

## theater

## Obies

# The Happy Awkward Moment

## Performance Theater's Intimate Surprise

by Mark Russell

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A theater is moving under the radar of our American culture—a theater influenced by hip-hop, burlesque, dance, and the experiments of longtime renegades like the Wooster Group, Mabou Mines, and Richard Foreman. It's a vital theater, sometimes made collectively, sometimes adhering to one person's vision; it exists in amazing diversity. It's connected to a web of communities of international scope.



Theater Group STAN's *Lucia Smelt*: a disarming informality

photo: Bernaded Dexters

A common thread runs through this theater, and that's performance: a focus on the joy and power of presence, the act of performing and witnessing that act. It's made for intimate audiences. It's a theater of surprises and pleasures. It's Performance Theater.

This theater has its roots—acknowledged or not, explicit or not—in performance art. Remember performance art? That '70s thing? It's still around. It just looks a lot like theater. Some call it experimental theater, fringe theater, physical theater, Off-Off-Broadway, or alternative. Performance theater is one of a long line of titles that try to define what's happening on small stages across the U.S.

At my venue, Performance Space 122, we have followed this line of work through many iterations. We cut our teeth as a space for new dance exploration inspired by contact improvisation and the Judson school. Later we became associated with solo performance under the influence of artists like Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian, and Karen Finley. The artists we are presently working with are attracted to more theatrical forms; some of them are even writing plays.

Perhaps what we're seeing now is a reaction to solo performance, a rediscovery of plays. Some of this new work is coming from a proliferation of Fringe festivals, which have popped up all over North America. Some of it comes from the young poets who define hip-hop theater. The community-based explorations happening across the country, often sponsored by the National Performance Network, are also feeding this movement. The focus is local; it's on the work less than on where the work might go or where the big payoff is. This is anti-

consumerist theater; you have to catch it fresh and homemade.

Richard Maxwell and Elevator Repair Service are two artists I feel typify the best of performance theater in the U.S. Both reduce the theatrical experience to its basics. They celebrate the joy of performing and witnessing performance. Their work shares an odd humor, a love of awkward moments, and an embrace of sheer presence. In Maxwell's *House*, for example, he confines his actors to stiff frontal blocking, which creates a heightened awareness of space and movement—the audience becomes acutely aware of the phenomenon of performance. In ERS's *Cab Legs*, the actors break a cardinal rule of traditional theater by speaking a majority of the show in barely audible voices, forcing the audience to follow the story—a paraphrased *Summer and Smoke*—through movement and visual clues.

Maxwell's and ERS's pieces are very contemporary takes on what Grotowski, Brook, and Barba were investigating 30 years ago. However, being modern media kids, they approach theatrical moments with an off-the-cuff informality that's very different from the formal reverence many of the '60 experiments held dear. Actually, Grotowski's work always had a biting edge of Eastern European sarcasm that never came across in the writings about the work, that could only be experienced. This ironic edge gave the work a great complexity and depth—a trickster theater that implicated the audience.

ERS and Richard Maxwell are also tricksters. Their humor often undercuts an audience just as they are laughing, bringing them to the quick realization that they're in a room watching, participating in a theatrical ritual. A little V-effect.

This fascination with the presence of the performer and the act of acting pervades much of the work I see in the U.S. Circus arts, vaudeville, puppetry, magic, spoken word—they're feats that must be experienced directly, not mediated. With Americans spending more and more time in front of screens, there's a hunger for low-tech surprise. Make it real.

Performance theater makes it real. Fantasy has been co-opted by film. These artists are looking for the truth in the bald artificiality of theater—truth that they cannot get elsewhere. It's not theater recognizably political or that overtly campaigns for social change—film and TV do that more efficiently. It's theater that embraces the temporary community of an audience—a deeper, more subtle politics.

I see others around the world investigating this same territory. Two examples: Forced Entertainment in the U.K. and Theater Group STAN in Belgium. These artists also reduce the theatrical to its simplest elements, then mine those riches.

Forced Entertainment, from Sheffield, England, is led by Tim Etchells. They've created a theatrical language that focuses on the responsibility of the performer and his or her actions. Etchells's probing, question-driven texts push his actors to be always fully present. He has taken the confessional mode of Spalding Gray and made it an ensemble activity. These are real tasks, executed in front of an audience. In *Quizoola*, for example, an actor in melting clownface is interrogated about intimate details of his actual life as well as banal facts, like "What's the capital of

Denmark?" The actors walk a tight wire of truth and performance, and we watch them and hold our breath. Etchells acknowledges his influence by the Wooster Group, but he has made their lessons his own. The gravity and intensity that pervade his work are extraordinary. When the questions are posed, the audience cannot help but think of their own responses and put themselves in the actor's shoes.

Theater Group STAN is a group of young Belgian actors—a collective of performers that have been working together for nearly 10 years. They deal almost exclusively with classic theater texts, but they reinvent these texts so fully I consider their work completely radical. After selecting a text, STAN then translate it, learn it, and tear it apart line by line. Only a few days before opening will they finally get up from their table and put together a few set pieces, some light cues, and perform the play. In a STAN piece the actors often wander in and out of the action whether their character is onstage or not. They watch each other as if in a very intensive rehearsal. It seems as if STAN is taking the great jazz of actors playing in rehearsal and bringing that to an audience. (How many shows have we seen that were great in rehearsal but fell flat when they finally got onstage with light cues, set, and other embellishments?) There's an informality in STAN's work that's disarming, and a rigor that's bracing. STAN's acting technique is straight-ahead natural—not lyrical, not pushing. If an emotion is set too high, as in many Chekhov or Ibsen classics, the actor will underplay it, setting the words off against his action. The language of the play becomes new again. Even tired, overdone plays—such as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of STAN's first hits—become fresh, politically charged contemporary works.

Recently I attended a conference organized by Roberta Uno and her New World Theater in Amherst, Massachusetts. Called "Intersections: Future Aesthetics," it focused on the new discipline of hip-hop theater. It was exciting to see so many young artists (most under 25) embracing theater as a forum for their ideas. There was a rough magic in their use of poetry, tap, and choral movement to express complex ideas. The work was simple, direct, and—with more than a few nods to performance art—a great look at the future of theater in the U.S. Another conference begins this June in Portland, Oregon, organized by Theater Communications Group, an organization set up years ago to serve the regional theater movement. Called "New Works, New Ways," it will take a different look at this vibrant field of young theater makers and the many avenues they are devising to create and disseminate their work. These are early, significant steps in the road to reinvigorating the American theater.

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Performance theater is a sniper in the guerrilla warfare of our culture—theater done in small cells, through international connections, via information passed in dark bars. The resistance is not to any outward oppression, but to the robbery of our spiritual lives by media, work, technology, advertising. We come to these dark rooms to escape the bombardment of modern life. We gather together to enjoy the awkward, the wrong, the uncomfortable, the not pretty, the not cynical, the rudely funny, the extreme, the simple pleasures of seeing a person on a stage in front of a small crowd—existing.

I'm looking forward to the future of performance theater, with artists like Maxwell, Etchells, STAN, and ERS, and a long list of others: the Universes; Julie Atlas Muz; Radiohole; the Big Art Group; the Rude Mechs of Austin, Texas; Pig Iron Theater and New Paradise Laboratories in Philadelphia; Berlin's Gob Squad; Japan's Dumbtype. By focusing on the exquisite experience of live performance, theater will only prosper. There will be greater and greater demand for what we do—the intimacy, the reality, the surprise of truth. The antidote to technology is the ever evolving theater of the present: performance theater.

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