Richard Schechner, the legendary American experimental theatre director. Elizabeth LeCompte joined the company in 1970 and five years later began to create her own work with Spalding Gray, apart from Schechner’s company yet still in its venue, the Performing Garage, located in the SoHo district of New York City. This former factory on, yes, Wooster Street, still serves as their home base where they develop (and often perform) their work.

Perhaps one day someone will write a detailed account of the rift that occurred, leading to the departure of Schechner, and the morphing of his company into The Wooster Group in 1980, with LeCompte as its Artistic Director.

Since its beginning the ensemble has been in a continual state of flux with members involving themselves in other pursuits only to fluidly rejoin. Simultaneous to these comings and goings has been an equally constant artistic evolution that has produced a considerable body of work: nineteen meticulously crafted pieces for theatre along with eight for film/video and five for dance. Note “pieces”, not plays. The Group does not present “plays” - they serve merely as springboards for some of the most complex, fascinating, bewildering and intellectually challenging work ever seen on stage. While not courting controversy they seem unable to avoid it. Acclaimed for brilliant individual performances as well as technological wizardry, Wooster’s unique creations are seen in festivals around the world.

Relaxed and imperturbable, LeCompte fielded my questions for an hour in the quiet of a hotel room, displaying a mental acuity that utterly defies her beckoning seventieth birthday.

Hillar Liitoja: The Wooster Group is one of the very few companies in the world I admire so intensely that it makes no difference to me what it is you are presenting. If you are in town, I will go and see you. In Toronto there is an organization called the Theatre Centre that is devoted to supporting every kind of “experimental” theatre. They just promoted your visit by starting off with - “Just two words: Elizabeth LeCompte”. This is particularly remarkable since the Theatre Centre is right now nearing the end of their biennial national festival. You’d think they’d not bother even mentioning you for fear of losing some of their audience. How does it feel to be the object of such intense respect and admiration? How does it feel to be such a star in a very circumscribed world?

Elizabeth LeCompte: Well, right now your saying all that, it feels great but I don't really experience it like that in my regular life, because I don't get a lot of that (*laughs*). I feel that I'm still at the very beginning of my career in some ways and even coming back here to Toronto I'm still exactly where I was 25 years ago when I came here. I'm still playing at the same Harbourfront, I'm still making work that's considered experimental and it's put on the last page of the Saturday Globe and Mail. I still feel that somehow I'm doing the same thing that I started to do, so I don't feel any different from the way I felt 25 years ago. But your saying all that makes me feel really good right now and I'd like to know how long it's going to last. I don't think any longer than a really good movie that I walk out of and I've loved it and then I forget it, *The Artist*, something like that.

No, your work stays long in the memory. I mean obviously there are those who would like to bolt from the theatre after twenty, or even ten, minutes ... (*she laughs*) But those who stay ... You started off as studying art, painting, I think, in particular. What inspired those studies? Which artists did you particularly admire at that time?

Well, it started much earlier than that, it started when I was about eight I guess and I liked Benjamin West, a kind of primitive American painter. And so I decided then that I wanted to be a visual artist. After that I got involved very much with the new American Expressionism, and the New York School basically, when I was working as a student. But then for some reason, I think it was the politics of the time, the sixties, drugs etc, I got involved more with theatre, with communities of people working. And so from then on I sort of veered away from painting and I sort of integrated that world into my work designing the pieces that I made. And I had a lot of early interest in architecture as well. I had given some architectural and engineering drawings to the college that I went to, to apply for art, so from the very beginning I was more interested in architecture. But at the time, in the late fifties, it was very difficult for a woman to pursue that kind of career, especially if you came from New Jersey and you didn't have any people who encouraged you in that way. So I guess I kind of veered off into architecture and from that into designing the theatre pieces.

Your involvement with theatre started off with Richard Schechner's The Performance Group.

Well, not really. It started before that. When I was in school I was involved with a company in Saratoga Springs that was called The Caffé Lena. It had a full café on one side and a loft on the other side. This woman named Spencer started a theatre company so on the weekends I would waitress at the café and then began to become involved in the theatre company. And this company, for a year and a half, included Spalding Gray [theatre creator and founding member of The Wooster Group] so I met him there and then we went together to New York.

And so it was basically Spalding who led you to The Performance Group.

Definitely.

What is it about a given play - or source material - that makes you decide to use it as a springboard to create a Wooster piece?

I don't know - cause it's different every time. Maybe before I die I'll see some kind of system, but it seems to me that I just go from some kind of question that comes up in the piece before and the question can be articulated - as it was with *LSD ... Just the High Points ...* - or it could be something that's intuitive that I wasn't able to develop in the piece before. It could be a performer that he or she has to do something; it could be that somebody lays an idea down and I just have nothing else to do in that time and so I pick that up just because I like to work; it could be that somebody approaches us and says I can get money for this and I've never heard of it before or I haven't read it like Chekhov, you know, Ron Vawter said we should do *Three Sisters*, there's a lot of women in the play and we have women in the company so we did that; it's so many ideas that I don't want to look back, I don't want to know what it is.

So in a way it's intuitive and natural.

I think so, it feels like a natural process.

I'm sure it varies, but how much time does it take for you to go from the first glimmer - *maybe* we could do something with Chekhov's *Three Sisters* - to the final decision - we are *definitely* going to base something on *Three Sisters*?

That happens almost immediately. When we read the translation by Paul Schmidt of *Three Sisters*, I saw it almost immediately and then it took a year and a half. We performed it during that time and I worked on it all during that time but it took that long for me to complete the whole picture. I have a kind of a picture that's out of focus, that comes up, and I think that makes me say, "I can do it, I can make the piece." But I couldn't ever articulate at that time what that is. I have to say it's usually a visual, sometimes an aural, sense of what the piece will be. And then I'll go way far away and then eventually I realize a lot of times I come back to that original picture.

I imagine some elements are already there by the time you've made that decision to proceed, but once that decision's been made, what are among the first things you want to explore and nail down?

Hmmm, I like to get, as soon as possible, some physical space marked out and at the same time I like to hear the performers say the text cause I don't

read the text separate from the performers. So when we read a text, we read it together or we do it together. But we never talk about it and we never sit down at a table and assign roles. I have an idea about who I think should play what but sometimes that doesn't work out, we switch around. So I'd say that I like to hear it in the space with the performers I'm working with and the technicians. I like to have a general idea of what the three-dimensional space is going to consist of and I like to have one or two things from a piece before that I didn't really get to use in a way architecturally, so I'm curious about how to use these things spatially.

Have you ever considered - or accepted - a commission?

Yes, several times. Early on, I guess it must have been in the late seventies, a company from Europe commissioned us to do a piece with their company in Holland and that later became *North Atlantic*. And then Peter Sellars, the theatre director, he offered us a commission to do Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Anthony* with Ron Vawter playing St. Anthony; *La Didone*, the opera, by the KunstenFestivaldesArts in Brussels; and *Hamlet* for the Barcelona Festival.

I'm shocked. I kind of thought you basically created only whatever you wanted to create ...

Well, I do.

Yes, of course, you're not going to accept a commission if doesn't interest you, correct?

Well I don't know whether it interests me until I've accepted it. So there's a problem there.

There *is* a problem there.

Because I see what I want to work on in everything. When I'm ready to work, almost anything can become material. It feels porous to me. If I have an idea, it will flow through.

You call the process of making a show a collaboration. Am I correct to assume that every artist in the company is an equal, that every artist has the right to cross disciplines, as it were, and comment on any aspect of the creation - and later the performance?

Yes. That doesn't mean that I'm going to accept ...

But you know what I mean. In so many companies the lighting designer, for example, has no right to say anything about the décor or the sound or whatever.

Whereas with you, everyone who is involved in the project has the right to make a comment about any aspect of the production.

Yes, you're right, but it's that word "right". It's not about "right" cause noone comes in for that. It's more about that there's *always* in the room an argument, and I don't mean an argument in the sense there's a fight. There's an *argument* in the sense of a dialogue always in the room, and sometimes there's disagreements and sometimes I'll go with the person who I don't agree with as far as I can go until I can't go there anymore and I have to go back, retreat. Sometimes I know that's not the way I want to go but I need that argument to be there from everybody, all the time.

Perhaps I should have said "the freedom".

Yes.

Whenever you face uncertainty, you look to yr co-creators, right?

Totally. Not only look to them, I demand that they give me something.

However you retain the right of "final say".

The *freedom*. No, maybe here it's a case of "right". I don't know. It's more that they give me that, I mean if anybody argued enough that they didn't agree with me, they would leave - or I would leave.

Leave the room?

No, leave the company. In other words, there's some kind of given thing, there always has been from the beginning, and I guess this must be a theatre thing, that people defer to the director. I'm not a traditional director, but I'm lucky enough to have that instilled in most of the people I work with that they give me that right without my having to demand it.

Are you also in a way implying that things get hashed out until common agreement is reached?

Sometimes. Sometimes people just look at me like I'm crazy and do what I ask.

Good. (*we both laugh*) By the way, you're doing a wonderful job of leading into my next questions. During the creation of *House/Lights* you say that Roy Faudree refused to say any of Gertrude Stein's lines - and when you coaxed him into speaking a few, he wd just subvert them in various ways until you relented and he was spared speaking any of her text.

You know, he did retain two lines. But he loved *Olga's House of Shame*, the movie that was running through, that had a text as well, and he loved those lines, so he took a lot of those lines on.

So he did end up saying two lines. I thought the job of a performer was to follow directions. To what extent will you submit to your performers?

If they really don't like doing something I don't want to watch them do something they don't like to do. So I'll try to find what they love to do and follow that track, always. I mean sometimes I'll force a performer towards something that I think I need and every once in a while that works out brilliantly, that I force someone to go someplace they don't want to go. It's very hard to do but I don't like to do it and I only do it when I feel I have to.

That there's no other alternative.

Yes.

A couple of days ago, when I watched the last rehearsal of *Vieux Carré*, you cut a line, added words, assigned new tasks, changed blocking - all mere hours before opening night. (*she laughs*) That's fearless and it makes me think the company is so familiar with the work, with each other, with continual changes, that you have total confidence they can assimilate and execute. It makes me wonder if there's a huge safety net in the actors being allowed to openly speak up mid-performance to rectify anything that goes awry. And it also makes me think you don't really mind if something misfires because it's live, it's exciting, it's palpably real.

Well, that's a case where I guess it's particular to my personality. I love the possibility that there's an accident going to happen that night. When it happens, if it doesn't give me something new, I'm horrified. If it gives me something new I don't care. You're right, it's a big risk and I suppose you could say that I enjoy that risk. But I don't enjoy it when it goes awry. I don't know what to say. It's a difficult thing, always. And I always do a lot of work on a piece, for instance this piece, it's not finished yet, I have one more section that I'm working on. So every night they have to go in cold. Tonight there's going to be another piece of this puzzle that took me so long to work out, I'll work it tonight. But if it goes awry and it's the last night of this run and I can't go back in and work on it, it's devastating to me because the next time we work on this piece will be another six months.

Well, that makes a lot of sense what you say. When it turns out well, it's awesome, but when it doesn't, then ...

Yeah, I'm not a person who loves to see everything fall apart all the time but I realize that sometimes that has to happen to make something more

Surely there must be times when you get really irritated with some performer or other - and vice versa - but do you ever get really *angry* for whatever reason? And if so, how do you deal with that anger?

Well, usually if I'm angry it's because I haven't been able to come up with something. So I'm throwing it off. The only reason I know this is for so many years I've known the only way to correct that for me is to turn it back on myself and to figure out what I really want and to go a different route to get it cause the anger usually is coming up against something that the other person isn't understanding that I want and is unable to do. So I don't like to take on my own frustration, I like to throw it out onto other people, so in the work I have to just constantly ... and the performers help me with that. They'll tell me that I'm doing that. If I say, "Why don't you *do* something? Why don't you do that *right*? All I'm asking you to do is *this*?", they'll turn it around on me and say "You're not being specific enough." or "You didn't tell me *this*." and I'll have to go back and go in cause always I figure every time that happens, not in life but in the work, cause we're there for a different reason than in life, always it's because I haven't figured out a way to communicate it, I haven't figured out a way to make it easy, I have to take another route, I have to walk around the wall instead of bashing into it.

I'm going to say that's just wise.

(with a touch of sarcasm) **And I am a totally wise person.**

No, I'm saying that seriously. I mean, how can you be more helpful than to have this kind of default position of, "I'm really upset right now," and then say "OK, but that's my fault, it's my problem."

Well, it doesn't come right away. I mean sometimes I'll just scream, they'll tell you, I'll just scream, but they let me do that because they know me now, so they know the system too, they'll stand back. I mean when new people come in, I think it's a little shocking, but for most of the people, they're going, "Oh, there she goes again", and they know I'll come around.

And ultimately what's happening during those moments is that you're not expressing anger at a particular person, you're expressing super-frustration at the situation.

No, it could be a specific person, it could be the situation. Sometimes I'll *pretend* it's the situation, but it *is* a specific person. But they do the same thing to me.

They *scream* at you?

Absolutely. It's frightening. It's like my painting has suddenly come alive and is coming at me. I'm confused and upset.

Confused, upset?

When they turn on me, I'm confused. When I'm working I don't think of them as ...

Enemies, antagonists?

I don't know, I don't think of them as ... people, individuals. I see the whole room as this kind of ... we're all working, we're all like atoms of some sort, we're all colours, we're all things, we're all moving, we're all spirits. So when the spirits become live and actually confront me, it's like ghosts becoming live, coming up from the grave or something, not the grave, or down from ... I don't know where. There's suddenly like, oh my God, these are people and they're mad at me. I'm just confused. But we work it out and we go back in - cause they're confused that I don't see what I'm doing with them. Sometimes there's a mutual misunderstanding and we always get through that.

You always just talk it out?

No, we just go back and do work. We don't often talk it out, not in the way you're thinking. Somebody will say to me, it's like *click* for me, it's sort of like a Zen thing where they come up and just slap me in the face. And I go, "oh, yeah", and then we go back.

Not literally slap you?

No, not literally. That's what it feels like.

I'd like to turn your attention towards critics and the press. I read that ostensibly your feelings about advertising and promotion are so ambivalent that you seem to cultivate marginalization while eschewing fame and the spotlight. Is that an accurate assessment of your intent?

No, it might be an accurate assessment but it's not my intent. Because of the kind of the kind of work we do I know we're always going to be a little off from whatever is happening traditionally or even in the avant garde at the time. Because I'm always trying to push something a little further, find out something I don't know. I'm always going to be doing something that's not quite in the stream of things for critics. Even avant garde work, that becomes codified so quickly.

Codified?

“This is what the avant garde should look like.” And then I’ll do something and they’ll go, “What is she doing? It’s not right.” So I know I have to deal with a certain lag in the critical establishment coming up to what we’re doing. So that means I would like to and have spent my life trying to figure ways to get around that lag. I’ve done it in the past, I did it by constantly ... we do a piece and the review would be marginal most of the time. It’s only a couple of times when we joined with the critical establishment totally at the time the piece opened - in fact I can’t think of any piece that from its first moment has been accepted critically by the general establishment. So I bring the pieces back so they can see them again and that helps. People always say to me, “LSD was such a great success,” or “Brace up! was such a great success” - well, *Brace up!* got a bad review in the *Times* the first time it ran and it’s been one of our most famous pieces. *LSD* was *dismissed* critically, so was *La Didone* when it first opened in Europe, most of our pieces have been marginally critically accepted in that way. And that’s painful but it’s also a healthy thing for us work-wise. But I have to have to figure out how to market that. So for us for the new digital age has really helped because of blogs and our ability to get to our audience is so much better. Now that we can “market” our work *through* our work by our daily blog, it’s whatever is happening to us during the day, that helps, that’s increased our presence on the internet and helped us expand our profile in the world and we’re not dependent on ... It’s been forty years and the *Times* has never written a preview piece on me the way they do with most everybody who comes up with a big piece. I’ve never had that and I probably never will. So we’ve figured ways to get around that and that’s been very exciting and creative for me.

I heard there was once a review in the Village Voice that was so upsetting or irritating that it made you want to ban certain critics entirely. Do you mind telling me what was so annoying, if that’s the right word, about that review?

I can’t remember, there have been so many of them. I’d have to know which one that was because there have been so many bad reviews. For *Rumstick Road*, for instance, we got just a terrible review from Michael Feingold in Village Voice about Spalding and how he shouldn’t be showing any of his private life to us, it was an affront to his family, etc. And I felt that was ... stupid. Sometimes we would keep reviewers out - there have plenty I would have liked to - but I don’t think I ever did.

Enter Kate Valk [consummate performer and founding member of the Group]

What, for you, is the purpose of showing a work in progress when you know full well it is not finished?

To get audiences down early, to get them in on the process so they want to come back; to keep a profile in our world so people are talking about it and coming to see it - and to make money along the way, to finance the piece.

Because if we haven't gotten a commission we have to finance it ourselves, so we charge money for those [works-in-progress], it's like a little art-tax. (laughs) And that helps us to continue working.

You are one of the incredibly few directors to attend every performance of every show. Would you tell me why you do that?

I don't know. I think it's because I'm always working on the pieces. I think once I stop working on them, and that's really true at the end of the run cause for me working in front of an audience is the best way to complete a piece. I really just want to be there.

Do you at all care if the audience understands your "take" on a given piece, that it "gets" the rationale behind certain major bold decisions?

Well, I care very much that they do, but when they do I want to move on as fast as possible. When they don't, I'm disturbed but I keep going.

Do you imagine how an audience will react to any given event in a piece? And/or do you hope they will respond in a certain way?

Both, yes.

Do you have a general, overall desire concerning the effect of the Group's work on an audience?

Mmmm. I guess I want them to be stunned and amazed. And I want them to laugh and to cry. (asks Kate) Does that sound right? (Kate says, "Yeah.") I don't know. You might qualify that and say I just came up with that cause I was looking at the needle [CN Tower] and I was stunned and amazed at why they would build something like that.

Oh, I think it's a little more than that. But I wonder, does it concern you how a piece is overtly received? I read about the minutes-long silence that greeted a Chicago performance of *House/Lights* and during the curtain call the reviewer observed perplexed expressions on the faces of the performers. Did that silence disturb you? And was it indeed a correct reading of the performers' reaction to the communal silence?

Well, luckily we have Kate here, I have no memory of that whatsoever.

Kate - I don't really remember that either, but yeah, you want them with you when you've climaxed. You want them to be with you the whole way and when you're finished you want them to be finished too.

But being devil's advocate, didn't you say something about liking your audiences to be stunned?

It depends on what stunned means, not like being hit on the head, I mean stunned in the way of *stunning*, it's a *stunning* show - there's two meanings, one is like you're in a coma and the other is like you're excited and an idea has popped into your head, what they call the "ahaa moment".

Kate - And the "stunned" leads to something else very quickly.

You love exposing the machinery of theatre as performers, not stagehands, move set-pieces around, rearrange props, speak audibly to technical operators. What makes you derive so much pleasure from that? Why do you consistently make this an integral part of the Wooster experience?

Kate - Because the whole room is alive, it means that everything can speak and there's no suspension of disbelief, we're not asking the audience to pretend things aren't there, or to blot out ... The whole room is awake and alive so anything could happen.

We always talk about if someone spoke out in the middle of the performance, we'd be able to incorporate it into the show.

Kate - I mean that's what drew me to the work, I'd never seen anything like it. When I saw Sakonnet Point I was stunned, I was short of breath, because the whole room was electric, all four walls, floor, ceiling. And you didn't know what was going to happen. It wasn't just the audience and then that dark space that you can't traverse, and you see something happening far away, all the remoteness of the fourth wall. I was blown away. The whole room was alive and electric and I was part of it. I was in it and I wasn't thinking about it while it was happening, I was in the moment with it and I'd never seen anything like it and that's why I volunteered.

One feature that repeatedly occurs in the Group's work is the superimposition of other source material onto a play's text - Pigmeat Markham's vaudeville routines colliding with Wilder's *Our Town*; Timothy Leary's babysitter-reminders as counterpoint to Miller's *The Crucible*; Joseph Mawra's soft-porn B&D film *Olga's House of Shame* in a mash-up with Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*. Why do you find these seemingly wildly-disparate combustions so fascinating, so inspiring?

Well, I think a lot of that has to do with me liking a story, a narrative and sometimes we're working with texts that don't have a strong narrative. And when they don't have a strong narrative I'll look for it in another system that will come through so you can see the main text we're working with but you can follow another narrative. Why I have to do that, I don't know but that seems to be a ... I don't like abstraction in that way, I don't like prose works, I wouldn't want to stage prose works, I don't like that on the stage. I like the stage with time and story. So for instance something like "The

Closet Drama” (Kate’s name for *Frank Dell’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony*) I had so many other stories involved in it. We brought in Bergman’s *The Magician* because I saw the story of the wandering troupe finding something, and the thing we were trying to find was what was Flaubert talking about, you know I need that conversation to go on in a piece. I don’t do it with all pieces, the Chekhov doesn’t have any other story than Chekhov, it has other aural or visual themes coming through but not text.

I imagine you would agree that the human mind cannot help but make connections. *House/Lights* actually began with the Olga film and it suddenly occurred to me that you could marry it with Julia Child’s memoir, *My Life in France*.

No, absolutely not. Because it wouldn’t have a narrative that I was really interested in. That’s like saying I could stage the phone book, you know what I mean, and there was a time in my life when I really thought I could stage the phone book. But I now know that was hubris.

Well, if you were to put your heart and formidable mind to it, would you not be able to create an extraordinary work combining almost any two source materials that I would pick out of a hat?

I don’t know. That’s a challenge. Is that a challenge? Give me two things and some money and I’ll do it.

I’ll betcha you could. I’m not saying “absolutely anything”, I do think I had that proviso in there.

(she laughs)

In 1995 you were awarded a McArthur Fellowship, often known as the Genius Grant, one of the most wonderful prizes in the world as one cannot apply for it, the nominators are unknown, the jurors are shrouded in secrecy, and its recipient - of (nowadays) five annual installments of \$100 000 each - carries no obligations. It is simply recognition of the greatness of one’s talent or artistry with the hopes there is more of the same nature to come. Recipients are not even aware of their candidacy until the phone rings. I remember being so happy for both you and Richard Foreman. I would love to know where you were when the call came, how you felt, and what it meant to you?

I remember exactly where I was. I was sitting at a desk next to my bed in my loft and when I picked up the phone, it was a woman that ran the foundation at the time and she said, “I’m calling to let you know you’ve received the McArthur award”, and I thought it was a joke, so I said, “Oh, come on.” And then I realized it was true and I had this feeling, I still have it, of fainting, I thought I was going to faint. That’s all I remember. And I

remember we went out for dinner afterwards, Jim Clayburg, you (Kate), me and Ronnie [Vawter]. Anyway, it was very surprising but she did say to me, “Well I think you should call Susan Sontag because Susan was the one who got you the award.” So there was always a qualification, just as there is in all the reviews.

Again, you are so beautifully leading into my next question. Since I am such a great admirer of Susan Sontag, I wonder if you are too and if she ever came to see Wooster’s work.

Everything. She was a good friend. She was in the front row every first opening, even when we were doing just the beginnings of pieces, open rehearsals, she was there.

I am curious to know if you follow the work of any of today’s theatre creators. And if so, who?

Well, I really don’t have a lot of time so it’s hard. And I think it’s a problem for people who work in something and they get older and it’s harder for them to encompass all the new stuff. I can’t stay out so late at night. So Kate sees a lot more than I do. But I follow all our interns, Richard Maxwell, John Collins, Marianne Weems, Eric Dyer and his company Radiohole. And Jean Reed, though she was never an intern, and whenever a playwriting award nomination would come through the Garage we’d always nominate her.

I have a quote here from Don Shewey’s 1983 article on *LSD ... Just the High Points...* when it was in its early stages - “What most interests LeCompte ... is the idea that American society is terrified of people with strong visions about anything from God to politics to art.” Leaving art aside, how times have changed! It seems that roughly half of all Americans believe God created Earth, that Darwinism is bunk - and what with the Tea Partiers’ intransigence and the endless Congressional logjams there seems to be no lack of extreme passion and furious engagement in politics. I’m curious to know how much attention, if any, you pay to such things and whether you might be terrified that people now *do* have such “strong visions about God and politics”.

Mmmm. That’s interesting.

Kate - She’s a news junkie. She always listens to right wing radio. I don’t know why. For entertainment?

No, for that dialogue. I’m too close to that subject to even remark on it because it’s an analysis - and I don’t analyse. I try to let things come through and then I work that out in the work. Whatever he said there, it’s interesting to me but I have to process it for a while cause I don’t work from that place, that intellectual place.

I've got a quote from you, Liz.

Oh-oh. That's always a bad sign.

"Even now, I can't say what the political intent behind *Route 1 & 9* is or whether it was racist, and my inability to say anything about that is disturbing."

Disturbing to me and disturbing to the audience. That's what I meant by disturbing. It's a disturbance in the air because the intent is not clear to everyone.

Even if you have, by now, resolved that issue in your mind, I wonder why that inability would have disturbed you in the first place. I mean, if you are continually leaving your audiences bewildered or mystified, why should you yourself not be prey to disconcerting uncertainty with regards certain aspects of your own work?

That's what's disturbing to me. I'm not sure why I'm doing things always. And that's a place of disturbance. I'm working from that disturbance, I'm not judging it. I'm just disturbed by it because I work from a place of disturbance.

Don't you think that the meaning of works evolves over time and artists aren't always necessarily aware of what the meaning is of what they're doing?

Absolutely. But that's a place that's difficult to be in. I mean most people want to nail down a meaning and live there comfortably and safely. I would like to do that too, but I can't. That's not how I live. That's not how I work. So it's a difficult place, to be called a racist and not be able to go, "I am not because this means *this* and *this* was my intent." To know that I've just absorbed something that was deeply moving and interesting and politically charged - and not be able to say, "I meant *this*, I feel *that*," - I couldn't work that way, I couldn't make the pieces knowing what I felt about something. I go into something to find out.

I think I understand what you're trying to say: when you're creating a work you're basically trying to answer questions and get to a certain point of understanding and when you fail to do that then it's ...

No, it's not even that. It's more that I don't make work to illustrate an idea. The idea is the work, it's the work itself. I can't always translate that work of art, which is the theatre piece, into a coherent essay on what it's supposed to mean. That's not what I do. And it's part of why I'm still working. If I could do that, I'd probably become a writer. But because I can't do that and people come at me with questions like "did it mean *that*?" I'm at a loss because I don't want to make up some reason why the piece meant *this* because I can't say. What I do is in the work. That's it.

I buy that. I accept that completely.

(laughs) **Unfortunately there's no other thing to buy besides that. If I could give you something else, I would. And there you have it.**

(Liz is told it's time to stop.)

We're very close.

Alright, one more. Quick.

When you look back over all those Wooster years, what have you accomplished that most surprises you?

Mmmm. That's a good one. OK, let's see. Aah, I think what most surprises me is that I'm still working, that I'm still excited about the next piece. I can't believe it, I must be an idiot!

(laughing) We'll leave it at that.

This interview was conducted on March 31, 2012.

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