

The Theatre of Images

**Edited, with introductory essays and
a new Afterword, by Bonnie Marranca**

**Pandering to the Masses:
A Misrepresentation
Richard Foreman**

**A Letter for Queen Victoria
Robert Wilson**

**The Red Horse Animation
Lee Breuer**

INTRODUCTION

In the last dozen years the American avant-garde theatre has emerged as a dynamic voice in the international arts scene. From its crude beginnings in out-of-the-way lofts, churches, private clubs and renovated spaces, it has become for many the liveliest, most creative center of theatrical activity in the West. This is due partly to the help of grant monies, but primarily to the emergence of a number of highly imaginative and gifted theatre artists.

Experimental groups of the sixties and early seventies broke down traditional parameters of theatrical experience by introducing new approaches to acting, playwriting and the creation of theatrical environments; they reorganized audience and performing space relationships, and eliminated dialogue from drama. Collaborative creation became the rule.

Value came increasingly to be placed on performance with the result that the new theatre never became a literary theatre, but one dominated by images—visual and aural. This is the single most important feature of contemporary American theatre, and it is characteristic of the works of groups *and* playwrights. As early as eight years ago Richard Kostelanetz pointed out the non-literary character of the American theatre when he wrote in *The Theatre of Mixed Means*:

...the new theatre contributes to the contemporary cultural revolt against the pre-dominance of the word; for it is definitely a theatre for a post-literate (which is not the same as illiterate) age. . . .¹

¹Richard Kostelanetz, *Theatre of Mixed Means* (N.Y.: Dial Press, 1968), p. 33.

If this theatre refused to believe in the supremacy of language as a critique of reality, it offered a multiplicity of images in its place. Kostelanetz's McLuhanesque statement clarifies the direction that the American theatre has steadily followed since the Happenings. It has now culminated in a Theatre of Images—the generic term I have chosen to define a particular style of the American avant-garde which is represented here by Richard Foreman (Ontological-Hysteric Theater), Robert Wilson (Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds) and Lee Breuer (Mabou Mines).

The works of Foreman, Wilson and Breuer represent the climactic point of a movement in the American avant-garde that extends from The Living Theatre, The Open Theater, The Performance Group, The Manhattan Project and The Iowa Theatre Lab, to the "show and tell" styles of political groups like El Teatro Campesino, The San Francisco Mime Troupe and The Bread and Puppet Theatre. (And it is continued in the current proliferation of art-performances.) Today it is demonstrated in the image-oriented Structuralist Workshop of Michael Kirby and in the works of younger artists: *Sakonnet Point* by Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte; the "spectacles" of Stuart Sherman. All of the productions and groups mentioned above exclude dialogue or use words minimally in favor of aural, visual and verbal imagery that calls for alternative modes of perception on the part of the audience. This break from a theatrical structure founded on dialogue marks a watershed in the history of American theatre, a *rite de passage*.

The intention of this Introduction is to demonstrate the significance of the Theatre of Images, its derivation from theatrical and non-theatrical sources, its distinctively American roots in the avant-garde, its embodiment of a certain contemporary sensibility and its impact on audiences.

This essay, which first isolates characteristics of the Theatre of Images and then deals at length with the specific pieces published here, will perhaps suggest an attitude to bring to this theatre. Hopefully, it will also offer helpful, new tools of analysis—an alternative critical vocabulary—with which to view contemporary theatre.

The absence of dialogue leads to the predominance of the stage picture in the Theatre of Images. This voids all considerations of theatre as it is conventionally understood in terms of plot, character, setting, language and movement. Actors do not create

"roles." They function instead as media through which the playwright expresses his ideas; they serve as icons and images. Text is merely a pretext—a scenario.

The texts as published here (less so in the case of *The Red Horse Animation* which offers a comic book as a textual alternative) remain incomplete documents of a theatre that must be seen to be understood; one cannot talk about the works of Foreman, Wilson and Breuer without talking about their productions. Attending a theatrical performance is always an experience apart from reading a dramatic text; but a playscript *does* generally stand on its own merits as a pleasurable experience, indicating what it is about and usually giving a clue as to how it is staged. Conversely, reading Wilson's *A Letter for Queen Victoria* can be frustrating for readers attuned to theme, character, story, genre and logical language structure. There is scarcely a clue to its presentation in a script composed of bits and pieces of overheard conversations, television and films. Similarly, in Foreman's work, which insists on demonstrating what the words say (in Wittgensteinian-styled language games), to read the text alone is to lose the sensual delight and intellectual exchange of his theatre. And *The Red Horse Animation* is not a play at all.

Just as the Happenings had no immediate theatrical antecedents, the Theatre of Images, though not quite so renegade, has developed aesthetically from numerous non-theatrical roots. This is not to say that this movement disregards theatrical practices of the past: It is the application of them that makes the difference. More directly, the avant-garde must use the past in order to create a dialogue with it.

Foreman's work shows the influence (and the radicalization) of Brechtian technique; Breuer has acknowledged his attempt to synthesize the acting theories of Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski; the productions of Wilson descend from Wagner. However, in their work, spatial, temporal and linguistic concepts are non-theatrically conditioned. Extra-theatrical influences have had a more formative impact. Cagean aesthetics, new dance, popular cultural forms, painting, sculpture and the cinema are important forces that have shaped the Theatre of Images. It is also logical that America, a highly technological society dominated by aural and visual stimuli, should produce this kind of theatre created, almost exclusively, by a generation of artists who grew up with television and movies.

The proliferation of images, ideas and forms available to the

artist in such a culture leads to a crisis in the artist's choice of creative materials, and in his relationship to the art object. It is not surprising, then, that all of the pieces collected here are metatheatrical: They are about the making of art. In *Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation* Foreman speaks directly to the audience (on tape) concerning the "correct" interpretation of events *as they occur*. The actors relate the formal "Outline" of the production at intervals in *Red Horse*. The result is a high degree of focus on process. How one sees is as important as what one sees.

This focus on process—the producedness, or seams-showing quality of a work—is an attempt to make the audience more conscious of events in the theatre than they are accustomed to. It is the idea of *being there* in the theatre that is the impulse behind Foreman's emphasis on immediacy in the relationship of the audience to the theatrical event.

The importance given to consciousness in the Theatre of Images is also manifest in its use of individual psychologies: Foreman in his psychology of art; Wilson in his collaboration with Christopher Knowles, an autistic teenager whose personal psychology is used as creative material (not as a psychology of the disturbed); and in Breuer's interest in motivational acting. In *Pandering*, life and theatre merge as Foreman incorporates his thoughts into the written text. In *Queen Victoria*, Wilson adapts, if only partially, autistic behavior as an alternative, positive mode of perceiving life. Through Breuer's use of interior monologue, the consciousness of the Horse is explored in *Red Horse*.

Each artist refrains from developing character in a predictable, narrative framework which would evoke conditioned patterns of intellectual and emotional response. Like all modernist experiments, which necessarily suggest a new way to perceive familiar objects and events, their works agitate for radical, alternative modes of perception.

In the Theatre of Images the painterly and sculptural qualities of performance are stressed, transforming this theatre into a spatially-dominated one activated by sense impressions, as opposed to a time-dominated one ruled by linear narrative. Like modern painting, the Theatre of Images is timeless (*Queen Victoria* could easily be expanded or contracted), abstract and presentational (in *Red Horse*, images are both abstract and anthropomorphic), often static (the principle of duration rules the work of

Foreman and Wilson); frequently the stage picture is framed two-dimensionally (in *Pandering* the actors are often poised in frontal positions). Objects are dematerialized, functioning in their natural rhythmic context. The body of the actor is malleable and pictorial—like the three actors who form multiple images of an Arabian steed lying on the performing space (*Red Horse*). It is the flattening of the image (stage picture) that characterizes the Theatre of Images, just as it does modern painting.

If the acting is pictorial, it is also nonvirtuosic, an inheritance from the new dance which emphasizes natural movement. This is an aesthetic quality of the particular branch of the avant-garde dealt with here. What I wish to suggest is that the Theatre of Images in performance demonstrates a radical refunctioning of naturalism. It uses the performer's natural, individual movements as a starting point in production. Of the artists featured in this anthology, Foreman is the most thoroughly naturalistic. He allows performers (untrained) a personal freedom of expression while at the same time making them appear highly stylized in slow-motion, speeded-up, noninflectional patterns of speech or movement. He also pays a great deal of attention to actual situation and detail and the factor of time. Foreman's work is stylized yet naturalistic as are Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* and Marguerite Duras' *India Song*.

The naturalism of nontraditional theatre is a curious phenomenon but one worth paying attention to because of its prevalence and diversity; it is also quite a paradox to admit that the avant-garde, in 1976, is naturalistic. In addition to being characteristic of the scripts printed here, it has shown itself in the production of David Gaard's *The Marilyn Project* directed last year by Richard Schechner, in Scott Burton's recent art-performance *Pair Behavior Tableaux*, as well as in Peter Handke's play without words, *My Foot My Tutor*. In these works there is a high degree of stylization by performers who "naturally" engage in an activity which is presented pictorially.

Perhaps that is why, in the Theatre of Images, tableau is so often the chief unit of composition. Tableau, in fact, has been a dominant structure in the work of twentieth-century innovators: the Cubists, Gertrude Stein, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philip Glass, to name a few. It is evident in the work of Foreman, Wilson and Breuer as well. Tableau has the multiple function of compelling the spectator to analyze its specific placement in the artistic framework, stopping time by throwing a

scene into relief, expanding time and framing scenes. In *Pandering*, the tableaux function as objects in a cubist space, very often confusing perception by the intrusion of a single kinetic element. The cinematic "cuts" of *Red Horse* frequently focus the actors in close-up; "frames" are duplicated in the actual comic book documentation of the performance.

The stillness of tableau sequences suspends time, causing the eye to focus on an image, and slows down the process of input. This increases the critical activity of the mind. For Foreman it represents the ideal moment to impart taped directives to the audience; it also regulates the dialectical interplay of word and image.

Neither time nor space are bound by conventional law. Time is slowed-down, speeded-up—experienced as duration. It is never clocked time. Likewise, spatial readjustment is frequent in all of the pieces published here. *Red Horse* is played in multiple viewing perspectives: The actors perform both lying on the floor and standing on it, and up against a back wall of the performing space. *Pandering* alternates easily from flat perspective to linear perspective; the actors continually rearrange the drapes and flats of the set during performance. In *Queen Victoria* space is divided, cut apart and blackened—usually by means of light—leaving the actors to serve as images or silhouettes in a surreal landscape.

If time and space are dysynchronous in the Theatre of Images, so is language broken apart and disordered. The language of *Queen Victoria* is "throwaway," devoid of content. In *Red Horse* choral narrative is correlated with the image in space as interior monologue substitutes for dialogue. *Pandering* is ruled by the distributive principle of sound: Actors speak parts of sentences which are completed either by other actors or Foreman's voice on tape.

Sound is used sculpturally, just as the actors are. Aural tableaux complement or work dialectically with visual tableaux. In *Pandering* the audience, surrounded by stereo speakers, is bombarded with sound. Sound and visual images dominate in performance in an attempt to expand normal capabilities for experiencing sense stimuli. Because of the sophisticated sound equipment used in the productions of Foreman, Wilson and Breuer it is reasonable to conclude that the Theatre of Images would not exist without the benefit of advanced technology. Perhaps experiments with holography may lead in the future to a theatre of total images and recorded sound.

The significance of the Theatre of Images is its expansion of

the audience's capacity to perceive. It is a theatre devoted to the creation of a new stage language, a visual grammar "written" in sophisticated perceptual codes. To break these codes is to enter the refined, sensual worlds this theatre offers.

Here, then, are three examples of the best of the American avant-garde theatre: works which break down the parameters of human experience which we have too hastily accepted.

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