

## Culture clash: what the Wooster Group revealed about the RSC (and British theatre hegemony) in Troilus & Cressida

Article (Published Version)

Fowler, Benjamin (2014) Culture clash: what the Wooster Group revealed about the RSC (and British theatre hegemony) in Troilus & Cressida. Shakespeare Bulletin, 32 (2). pp. 207-233. ISSN 0748-2558

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/61986/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Culture Clash: What the Wooster Group revealed  
about the RSC (and British theater hegemony) in  
*Troilus & Cressida*.**

**BENJAMIN FOWLER**  
*University of Warwick*

**TROILUS.** If there be rule in unity itself,  
This was not she. O madness of discourse,  
That cause sets up with and against itself!  
Bi-fold authority, where reason can revolt  
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason  
Without revolt. This is, and is not, Cressid! (5.2.141–46)

I saw this amazing thing that Kate Valk did with their method. She started looking at *Cressida* via an interview with Björk. It was fed to her through an earpiece, but she could also see it on a TV. She repeats Björk's mannerisms and mimics her accent, and then she goes seamlessly into a speech from *Cressida*. Somebody was interviewing Björk, so when Kate was doing Björk she was talking to one of us, and it was like she was having a conversation with us, really talking to us. Then she would break into this *Cressida* speech. It really was engaging. She was doing about five things at once. She was playing. Something worked . . . something let them in.

—Paul Ready

**P**aul Ready was among a group of British actors representing the Royal Shakespeare Company, led by the director Rupert Goold, flown to New York to test the viability of a collaboration with the Wooster Group as part of the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival. Observing them rehearse, Ready was struck by key characteristics of the Group's method: "inappropriate" combinations of material (Björk and Shakespeare) jostled for attention; technology and mediated material grated against "liveness" as theater's distinctive feature, yet focused actor and spectator on the pres-

ent moment; performers negotiated a multi-sensual reality (in-ear feeds, televised material), mimicking the traditional receiving-and-filtering role of the spectator. The British actors even explored the Wooster métier themselves, screening Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy* (2004) on monitors around the Performing Garage and imitating Brad Pitt or Eric Bana while delivering Shakespeare's text. Ready intuitively connected with the Wooster method; for him, their seminal obsession with the live "copying" of recorded material somehow created the conditions for Valk, the Wooster Group performer tackling Cressida in that rehearsal, to "break into" Shakespeare's text, and Ready to engage with Valk's performance.

In late August 2012, I watched the result of these workshops at the Riverside Studios in London, where the Wooster Group applied similar methods to *Troilus & Cressida* alongside an RSC contingent now directed (because of Goold's film commitments) by the RSC's resident playwright Mark Ravenhill.<sup>1</sup> Split along Trojan and Greek lines, the companies had rehearsed independently on either side of the Atlantic, and by this time the Group had abandoned Björk in favor of a range of cultural "found objects" that superimposed the text with "indigenous" themes; the dialogue of Chris Eyre's Native American drama *Smoke Signals* (1998) and movement from the Inuit film *Atanarjuat, or The Fast Runner* (2001) guided the actors' vocals and gestures as Björk had done in rehearsal. The most visible British reception to the Wooster contribution, as expressed in reviews and walkouts, was bafflement mixed with boredom and anger.<sup>2</sup> Some critics tried to dissect their use of interpolated cultural references; many simply chastised the Group for willful obscurity and a lack of technical ability.

Of course, reception is shaped by a spectator's experiences and background, and the response to this *Troilus & Cressida* brought, as I hope to show, cultural and artistic controversies into sharp focus. In my own case, I came to the production having recently worked with the RSC as an assistant director on two equally high-profile but very different experiments, one that had been highly praised—Gregory Doran's scholarly-creative attempt to reconstruct Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Cardenio*—while the other, the playwright Anthony Neilson's revival of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, had provoked press controversies of its own.<sup>3</sup> Having recently worked too on Shakespeare with actors in Japan, the problems and possibilities of cultural exchange via the—classical to some, alien to others—repertoire were in the foreground of my thinking.

Now, as an audience member at this *Troilus*, I found that—unlike countless productions I'd encountered in the past whose over-solicitous attempts to make Shakespeare "clear" confined the plays within the lim-

its of a standard operational logic—the Wooster Group was making me listen to Shakespeare anew. To my mind, the Group’s use of secondary material to break *into* a text whose associations remained resolutely foreign to them as an American experimental company allowed the text to break *out of* the hegemonic shackles that hobble mainstream British Shakespeare to the demonstration of the author’s “meaning.” Thrown into stark relief alongside the RSC, this emancipatory dimension to their work went uncharted in British reviews. In fact, any expression of it seemed stifled under the weight of a doggedly hostile critical discourse; as Valk reflected in a post-show discussion at the Riverside Studios, it was the Woosters who “took the hit” in the British press (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 242).

I want to identify the assumptions and expectations that lurk in the shadows of the Wooster Group’s critical mauling. The pathways opened up in their work eluded traditional evaluative formulas structuring the rhetoric of British reviewing and what constitutes “proper” Shakespeare. Critics conditioned by British mainstream traditions, and largely ignorant of this company’s customary techniques, accused the Americans of not *understanding* Shakespeare, instead of exploring the use they made of *Troilus & Cressida* on this specific occasion. I’ve allowed voices from the Wooster Group itself<sup>4</sup> to demand attention throughout, inserting notes and anecdotes gathered during my research into their history that resonate with my intuitive grasp of their aims in *Troilus*. It is my hope that these infiltrating voices both contest the erasure of the Group’s genealogy in critical readings of this production, and mimic the counterpoint of the Wooster aesthetic itself, whose polysemic texture scatters meanings.

### Critics (Reception)

As the theatre dies, it is being protected by a clique of people who are narrowing it back to the writer. And because we don’t work that way, we trespass everywhere. We plagiarize. We steal. We are outlaws.

—Elizabeth LeCompte (qtd. in Savran 92).

Three reviews are symptomatic of critical responses repeatedly triggered by the Wooster Group’s work on *Troilus*. Drawn from publications aimed at three diverse constituencies, they signal the deep penetration of homogenous critical attitudes: the *Stage* is the world’s longest-running publication for the performing arts community; *Watsonstage.com* addresses an internet-savvy theater-going public; the *Guardian* dominates liberal, middle-class print journalism and boasts the world’s third most

popular newspaper website (as of June 2012, “The Guardian is now . . .”).<sup>5</sup> Each reviewer reveals assumptions regarding how the British theatrical production of texts is conceptualized and evaluated, magnified through the lens of “Shakespeare” as author (and cultural phenomenon).

Discussing the Wooster Group in his two-star *Guardian* review, Michael Billington argued that “the idea of Cressida as a woman who uses her sexual power as a means of self-preservation, when she finds herself in an alien Greek culture, is never followed through.” Despite his failure to attribute this “idea”—is it Shakespeare’s? The reviewer’s own?—Billington understands acting as the concretization of psychologically cogent behavior. According to Heather Neill in *Stage*, “Cressida can be a tease or a victim; here she is neither.” Again, the critic leaves the authorizing agent of these two interpretive possibilities unattributed, yet implicitly recruits Shakespeare to legitimate the Group’s failure to pursue either option inscribed in his text. Assessing their (lack of) characterization, Neill found little “recognizable” as “a realistic exploration of human relationships,” resonating with Simon Tavener’s claim, in his one star *Whatsonstage* review, that LeCompte’s actors “show no real understanding of the language or character and this fundamentally undermines the text.”

Despite seeming subtly differentiated, these criticisms occupy the same ground. Billington and Neil were dissatisfied with a performance language that could not demonstrate Shakespeare’s incisive grasp of transcendental “human relationships,” understood in psycho-realist terms; apparently critiquing the technique of American performers (“I have never heard Shakespeare spoken so badly”), Tavener grounded his diagnosis of “bad acting” in the Group’s inability to understand Shakespeare (specifically, his characterization).<sup>6</sup> The Wooster Group not only frustrated these critics because their work renounced recognizably realist frameworks, they also turned Shakespeare’s “complex play” into a “bizarrely disjointed spectacle” (Billington), a “mess” (Neil) and, at worst, “fundamentally undermine[d]” Shakespeare (Tavener).<sup>7</sup>

In upending the habitual evaluative criteria of the critics, whereby a production is deemed successful if it signifies the actors’/director’s intellectual comprehension of the text (crystallized in a rehearsal room in the past), the Woosters refused to teach (or remind) audiences what the play, or what Shakespeare, “means.” In so doing, the reactions they elicited revealed how blinkered British critics are by a literary attitude that personalizes the dramatic work as the author, fuelling reactionary defenses against the derisive and vandalistic uses a company might make of a writer’s text.

Stephen Purcell has analyzed how contemporary critics legitimate productions with “reference to Shakespearean authority,” chastising them for “brutal” or “savage” abridgements or, in contrast, praising radical adaptations (often foreign) for “invoking the ‘spirit’ of Shakespeare” (366). Purcell identifies the contingent and subjective use of this imprecise term—what objective critical criteria establish how far a production is true to a writer’s *spirit* apart from a reviewer’s *taste*? Yet the notion that a production should select from a wide, stable, and finite set of possible meanings that inhere in Shakespeare’s “work” persists, as in Neill’s sense of *Cressida* as a tease *or* a victim. I’m consciously recruiting terminology from Roland Barthes’s 1971 attempt to move *From Work to Text*, in which he denotes the self-contained literary “work” as the object of a literal science, whose priority over all acts of interpretation remains upheld, undisputed.

As Barthes observed, over time, the meanings of a “work” become imbricated with authorship, tied into the activity of the writer who sustains their authority. However, the contingent nature of such meanings asserts itself whenever the production of a Shakespearean “work” is historicized. John Dryden, who “new modell’d” the plot of *Troilus & Cressida* in 1679, believed that it began with “some Fire,” but clearly the author “grew weary of his Task,” his play descending into “a Confusion of Drums and Trumpets, Excursions and Alarms.” As a result, and “because the play was Shakespeare’s, and that there appear’d in some Places of it, the admirable Genius of the Author,” Dryden undertook to “remove that heap of Rubbish, under which many excellent Thoughts lay wholly bury’d” (204).

Contrast Dryden’s 1679 reading with Michael Billington’s 2012 diagnosis of *Troilus & Cressida* as Shakespeare’s “complex play about time, treachery and the human littleness of Homeric heroes.” His insight relates to a different structure of thinking from Dryden’s, in which “authentic Shakespeare” is aligned with poetic sensibility and a cult of genius. Billington’s approach to what Shakespeare is, indeed what plays are, follows the pattern established by directors whose productions he watched as he matured as a critic—figures such as Peter Hall and John Barton, who were educated at Cambridge by F. R. Leavis and trained in New Criticism. This formalist approach, emphasizing an internal analysis of the isolated work of art as paramount, led critics (and directors) to root the authority of their claims in the field of the “autonomous” work, simultaneously mining it for originality.

Despite the contingent nature of their historical positions, critics frequently advocate productions deemed to have read the work correctly

(according to their own framework) as *true to Shakespeare*—even if, as in Dryden’s case, large chunks of the work that do not fit the cultural consensus need to be excised or re-written. The “work,” then, is read as evidence, a cultural object smothered with its author’s fingerprints, transformed into the archaeological site of the author’s activity—whether conscious or unconscious—whose buried foundations need to be *excavated* by contemporary practitioners. Billington’s “main gripe” with the Group’s treatment of *Troilus*—their “failure to enhance our understanding of the play”—evinces how this critical tendency stretches to license the excavation of *innovation*, as if an element of the work’s topography had hitherto lain undetected, undeclared by its author, or unarticulated by previous directors or critics. Nevertheless, and despite the limits of “our” understanding, the work remains the field of the *already* signified, its meanings lingering undiscovered; practitioners must grasp and reveal the author’s truth.

### Practitioners (Making)

Practitioners of “mainstream” Shakespeare in Britain’s national institutions perpetuate the living currency of such evaluative criteria, troubling a unidirectional relationship between criticism and production that polices a “proper Shakespeare” standard and aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of the National Theatre, is fêted by critics for a ten-year stewardship strewn with the landmarks of major Shakespeare revivals unanimously praised for their *clarity*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he revived another “problem” Shakespeare play in the summer of 2012, *Timon of Athens*, which serves as an illuminating case study alongside the concurrent Wooster/RSC *Troilus*.

Hytner’s declared directorial motives, in tandem with the comments of his dramaturg Ben Power, consolidate the dominance of the critical compulsion that theatrical production should demonstrate an author’s meaning. In a video on the National Theatre website (*The Making of Timon*), both Hytner and Power reasoned the *relevance* of Shakespeare’s work in today’s world: “Obviously what it’s about is the monetisation of human relationships” (Hytner); “It’s about a society tipping into chaos because of finance, because of money, because of credit” (Power); “It’s a savage explosion of misanthropy, rage, disillusion, cynicism, in the face of the realisation that the world is entirely in the grip of financial transaction” (Hytner). *Timon* might have been bashed into Shakespeare’s MacBook yesterday.

However, Power qualified the text of *Timon* as, “almost more than any other Shakespeare play, really corrupt. The play that we have—the play

that was published in the First Folio of Shakespeare's Complete Works, cannot be—is not—a complete play." In terms uncannily consonant with Dryden's appraisal of *Troilus* in 1692, Power explained that "the things in the play which are really extraordinary [. . .] need to be excavated, brought out by cutting, shaping, little bits of re-writing here and there to try and push away some of the dust of the corruption of that text," so that a contemporary audience "really get a sense of the world that [Shakespeare is] talking about and its relationship to the world that we see outside our windows in London every day."

*The Making of Timon* also reveals Hytner telling his actors on day one of rehearsals: "I've basically cut where it doesn't feel comprehensible, where it doesn't feel that it will be immediately impactful on a contemporary audience—Get rid!" In exactly the same ideological move legitimating critiques of the Wooster Group, the imperative of *relevance* in contemporary production is justified with reference to Shakespeare's authorship. Power's dramaturgical "excavation," working in tandem with Hytner's desire to be "immediately impactful," purports to call forth *Shakespeare's* world, a world which appears to share striking similarities with our own, while eliminating the "dust" and "corruption" that obscures that linkage. In "excavating" Shakespeare out of a dusty and corrupt text, Power justified extensive cuts, additions, and structural surgery, all of which went unremarked in reviews—as did the logical fallacy inherent in the notion of achieving direct communion with an author through editing and re-writing a flawed, spurious text.

Significantly, once "relevance" is legitimated with reference to the immediate, direct communion it affords between Shakespeare and contemporary audiences, performance takes on the pedagogical function of a lecture, artists become educators, and a particular discourse of spectatorship is enacted: audiences become passive consumers of information transmitted by a director/dramaturg (often conceived before the actors engage in the process, as in Hytner's pre-rehearsal textual hygiene routine that cleansed *Timon* of anachronistic crust). Such an approach valorizes "accessibility," peddling concessions to audience comprehension as honest communion with authorial intention. Perhaps inflected by the legacy of New Labour's "participation" and "inclusivity" rhetoric, this *clarity fever* holds the sway of an ethical discourse (Shakespeare should be accessible to all); seen from another perspective, a select group of cultural custodians are making work based on intuitive assumptions (where Shakespeare "doesn't feel comprehensible") that determine in advance what audiences can and cannot cope with.<sup>10</sup>

### Making Signs (Acting)

You're still not present. You're making signs that you're now dropping out.  
But you're not really dropping out. You're not really talking to people.  
You're making signs.

—Elizabeth LeCompte, noting a run-through  
of *Frank Dell's The Temptation of  
St Anthony*, 1987 (qtd. in Quick 53)

A realist discourse often snakes through discussions of mainstream institutional British Shakespeare. Nicholas Hytner's celebrated work on Shakespeare at the NT (*Henry V*, *Timon of Athens*, *Othello*) is distinguished by his use of a contemporary *socio*-realist aesthetic to "reveal" Shakespeare's ongoing relevance in today's world. *Psychological* realism, as already noted, is often the wavelength on which critics receive an actor's performance. Even the (extremely rare) positive reviews this *Troilus & Cressida* garnered remained tangled in the same hegemonic lust for realism. Jane Shilling, writing for *The Telegraph*, praised LeCompte and Ravenhill's "elegantly disturbing production" for building a "powerful sense of beleaguered humanity," with a strong performance from Marin Ireland as "a sly Cressida." Despite Shilling's praise for a Wooster actor, critics tended to isolate the RSC's psychologically recognizable characterization and dexterous verse speaking as relieving points of orientation in a challenging production. Neill cited Joe Dixon nailing "Achilles' sulky vanity" as a corrective, with Scott Handy's "well-spoken Ulysses" providing a "tantalizing whiff of what might have been"; Tavener exalted Handy's "intelligent and engaging" performance, revealing the "political, philosophical and rhetorical nuances" of the text; Billington praised Handy for delivering the verse "with a kind of witty intelligence that we used to take for granted at the RSC."

This slippage between role and actor signals contradictions inherent in a highly elastic realist terminology, especially prominent in the clash between the experimental Woosters and a British "classically trained" company. "Witty intelligence" describes Scott Handy, rather than his Ulysses, denoting a house style as opposed to a character insight. The RSC voice department provides generic verse speaking sessions, warm-ups, and one-on-one interventions targeting technical and rhetorical proficiency, refining the RSC actor's facility in "making signs" that communicate their understanding of Shakespeare's text to an audience. Instead of being absorbed in the character, immersed in its psychological interiority, the actor's attention is absorbed in *signaling* character, emotion, and poetry as clearly as possible.

Valk and LeCompte described their initial reaction to the RSC aesthetic in a post-show interview with Maria Shevtsova: “[Ravenhill] has them doing big performances, high performances” (Valk); “Really loud, without microphones” (LeCompte); “huge things, right to the audience” (Valk); “it’s really cartoon, American cartoon” (LeCompte, qtd. in LeCompte, Valk and Shevtsova 240–41). They interpreted Ravenhill’s direction as a reaction to the delicate fluidity of their own cinematic, naturalistic tone, he having travelled to New York to watch them run scenes before rehearsing with his own actors in the UK.<sup>11</sup> To the Woosters, who acknowledge their technical shortcomings alongside classically trained British actors,<sup>12</sup> the RSC’s *illustrative* approach bore little resemblance to the kind of *cinematic* naturalism that oozes from the pores of contemporary American pop culture:

**MARIA SHEVTSOVA.** [The Wooster Group] foregrounded the artificiality of the acting. You weren’t trying to represent characters.

**ELIZABETH LeCOMPTE.** We weren’t?

Yes. I don’t think that acting is artificial. [. . .]

**SHEVTSOVA.** Okay, perhaps what I should say is that The Wooster Group acting is not within the kind of psycho-realistic style that might normally characterize the Royal Shakespeare Company.

**LeCOMPTE.** Oh, I see. Like what the Greeks are doing, where what they do is completely illustrative of what they are saying.

**SHEVTSOVA.** Yes, where they are trying to enter a character in a kind of psycho-emotional way.

**LeCOMPTE.** Well, we do that, too.

**SHEVTSOVA.** But you do it very differently.

**KATE VALK.** [. . .] Liz is interested in a kind of cinematic naturalism rather than an illustrative [style], which can be helpful to tell a story, but is stolid.

**LeCOMPTE.** This is this—this is this—this is this. (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 238)

Even Shevtsova, whose research signals her immersion in experimental performance, conceives of the standard British/RSC acting tradition as “psycho-realistic”; seen through the eyes of LeCompte and Valk, the RSC’s “American cartoon” aesthetic shares more characteristics with *pantomime*, a gesticulatory semaphore, than what they understand as realism or naturalism.

Significantly, the Wooster diagnosis of British Shakespeare acting wasn’t registered in reviews. Commentators often picked up on Ravenhill’s “camp” aesthetic, yet the British acting remained uncontested as a

reflection of a pretty standard treatment. Thomas Cartelli's analysis of the production's reception describes how the RSC actors managed to recognizably enact what the script would seem to prescribe "to the audience's general satisfaction by doing their half of the play in a dramatically 'straight' if theatrically 'queer' manner"(239).

This "queer" theatricality transpired predominantly in the RSC's use of costume to allude to a range of cultural stereotypes, exhibiting a conspicuous preoccupation with "queering" masculinity. Ravenhill's attempt to make Shakespeare *say something* involved pursuing a "realistically" inconsistent (if conceptually coherent) visual aesthetic, resonating with Billington's diagnosis of this play as investigating "the human littleness of Homeric heroes." The all-male cast changed in and out of desert combat fatigues and floor-length dresses; Rubin Varla's Thesites, a caustic amputee in drag, delivered his acerbic routines in smeared clown make-up, pearling with sweat generated by the manic propulsion of his manual wheelchair on and off stage; Joe Dixon's Achilles, when not in an evening gown, lounged about in a white flannel towel as if his tent were a gay sauna; and Aidan Kelly's WWE Ajax, modeled on Hulk Hogan, strutted on stage in a super-hero cape and a prosthetic body builder torso, striking poses and rallying audience support during his pre-wrestle warm up.

These cultural stereotypes, appropriated with commitment by the actors, rarely threatened to trouble a coherent fictional universe in which language was mined for conventionalized signs of character psychology. In the program, Ravenhill articulated his desire to pursue inconsistency, unreliability, and contradiction in order to "create the realistic theatre that Shakespeare was looking for." Such qualities aptly describe a production that oscillated between two theatrical styles, but not the discrete contribution of the RSC, in which visual inconsistency never destabilized audience expectations. In divining the semantic heart of Shakespeare's work as the "realistic theatre" of contradiction, inconsistency, and unreliability, Ravenhill also signaled his investment in the same quest for authenticity discussed in relation to the critics, seeking legitimacy in the play's authorship.

The Wooster Group, by contrast, resisted any decisive interpretative gestures demonstrating their rehearsed intellectual understanding of the play to an audience. As I turn to their aesthetic, I'd like to return to Barthes and his 1971 theorizing of the "text," which he intended to displace the closed autonomy of the "work," liberating it from the myth of filiation to its author and, in so doing, allowing it to be read "without the inscription of the father" (161). Ironically, critics often praise Shake-

spere's writing for the *invisibility* of authorial intention, establishing an authorship that codes two simultaneously authoritative possibilities for meaning (e.g. Cressida as a tease *or* a victim). For Barthes, moving from "work" to "text" requires a critical adjustment, rehabilitating the cultural object instead as a "tissue," a "woven fabric," an "activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over" that "gathers up [the work] as play, activity, production, practice" (162).

Although scrutinizing literary text, the performative metaphors Barthes advocates are striking. In disavowing a "work's" discrete meanings and authorial signature, Barthes flirts with *performance* as a creative site of activity, where "playing" a text opens up countless interactive possibilities for a reader. With the same emphasis as Barthes, I want to turn away from how the RSC "made signs" out of Shakespeare's work to examine the Wooster Group's deconstructive *play* with the dramatic text of *Troilus & Cressida*.

### Native Americans v. Original Practices (Concept)

*Troilus & Cressida* gestures toward a dramaturgy of deconstruction. As an intellectual discourse that haunts post-1960s experimental performance aesthetics, "deconstruction" rarely forges an alliance with accounts of theater as a sensual or affective phenomenon, instead prioritizing a discussion of an artist's or Group's *intentionality*. I'd like to supplement a routinized postmodern discourse of "deconstruction" with one that engages the exuberant materiality of the Wooster Group's carefully constructed performance (in which multiple cultural texts, references, and signifiers were "gathered up" and converted into "play, activity, production, practice"), and whose phenomenal form allowed meanings to sprawl at the same time as thwarting reliably authoritative perspectives.

The Group's juxtaposition of indigenous cultural representations with Shakespeare's text profiles the productive use they make of deconstruction, which David Savran glosses as "a representation turned back upon itself and offered as a critique of the assumptions, goals and methods which have allowed it to come into being" (48–49). Savran could be explicating the efficacy of Cressida's performance of a "wither'd truth" (stroking Diomedes's cheek, giving him her sleeve) as it impacts on Troilus in act five scene two, where the "credence" in his heart "doth invert the attest of eyes and ears" (5.2.120–122): "This is, and is not, Cressid!" (5.2.146). The performance Troilus witnesses triggers epistemological crisis, causes certainties to be shelved, throws master perspectives into flux, and turns "authority" "bi-fold" (5.2.144). Robert Weimann formulates Troilus's experience of discontinuity, of a "bewildering separation of visible signs

from transcendental meanings” as “authority disturbingly surrender[ing] the parameters of an unquestioned givenness” (67).

The Wooster Group’s troubling appropriation of Native American/ First Nation signifiers in performance could be described in the same terms. In-ear speakers trailed wires from underneath the crude plastic Native American wigs worn by the company; animal skins, headbands, and feather headdresses clashed with the black straps that lassoed battery packs and amplification technology to the bodies of the performers; crude elements of set suggested a tee-pee structure and a camp fire. All references to indigenous iconography were undermined by the clearly Caucasian status of most of the company—in other words, the production’s aesthetic both “is, and is not” Native American. In fact, LeCompte commissioned an artist (Folkert de Jong) to design a non-literal “synthesis of materials and ideas” (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 236), enshrining—like *Troilus’s* Prologue, “armed—but not in confidence / Of author’s pen or actor’s voice, but suited / In like conditions as our argument” (23–25)—an ambivalent relationship to representation (cultural and theatrical) in the Group’s visual aesthetic.

In addition, Wooster actors unanimously processed Shakespeare’s text through a flat, Northwestern Indian accent, partly informed by dialogue from Chris Eyre’s 1998 film *Smoke Signals*, channeled through their in-ear receivers. The film is written, directed, and acted by members of the contemporary Native American community, dealing with two close male friends (Victor and Thomas) and their conflicting relationship to their cultural identity as “Indians.” Its use lends ethnographic authenticity to the accents the Woosters strove to recreate, yet simultaneously twists the film’s ruminations on Native American representation in contemporary American culture into yet another reversal. Eyre’s film depicts Victor ribbing Thomas for “always trying to sound like some damn medicine man” and taking his identity cues from the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990)—which Thomas has seen over 100 times—rhetorically asking, “don’t you even know how to be a real Indian?” Signifying the apex of “American Indian” representation in mainstream white culture, *Dances with Wolves* blended popular narratives into the “politically correct” figure of the *noble savage*. LeCompte is characteristically fascinated by the suggestive and contradictory power of such a figure: “‘noble’ and ‘savage’. How can they be together?” (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 236). Eyre’s film uses *Dances with Wolves* to probe dialogically the extent to which “authentic” Native American identity is ensnared in its cultural representation, troubling easily discernable boundaries between reality and representation.

The Group also incorporated the Canadian pseudo-documentary drama, *Atanarjuat, or The Fast Runner* (2001), within the matrix of cultural representations supporting their performance. Similarly to *Smoke Signals*, this is the first film to be written, directed, and acted in Inuktitut, an indigenous Inuit language of Canada, and the film's makers sought to tell their thousand year old Inuit story with forensic attention to historical and ethnographic detail. TV monitors at the corners of the stage, angled inwards, allowed Wooster performers to rip movement and gesture from screened segments of *Atanarjuat* at seemingly indiscriminate intervals.

To have the Woosters appropriate these mediated performances while delivering Shakespeare's text set up a binary between "authentic" source and copied "representation." However, an investigation into the provenance of each film, simultaneously invested in "authenticity" while aware of its status as (and vis-à-vis) cultural "representation," destabilizes such a binary. Like Troilus, faced with a semiotic order that contests what he once perceived as cultural absolutes (loyalty, fidelity, "rule in unity," 5.2.141), the Group concocted a matrix of citations in which "cause sets up with and against itself" (5.2.143), undermining any stable discourse of indigenous communities. Fascinatingly, Michael Billington got snagged on exactly these issues in his troubled response:

Politically, there is something questionable about modern white Americans appropriating past tribal customs; and, however authentic the war cries and dances, the actors can't help resembling extras in a Bob Hope western.

Indeed, when asked by Maria Shevtsova if she was worried about falling into "an exoticism of the American Indian," LeCompte replied, "I want to fall into that . . . I wanted both sides. . . ." (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 236). The Woosters offer no straightforward *presentation* of American Indian as a naturalistic guise that fits snugly over the Trojan community in Shakespeare's play. Instead of "making signs," they stage a provocative interaction of the live and mediatized forms in which the assumptions and methods that govern representational strategies loop and detour in and around the issues we might perceive in Shakespeare's text. Thomas Cartelli, for instance, makes highly creative use of the Wooster Group's deployment of indigenous signifiers, suggesting an imbrication with Shakespeare's (and early modern culture's) appropriation of the Trojan War via its representation in Homer (and its translation/creation by George Chapman in the sixteenth century). He considers how the Wooster's use of cultural sources might map over a play that re-enacts the ruination of a culture, sourced from "far-from-originary" Troy material (236).

However, Cartelli qualifies his speculations by stipulating that “only an audience as interested as the Wooster Group itself is in everything theatrical and filmic that has happened in the last one hundred years could have comprised an audience fully responsive to its mixing and mashing of material drawn from so many disparate sources” (237). Audiences may in fact have remained oblivious to at least one, if not both, of the films I have already discussed and their uses by the performers—only the onstage actor could hear the *Smoke Signals* sourced in-ear track, and occasional glimpses of *Atanarjuat* were afforded to spectators for purely pragmatic reasons, with monitors placed at the stage’s corners exposed by the Swan’s thrust configuration. How, then, could audiences perceive, let alone respond to, the Group’s deconstructive strategies?

Crucially, Wooster Group constructions work on many levels. The conceptual and philosophical implications of their “mixing and mashing” remain available to the scholar who catalogues and examines the Group’s cultural reference points, and even the interested audience member who harnesses the internet for some postspectatorial research (you can pretty much piece together the whole network of signifiers in play within a few Google searches). While these pre- and post- performance investigations generate compelling accounts of the Group’s work, they often paper over the cracks that distinguish the experience of a Wooster production as it is encountered. It’s my contention that these cracks, far from signaling conceptual deficiency, become access points for creative spectatorship.

Watching this production (and not knowing what to expect, this being my first Wooster show), I had no idea about the names, provenance, or resonance of any of the Group’s material extraneous to Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the dissonances generated by their use of technology, the distraction techniques devised for the performers, and the non-naturalistic deployment of indigenous semiotics led me to ruminate on their aesthetic as a metaphor for their relationship both to Shakespeare, and to the circumstances of this particular collaboration. I also experienced their cinematically inflected delivery as a kind of disavowed *presentation* of Shakespeare’s text, having no idea they were mimicking the intonation of Native American voices. As I heard them, the Woosters liberated Shakespeare’s language, presenting rather than *representing* (or interpreting) the text—finding a way to preserve what Richard Foreman describes as “the wide range of associative mental links” that characterize an idiom whose poetry “fragment[s] simple coherence.”

My experience of the concrete form of the Group’s art tallies with Kate Valk’s account of their decision to take up the Northwest Indian accent:

We were reading the play and I thought what was wrong with our reading this play was that we were pretending that we understood what we were saying. I just said, 'Oh, we should say it like Indians,' because I was thinking of English as a second language. I don't know, it just came to me. (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 234)

As is so often the case with their work, its philosophical, conceptual, and intellectual sophistication belies its inauguration in pragmatic and intuitive solutions.<sup>13</sup> Discussing their 1984 production of *LSD (Just the High Points)*, Philip Auslander describes the company as less interested in “representations of an exterior reality than of the relationship of the performers to the circumstances of performance” (*From Acting* 41). Andrew Quick similarly notices a “ghosting of the troupe in different guises,” most literally in *Brace Up!* (1991), which filtered the Group’s relationship to the central text being staged (*Three Sisters*) through the lens of a Japanese theater troupe staging Chekhov (14). In this *Troilus*, Native American “ghosted” the Group’s status as outsiders, as subaltern representatives of the contemporary avant-garde clan invited to the home of the more financially powerful company (the RSC), and required to converse in their idiom (Shakespeare).

The Wooster Group’s approach concretizes the clash between two artistic cultures. Indeed, Rupert Goold’s original intentions for the RSC’s contribution may have enlivened and sharpened the dialectic of that cultural clash. At the end of their R&D week in New York, Goold suggested pursuing “original practices” as the RSC’s performance language. Perhaps this strategy would have more acutely realized the project’s ambitions as an exploration of two distinctive companies and their complicated relationship to “Shakespeare,” putting representational “authenticity” under further scrutiny, and interrogating *Troilus*’s mediation through a performance language that seeks both to excavate and reconstruct Shakespeare. As it stood, Ravenhill’s production sought to divine the play’s *intrinsic* authenticity, pursuing inconsistency in order to represent *Troilus & Cressida*’s transcendental “meaning.”

In contrast, and like the speaker who voices the play’s prologue, the Wooster Group’s Kate Valk lacked confidence in both “author’s pen” (understanding Shakespeare) and “actor’s voice” (her ability to speak it). Playing in the gap between these twin imperatives, the Group stumbled on a pragmatic solution that, to LeCompte’s ears, liberated them: “we could suddenly, with mere simplicity, catch great truth instead of pretending with some craft that we didn’t have that we were going to get the ideas in Shakespeare’s rhetoric clear” (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 237). It’s

tempting to hear in her (perhaps unconscious) appropriation and inversion of Troilus's words ("I with great truth catch mere simplicity," 4.5.104) the implication that "others fish with craft for great opinion" (4.5.103).

Alongside the particularly strong metaphor "speaking Indian" set up for the project, LeCompte's assessment of its implications articulates my own overriding sensation—in refusing to limit the reception of Shakespeare's text by clarifying and communicating his use of rhetoric, the Wooster Group, paradoxically, made it come alive.

### Technology

[Deal] with the words as idiocy. It sounds like you're trying to find meaning in it. Let go. Don't sit down on the language in a heavy way. Yes, it's not heavy, it's idiocy, it's total idiocy.

—Elizabeth LeCompte's note to  
Kate Valk, rehearsing *Frank Dell's*  
*The Temptation of St Anthony*,  
1987 (qtd. in Quick 53).

The history of LeCompte's artistic investigations with the Wooster Group might be summed up as an attempt to "deal with the words as idiocy," strategizing situations and activities that frustrate the performer's desire to load language down with the heavy burden of meaning. LeCompte's rehearsal note is the seed of the fully-grown technique Ready observed during his visit to New York, where tasks based on imitation ("she was doing about five things at once") somehow provided the conditions to release the dramatic text.

Technology is integral to the Group's particular species of stagecraft. Actor and spectator experience technology as a physical, rather than immaterial, phenomenon. Audio tracks are fed directly into the ears of the performers, live mixed by onstage technical experts who also edit, cut, blend, and render footage transmitted to performers via onstage monitors. Both actor and technological input (as triggered by a live "expert") remain spontaneous and responsive to each another. Despite uncomfortable sightlines, everyone in the auditorium watching *Troilus* was able to see some aspect of the monitors; even though the in-ear wasn't audible to spectators, it was clear from the performers' displaced attention that they were dealing with some kind of aural input. Simultaneously, the polysemy of technological stimuli coming at the performer had to meet with the exigency of delivering a memorized text.



Fig. 1. Pictured: Greg Mehrten as Pandarus in The Wooster Group's CRY, TROJANS!

Although this image shows the Group's continued work on Shakespeare's play back in America (in a production independent from the RSC that opened in New York in early 2014), it conveys an accurate sense of their aesthetic and use of technology in *Troilus & Cressida*. Photo: © Paula Court.

The encroachment of technology onto the Wooster stage does not merely reinforce the infiltration of the digital across all aspects of life; it serves to heighten the actor's reactivity in the live moment. LeCompte highlighted the discrepancy between the Group's upfront, highly material use of technology and the invisible technical support systems that facilitate an RSC production ("monitors backstage, microphones, everybody's talking to each other on microphones"), where electronic cuing systems blink green to trigger an actor's entrance (Lecompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 242). The Wooster Group harnesses technology to sharpen the senses of the actors; the RSC (indeed, most theaters) construct the inverse—a technological safety net that ensures that the actors don't have to listen to what is going on onstage.

Fascinatingly, whenever the RSC actors took over the stage in this *Troilus & Cressida*, the Wooster monitors imaged their textual delivery with an undulating visual sound-graph. Was this a playful gibe at RSC mellifluosity? For me, it profiled exactly how the RSC seemed to straightjacket text into rhetorical stresses, where emphases pinned down words and fixed their meaning. The Woosters, in contrast, did not have the opportunity to tell us what the text meant, their focus displaced from a straightforward representation of "character." And yet, in the words of audience member Michelle Terry, "all the time they were onstage you felt as though they were still creating and still discovering what it meant to say those words to that person on that particular night with that audience present."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Terry (herself a remarkable British actress of Shakespeare at both the National Theatre and Shakespeare's Globe) kindly shared her reflections on being a Wooster spectator with me, and allowed her words to inform (and invade) this essay. She responded to the state in which LeCompte's actors channeled Shakespeare's text as a state of being "in the moment," and understood the variables set up by technological stimuli (the Wooster trademark aesthetic) as one that maps fascinatingly over the environment Shakespeare was writing for, based on her experience performing at the Globe:

Being 'in the moment' is a state that all actors strive to be in, but invariably once the play reaches the black box of an auditorium, the only real variables left to manage during the show are your own feelings. The play has been well rehearsed, the chances of the scenery collapsing are slim, and the audience sits quietly, passively and reverently. And yet this is the antithesis of the audience that Shakespeare was writing for. [. . .] They, as well as the actors, encounter the many variables that the Globe cannot

avoid: the weather, the planes, the pigeons, the drunk person leaning on the front of the stage, the school coach party of teenagers that won't stop talking. As an actor at the Globe you ignore these external influences at your peril. If the aim is to be present and tell the story truthfully as it occurs to you today, ignoring a pigeon sitting on your lap would not be immediate or honest.

Terry highlights how the Globe environment necessitates an interface between the actor, recalling a memorized text, and the particular circumstances of each instantiation of that text.<sup>15</sup> An actor at the Globe, Terry suggests, should never present a closed off, finished version of a character, but instead encounter the material in front of a gathering of witnesses, open to the contingencies that shape and inform this specific representation.<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare's writing often self-reflexively ponders its status as a real-time confrontation with both the actor who recites the lines, and the audience, invited by *Troilus's* prologue to "like or find fault: do as your pleasures are" (30).

Compare this with Quick's analysis of the Wooster aesthetic: "In these performance works, the truth, the 'to be' of the encounter, emerges in the act of confronting the material, rather than in an excavatory practice that would pull the truth from hidden depths" (270). The actors, instead of embodying the material, are placed *in relation to* the material, and Shakespeare's text becomes *a third thing*, referred to in common by both performer and spectator, and refusing to circumscribe its possibilities in the here-and-now of the encounter.

### "A third thing" (Spectatorship)

Remarkably, a return to act five scene two of *Troilus & Cressida*, and the way it figures spectatorship, forecloses the distance between sixteenth-century playwrighting and contemporary avant-garde performance strategies. Shakespeare's scene asks audiences to shift their attention between triangulated perspectives: Thersites, who offers a running commentary on what he is seeing; Troilus (alongside his guide Ulysses), a spectator lodged in existential limbo provoked by the schism between transcendental knowledge and ocular proof (Cressida's "wither'd truth"); and the interaction between Cressida and Diomedes, observed but not observing. Troilus and Ulysses see them, Thersites sees both groups simultaneously, and we (the audience) see all three, invited to assess the reactions of both Troilus and Thersites in relation to the spectacle that we all witness.

Weimann offers a further complication with reference to the scene's early modern staging: the "simultaneous availability, even the interaction of localized and unlocalized areas" for Shakespearean audiences watching this scene "interlock with multiple cultural functions of performance on the Elizabethan stage, where a performer (like the boy-actor playing Cressida) is, and is not, lost in a character" (68). Surely the same could be said of the Wooster Group actor, implicated in a system that artificially constructs "functions of performance" preventing the actor from losing themselves to the role.

Instead of merely playing their character, Weimann suggests that the Shakespearean actor is placed *in relation to* their character. As this scene overlays multiple perspectives and performance "spaces" simultaneously, so the Wooster Group uses technology to multiply and overlap the zones of the recorded and the live, the copied and the memorized. Wooster Group actors, in being placed in relation to Shakespeare (and the many other fragments of visual/aural culture the production enlists) emblemize the interplay between presentation and representation staged in act five scene two, where audiences observe actors who double as spectators, placed in relation to a performance (Cressida and Diomedes) to which we all refer in common.

This kind of artistic form posits the creation of a uniquely stimulating relationship between performance and spectator. Jaques Rancière, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, maps the pedagogical relationship between schoolmaster and pupil onto the relationship between artist and spectator in order to theorize such a model. He seeks to resist the logic of the "stultifying pedagogue" (the schoolmaster) and the "straight, uniform transmission" of their knowledge to the ignoramus who "not only doesn't know things, but they also don't know what they don't know" (14). Eliding teacher with artist and pupil with spectator, he instead proposes a pedagogy of equality that presupposes that we all learn in the same way: we just have to travel the path from what we already know to what we do not yet know (11). In this model, teachers (or artists) do not exist to transmit information (along the lines of Hytner's approach to the audience in his *Timon of Athens*), but to engage in a dialogue with the pupil (or spectator) that, with reference to "a third thing, alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it" (15), emancipates the pupil to think for themselves. Rancière's description of a revised pedagogy imbricates with his model for emancipated cultural spectatorship.

In much the same way as Barthes describes a reader's meaningful interaction with a text as a "stroll" through it, Ranci re conceptualizes an audience as "individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them" (16), likening what they see to "their unique intellectual adventure" (17): observing, selecting, comparing, interpreting, composing, refashioning, drawing back (13). The Wooster Group creates performative structures that invite exactly this kind of participation. Based on a spectator's personal experience, the multiple layers of citation recruited into this *Troilus* fire off unique reactions and interpretations. The Group spliced together segments of a scene between Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood from *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), one of many sources incorporated alongside *Smoke Signals* and *Atanajurat*. Screened during Troilus and Cressida's parting scene (act four scene five), the Wooster actors mimicked Beatty and Wood's melodramatic gestures, which oscillated between frustration and desire. If you had seen the film previously, you might ponder the significance of its love and loss narrative against the scene being staged. If not, you might unpack the clash of genres, reading cinema against live theater. Does the stylistic artificiality of a Hollywood romance augur ill for the lovers, traced threateningly over Shakespeare's dialogue? Its use as a choreographic score might foreground any number aleatory connections for the open spectator.

What do you make of the Group's use of lacrosse sticks as weapons? Does it trivialize war as a sport? What if you'd learned that lacrosse has its origins in a tribal game played by Native Americans? How do you interpret the Trojan body armor, designed by Folkert de Jong, casing Hector and Troilus in hollow, rubbery torsos modeled on classical Greek sculpture? Are the Trojans literally carrying the cultural baggage of Greek art on their backs? What if you've bought a program and read that the construction material is Styrofoam, "a material that is fragile, pliable, lightweight and modern and which will never decompose" ("Office of Mesophytics"). Does de Jong's use of Styrofoam as a representational material tie into the politics of *cultural* representation (both the Wooster appropriation of Native American and Shakespeare's appropriation of a Greek narrative)?

There are no homogenous answers, nor do the Woosters insist on forcing your engagement with specific questions. Instead, audiences are invited to embark on their own unique intellectual adventure. This is a major departure from work traditionally presented on Britain's institutional stages. Terry stresses as much when processing her own reaction to the Woosters:

Did I come away with a greater understanding of the play *Troilus and Cressida*? Probably not. Was that the job or expectation of an evening that was sold as “*Troilus and Cressida*”? Probably yes. Do we prize narrative and plot and literality over an all-consuming sensory experience? Yes. Were all my faculties asked to engage with the event before me? Yes. Story and relationships came after the event. They were not spoon-fed to me. On the night I saw the show, the mating and meeting of Troilus and Cressida was one of those beautiful rare moments where all the external influences imposed by the Wooster Group came together. Maybe this only happened the night that I was there. Maybe the following evening any one of those variables might have offered up something different. But the more that groups like the Woosters keep exploring that, the longer theatre will remain theatrical and not fade into some live televisual reenactment.

Once more, the Wooster’s use of technology asserts its power in making actors more reactive and theater more *theatrical*. I perceive the inverse in British theater, not only in the accelerating enthusiasm for screening major productions in cinemas across the globe, where live shows seem to be increasingly pre-adapted for screen,<sup>17</sup> but also in the way that live performance is structured by the televisual discourse of the “repeat” transmission. In the hugely enjoyable nine months I spent as an assistant director at the RSC, the biggest challenge I faced was strategizing ways to keep actors invested in their highly fixed and polished “reenactment” over the course of 86 performances. Tightly timed cueing sequences and a complicated lighting design shaped around carefully fixed blocking leave little room for experimentation or variation onstage. Once the creative team has “realized” a project, directors typically leave their assistants to “maintain” productions beyond press night. Even for those otherwise inclined, the economic exigencies of a freelance career often force them to be geographically remote once a show has opened, rehearsing a new project elsewhere. By contrast, LeCompte has seen every performance her Group has given over the past four decades. Each is different, and the company continues to work new ideas into each production alongside its program of public performances.<sup>18</sup>

The art of the Wooster Group does not stake its authority on its relationship to authenticity (authorial or representational), but instead acknowledges its activity as (re)presenting Rancière’s “third thing”—the text of *Troilus & Cressida*, alongside the various other cultural “texts” recruited into this production—a third thing “that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them,

excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect” (15). Far from establishing a community consensus as to what the play means, this type of practice (to recruit Clare Bishop’s précis of Rancière) invites spectators to “make use of a work in ways their creators might never have dreamed possible” (16). This seems to align with the stated aims of the World Shakespeare Festival, which sought to “explore Shakespeare as the world’s playwright” and focus attention on the varied uses contemporary global practitioners make of Shakespeare’s plays today.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the form of criticism espoused by British reviewers was severely inhibited from assessing the production in these terms: far from taking a coherent critical stance, many failed even to articulate the artistic identity of the Group’s work.

It is my hope that this essay sways readers that contemporary Shakespeare production should not shun experimental, avant-garde practices. The kind of interrogations pursued by the Woosters challenge the realist proclivities of a theater tradition whose hegemonic sway endures, subtly and indirectly, as hegemony operates. Indeed, that challenge may, in some ways, lead toward forms of practice not as distant from early modern performance conventions as we might imagine. Certainly, as the digital revolution gains traction and invites us to curate, interact with, and participate in culture in unprecedented ways, the Wooster Group’s aesthetic opens theater up to the creative spectator. In their work on *Troilus & Cressida*, through its densely orchestrated texture and the simultaneous availability of heterogeneous interpretations, audiences were invited to make use of the Wooster’s creation in ways that its makers may never have dreamed possible. LeCompte’s own spectatorial sensibility—desiring “many, many meanings to coalesce at the same point” (qtd. in Savran 53)—is symptomatic of this critical and artistic approach, an approach that feels particularly suited to Shakespeare.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Paul Ready had also moved on. The only British actor engaged from R&D through to production was Scott Handy. Like Ready, Handy caught the Wooster bug—after taking to working with them, Kate Valk described how “he actually had to convince Mark [Ravenhill] to cast him” in the final RSC lineup (LeCompte, Valk, and Shevtsova 241).

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Cartelli, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, offers a frank account of how Shakespeare scholars visiting Stratford for the International Shakespeare Congress responded to the show—“‘appalling’ or ‘awful’ being the preferred adjective” (234–35). Jane Shilling, in her *Telegraph* review, cited a conversation with the

barman at Stratford local, the *Dirty Duck*, which saw uplift in trade thanks to notoriously high levels of interval audience abscondence.

<sup>3</sup>I spent 11 months as a resident assistant director with the RSC during their 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday season (January to November 2011). Four assistant directors worked with two acting companies across a season of eight plays.

<sup>4</sup>Predominantly its director Elizabeth LeCompte and Group member Kate Valk, who, instead of performing, acted as an informal dramaturg on *Troilus*.

<sup>5</sup>My discussion of the production's critical reception excludes the rising tide of online blog commentary, where authors frequently take an oppositional stance to the traditional models of print media critics (see Andrew Haydon's blog essay: [postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/on-criticism-of-taste-and-trenches.html](http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/on-criticism-of-taste-and-trenches.html)). Catherine Love's blog review of *Troilus* evidences key characteristics of this new "digital criticism," favoring the Wooster Group's contribution over the RSC's ([catherinlove.co.uk/2012/09/08/Troilus-and-cressida-rsc-the-wooster-group/](http://catherinlove.co.uk/2012/09/08/Troilus-and-cressida-rsc-the-wooster-group/)). Documenting her "perplexing inability to articulate what it was about the piece that I found so engaging," her review signals the self-reflexive emphasis on subjective experience that characterizes such discursive blog texts. While Love's account offers a clear demonstration of the kind of personal intellectual adventure that I advocate at the end of this essay, it remains unclear who exactly the audience is for these online "reviews," whose writers (and their efforts) are self-selective (unlike the institutionalized critic) and remain unpaid. However, hybrid figures like Matt Trueman straddle both realms and, judging by Twitter conversations, theater directors and playwrights are increasingly interested in the views of these (predominantly) young critical voices. The impact of "digital criticism" remains to be seen.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Taylor isolates similar problems in the *Independent* (31 Aug 2012), as do Neil Norman in the *Daily Express* (10 Aug 2012) and Henry Hitchings in the *Evening Standard* ("emotionally and psychologically it lacks depth," 31 Aug 2012).

<sup>7</sup>Significantly, institutional context had little impact on reviews. This *Troilus* & *Cressida* transferred to London's Riverside Studios, which has a strong identity as an experimental venue, after its Stratford premiere in the Swan. Paul Taylor's London review for the *Independent* (31 Aug 2012) illustrates how consistent critiques were across both venues, suggesting that critics' concerns wouldn't have been alleviated by the project's contextualization as "experimental." He acknowledges the negative reaction in Stratford, and tells readers that he had "hoped to find reasons for declaring it unjustly maligned." However, Taylor finds that the Wooster Group's interweaving of text and technology "succeeds in sucking all the life out these episodes," while it is a "relief" to listen to the British actors, particularly the "superb verse-speaking of Scott Handy." See also Henry Hitchings's in *The Evening Standard* (31 Aug 2012).

<sup>8</sup>I am using "mainstream" to denote work emanating from large-scale producing theatres (Royal and National), undergirded by large infrastructural and

financial support systems, with coordinated major openings (in a centralized press-night diary) attended by first-string critics. There does exist an experimental performance culture in the UK. However, companies like Forced Entertainment illustrate how this kind of work relies on regional touring circuits and European co-production funding, often remaining institutionally rootless and accorded a “fringe” status.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Billington’s review of Hytner’s *Othello* (*The Guardian*, 23 April 2013) is illustrative: “Everything about the production is clear, clever and comprehensible.”

<sup>10</sup>Art historian Claire Bishop explores these arguments in her analysis of participatory trends in contemporary art. Chapter 1 of *Artificial Hells* assesses New Labour’s influence on Britain’s cultural climate in the early twenty-first century.

<sup>11</sup>It may appear strange that the Woosters describe their aesthetic as “cinematic naturalism.” In one sense this is *literally* the case: as will emerge later in the essay, their vocal tone and physical choreography are a straightforward remediation of cinematic footage. This qualifies their assessment in formal terms, but not in terms of characterization. However, Philip Auslander persuasively links Michael Kirby’s description of “nonmatrixed performance” in 1960s/70s performance art (whereby the actor does not embody a fictional character but “merely carries out certain actions”) with film acting itself (*Liveness* 28). Auslander describes how the film actor’s action-tasks “acquire representational and characterological significance only in the editing room” (*Liveness* 29). Willem Dafoe (a Group member in the 80s and 90s) told Auslander that “what he does when performing in a Wooster Group piece is virtually identical to his acting in films—to him, both are primarily nonmatrixed, task-based performing” (*Liveness* 29).

<sup>12</sup>See Paul Prescott’s account of a Stratford post-show discussion in his Blogging Shakespeare review: <http://www.bloggingshakespeare.com/year-of-shakespeare-troilus-and-cressida-rsc/>

<sup>13</sup>Andrew Quick emphasizes that the Wooster Group’s choices are pragmatic and intuitive. Political resonance is a by-product of the shared personal and ethical orientation of a company of individuals glued together by longstanding, committed relationships (270).

<sup>14</sup>All quotations from Michelle Terry are taken from email correspondence with the author, January 2013.

<sup>15</sup>Terry provides a clear example of the discrepancy between the Wooster Group and the RSC in this regard: “When a Wooster Group actor rescued a stray water pistol from the stage floor and then came face to face with an RSC actor in a stand off scene in the play, the Wooster Group actor looked to the TV screen where he was getting external direction for body language. The character on the screen raised his arm. The Wooster Group actor duly followed, only to find that in his hand was a water pistol, and as the water pistol was repeatedly raised it came face to face with the RSC actor. But even with a pistol pointing at him, the RSC actor did not flinch. He did not respond in any way to what was being immediately presented to him. As one actor was taking the present and

pushing the scene into the future, the other actor felt locked firmly in the past.”

<sup>16</sup>The similarities Terry perceives between the Wooster aesthetic and the environment of the early modern playhouse find support in scholarly explorations of the interplay between Shakespearean text and early modern staging conventions. Pascale Aebischer’s essay on “silence” in *Measure for Measure*, for instance, posits potential overlaps between the dramatic situation of the play’s final scene and the circumstances of its initial public presentation. Considering the implications of cue-sheets in early modern stage practice, and reflecting on the unique relationship between adult actors and their apprenticed boy players, Aebischer explores how the text might accommodate the live reactions of the actor.

<sup>17</sup>Nicholas Hytner’s *Othello* (2013) at the National Theatre was, to my mind, a clear example of a “camera-ready” staging, with stage action confined to a series of fully realized interiors within containers that trucked on and offstage.

<sup>18</sup>After holding open rehearsals in New York throughout Fall 2013, the Group transformed their work on the RSC *Troilus* into an independent Wooster production, previewed in Jan 2014, called *Cry, Trojans!*

<sup>19</sup>See the RSC World Shakespeare Festival website: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/history/world-shakespeare-festival-2012/>

### Works Cited

- Aebischer, Pascale. “Silence, Rape and Politics in *Measure for Measure*: Close Readings in Theatre History”. *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26:4 (2008): 1–19. Print.
- Atanarjuat, or The Fast Runner*. Dir. Zacharias Kunuk. Lot 47, 2001. Film.
- Auslander, Philip. *From Acting to Performance*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performances in a mediatized culture*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. “From Work to Text.” *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana, 1977. 155–64. Print.
- Billington, Michael. “Othello—Review.” *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 23 April. 2013. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.
- . “Troilus & Cressida—Review.” *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 9 Aug. 2012. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells*. London: Verso, 2012. Print.
- Bishop, Claire. “Introduction.” *Participation*. Ed. Claire Bishop. London: Whitechapel, 2006. Print.
- Cartelli, Thomas P. “‘The Killing Stops Here’: Unmaking the Myths of Troy in the Wooster Group/RSC *Troilus & Cressida* (2012).” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.2 (2013): 233–243. Print.
- Dryden, John. “Preface to *Troilus & Cressida*” *Essays of John Dryden*. Ed W. P. Kerr. Oxford: Clarendon, 1900. 202–07. Print.
- Foreman, Richard. “Notes on my next project: Zomboid!”. *Hot Review*. Hunter College Theater Department. 6 Sep. 2013. Web. 15 Dec. 2013.
- “The Guardian is now the world’s third most read newspaper website.” *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, n.d. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.

- Hitchings, Henry. "Troilus and Cressida, Riverside Studios—Review." *Evening Standard*. Associated Newspapers Ltd., 31 Aug. 2012. Web. 8 Jan. 2013.
- LeCompte, Elizabeth, Kate Valk, and Maria Shevtsova. "A Conversation on the Wooster Group's *Troilus and Cressida* with the RSC." *New Theatre Quarterly* 29.3 (2013): 233–46. Print.
- Neill, Heather. "Troilus and Cressida." *Stage*. The Stage Media Company Ltd., 9 Aug. 2012. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.
- Norman, Neil. "Theatre review: Troilus and Cressida, Swan Theatre, Stratford." *Daily Express*. Express Newspapers, 10 Aug. 2012. Web. 8 Jan. 2013.
- "Office of Mesophytics." Program notes. *Troilus & Cressida*. RSC/Wooster group. Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 2012.
- Purcell, Stephen. "That's Not Shakespeare': Policing the Boundaries of 'Shakespeare' in Reviews." *Shakespeare* 6.3 (2010): 364–70. Print.
- Quick, Andrew. *The Wooster Group work book*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2011. Print.
- Ravenhill, Mark. "Performing the Problem." Program notes. *Troilus & Cressida*. RSC/Wooster Group. Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 2012.
- Ready, Paul. Personal interview. 18 Dec. 2012.
- Savran, David. *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*. *Complete Works*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. 745–776. Print.
- Shilling, Jane. "Troilus & Cressida." *Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 9 Aug. 2012. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.
- Smoke Signals*. Dir. Chris Eyre. Miramax, 1997.
- Splendor in the Grass*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner, 1961.
- Terry, Michelle. Personal email correspondence. Jan. 2013.
- "The Making of Timon: Staging the Play." Online film. *National Theatre*. National Theatre, 2012. Web. 6 Sep. 2013.
- Tavener, Simon. "Troilus & Cressida." *WhatsOnStage*. Whatsonstage.com, 9 Aug. 2012. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.
- Taylor, Paul. "Troilus and Cressida, Riverside Studios, London." *Independent*. Independent Print Limited, 31 Aug. 2012. Web. 8 Jan. 2013.
- Troilus & Cressida*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Mark Ravenhill. RSC/Wooster Group. Riverside Studios, London. 30 Aug. 2012. Performance.
- Weimann, Robert. *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.