

DOCUMENTATIECENTRUM VOOR DRAMATISCHE KUNST V.Z.W.

RAAD VAN BESTUUR

Jozef De Vos (voorzitter), Dirk Willems (secretaris), Jan Hoeckman (penningmeester).

REDACTIE DOCUMENTA

Jozef De Vos (hoofdredacteur), Luc Lamberechts, Annick Poppe, Freddy Decreus, Ton Hoenselaars, Jürgen Pieters, Mieke Kolk, Johan Callens, Yvonne Peiren, Johan Thielemans, Karen Vandeveldel, Christel Stalpaert, Ilka Saal.

\* \*  
\*

DOCUMENTA is een driemaandelijks tijdschrift van het Documentatiecentrum voor Dramatische Kunst, v.z.w. en het Documentatiecentrum voor Dramatische Kunst, Universiteit Gent.

Bijdragen, boeken ter recensie, bibliografische informatie en alle redactionele correspondentie dienen te worden gericht aan Dr. Jozef De Vos, Ossenstraat 38, 9000 Gent.

Alle correspondentie betreffende abonnementen, betalingen, enz. dient te worden gericht aan de heer Jan Hoeckman, Bromeliastraat 28, 9040 Gent (Sint-Amandsberg).

Een jaarabonnement kost €25 (België) of €40 (Nederland) te storten op rekening 447-0069151-12 van het Documentatiecentrum voor Dramatische Kunst, Gent.

Voor betalingen vanuit het buitenland gelden volgende code en nummer:  
SWIFT: KREDBEBB  
IBAN: BE 1944700691 5112

Losse nummers zijn verkrijgbaar tegen €7.

ISSN 0771-8640

**"IT'S UP TO YOU, NEW YORK": A CRITIC'S VIEW OF  
NEW YORK'S ALTERNATIVE THEATER TODAY**

Tom SELLAR

**Noot van de redactie**

In januari-februari 2011 organiseerde deSingel in Antwerpen een festival gewijd aan theater, dans en performance uit New York. Dank zij dit initiatief kon het publiek kennis maken met een hele reeks voorbeelden van voorstellingen uit het veeleer alternatieve circuit. Bij die gelegenheid gaf Tom Sellar, professor aan Yale University en theatercriticus bij *Village Voice* een lezing waarin de context van dit nieuwe New Yorkse theater geschetst wordt en enkele markante ontwikkelingen aangeduid worden. Documenta is verheugd de tekst van deze uiteenzetting te mogen publiceren. Speciaal voor deze publicatie vulde de auteur deze informatieve tekst aan met een aantal kritische passages uit *Village Voice* waarin ook naar specifieke opvoeringen die in Antwerpen te gast waren, wordt verwezen.

New York's "alternative" performance scene is in an exciting moment of renewal, full of new artistic energies and fresh entrepreneurship, and led by a new generation of theatermakers. It may be rare good news to know that emerging artists whose work holds little commercial value can survive – and even thrive -- in the careerist capital of capitalism, a metropolis where public arts funding scarcely exists and where obscene real estate prices and now a severe economic downturn make it harder and harder to live as a creator of innovative performances. But they have persisted and the results are on display. So what exactly is happening in New York's "art" theater and dance world—far removed from the big playhouses presenting realistic dramas, Broadway spectacles, or traditional dance. Does New York's newest wave of performance-makers have anything in common, or are they as insistently individual as everyone else in New York? What directions is their work taking and what can we expect for the future?

This report is titled "It's Up to You, New York" partly in homage to Frank Sinatra – his classic ode to my native city is a great song, full of the swagger and grand aspirations that define New York City -- but more importantly, because that lyric captures the Do-It-Yourself ethos and the stubborn optimism of today's emerging performance scene.

First, I would like to identify a few important changes in artistic structures: “It’s Up to You” – the artist – to make your own way in our very expensive city, without help or compassion. With virtually no direct public funding for individual artists, American theater and dance makers must be resourceful and focused; they are entrepreneurs as well as creative and soulful thinkers. Never has this been more true than today, when the economic crisis has brought peril and promise to our vulnerable community: corporate support for the arts dried up, private philanthropies struggle to help, doors are closing – and yet extraordinary partnerships are being formed, new groups are formed every week, and a new spirit of cooperation has emerged among young performance groups who hope to build a dynamic base.

To discuss the changes in New York’s “downtown” performance scene, it is necessary to talk about some of the changes in New York City itself. The significant art movements in previous generations took place in neighborhoods which were centers of artistic life, and where artists also lived. The Abstract Expressionists, the beat writers, and the off-off Broadway movement launched in the early 1960s all had Greenwich Village as a home—first the west part, then the east. In the 1970s and early 80s, the artists who developed the language of postmodernism expanded into adjacent neighborhoods: making lofts in industrial SoHo and TriBeCa (Triangle Below Canal Street), and slightly north to Chelsea. These neighborhoods in some sense belonged to the artists and writers, and they are near the big centers of money and power in midtown, Wall Street – within walking distance. In the 1990s, however, Manhattan once again became a desirable place for well-to-do middle-class people to live; the white middle class had fled following the race riots of the late 1960s and the city’s bankruptcy in the 1970s, which left streets untended and crime notoriously high. In the 1990s, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani threw the prostitutes and sex shops from Times Square and brought Disney in to build entertainment franchises. Popular television shows like *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Sex in the City* made New York appear to be a glamorous and interesting place to live to the rest of the country; fueled by a high-tech boom and real estate bubble, the gentrification of many previously derelict neighborhoods, and an influx of foreigners and Americans eager to live in the hedonist metropolis seen on TV, Manhattan rents soared.

Today most artists – indeed, most people under 40 – cannot afford to live in Manhattan, where a small apartment with one bedroom can easily cost \$3000 month. The alternative theater still has many venues in Manhattan, but the artists generally moved across the river 20 years ago, reinvigorating Western and Central Brooklyn in particular: Williamsburg, Greenpoint, DUMBO, downtown Brook-

lyn, Fort Greene, and, in the borough of Queens, Long Island City. The city developed a culture zone around the Brooklyn Academy of Music where many dance and performance groups found studio and office space. And artists began building new venues of their own, in their own communities. Walk around Brooklyn today and you will see: there is an undeniable feeling of renewal, even Renaissance, with storefronts and former industrial spaces converted into every imaginable use, and young people starting their own businesses and arts organizations. Many spaces are multi-functional to make things more economical: an art gallery might sell high-end boutique items, and also serve as a space for literary readings and then become a nightclub-lounge in the evenings.

So the geography has also changed: what used to be called the “downtown” theater and dance, because the venues and communities were based in the Southern end of Manhattan below 14<sup>th</sup> Street, in the East Village, SoHo, TriBeCa— is no longer exclusively located “downtown.” In the real estate boom that began in the late 1990s, Manhattan became simply too expensive for many young artists to live or to work; they moved in large numbers across the river to Brooklyn or Queens, where they found lofts and office spaces, founded new organizations such as the multi-arts presenter Collapsible Hole, began forming new communities for themselves, re-energizing neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Red Hook, DUMBO, Fort Greene, and Long Island City with their own studios, galleries, cooperatives, literary spaces and, of course, performance venues. This is a significant development for the city – these areas are now vibrant and full of future economic potential – and also significant for the art form: by moving away from the neighborhoods which were closely identified with the historical American avant-gardes of the 1960s and later the 1980s, young artists have literally moved into new terrain. Still, on the one hand, these places offer possibilities for performing artists to form new communities, to exchange ideas, share lives, to reinvent values as earlier generations did in, say, the Lower East Side in the 1960s, forming a sense of their own power to pose the mainstream. On the other hand, with artists spreading around the city’s outer boroughs, there are no clear borders; it may turn out to be a problem that there is no “center” for all these highly individual artists to converge upon. Certainly it poses a problem for the *Village Voice* theater critic. When my newspaper editor calls me with an assignment, I might be headed out the door to see the Royal Theater of Sweden, but it is just as likely to be a bunch of dancers under a dark bridge, or a guy cooking you a meal in his tiny apartment while he recites a monologue about his crazy family in Ohio. I am a native New Yorker, but sometimes even with my iPhone Global Positioning System and a good pair of Nike sneakers I have trouble finding new, temporary venues in, for instance, industrial areas of Bushwick, Brooklyn. Not everyone enjoys such

urban adventures, and audiences outside the community or artists need to know where to look if they want to discover the extraordinary, and they can't look everywhere. There are thousands of options for a night out in New York; performance artists must compete for public attention in a cultural marketplace with an abundance of supply.

Another change: young ensembles now lead the city's progressive performance scene. Although playwright-directors—like Young Jean Lee, Thomas Bradshaw, and Richard Maxwell— and choreographer-directors—like Miguel Gutierrez and Sarah Michelson—stand among the era's artistic pioneers, the arena for experimentation is increasingly occupied by self-producing groups, who devise work collectively in long-term collaborations. This decade has seen a new crop of ensembles—Temporary Distortion, Witness Relocation, Radiohole, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Elevator Repair Service, among others; there is even one calling itself “the National Theatre of the United States of America,” ironically, since we have no national theater and historically every attempt to create one has been a disaster. You can hear from this list of groups that most of them are named more like alternative-rock bands than traditional stage ensembles—and they or-



“The Select”, gebaseerd op *The Sun also Rises* door Elevator Repair Service  
(©Alex McKnight)

ganize themselves that way, too: working independently at home to devise a new piece, and then taking it on tour for months at a time. Their audiences are noticeably younger than standard, too, organizing their cultural calendars and activities through Facebook and other social media. Together, these ensembles have re-infused New York's performance scene with interdisciplinary energies and new visions. There have always been progressive ensembles, of course, such as the influential Wooster Group in the 1980s; but in the past 10 years there has been an absolute proliferation of new groups who want to devise work collaboratively. Perhaps it's because groups offer a form of solidarity to performance artists in a hostile economy—stick together; or perhaps, as I suspect, it's simply more nourishing for younger artists to develop their work with friends over time, to build upon and evolve from previous projects. (This is made possible, by the way, by the network of arts presenters who invest in the tours of their work.)

So what are the characteristics of this new work? I'll try to give you a checklist of some of my critic's impressions—formed by seeing performances perhaps 3 or 4 times a week as a critic, journalist, and sometimes just as a devoted fan or thrill-seeker. First: Many of New York's edgier ensembles have been drawing on non-dramatic source material (i.e., no plays). They turn to film, novels, improvised dialogue, interview transcripts, and belles lettres—trying to stage an event from anything, it sometimes seems, except formal literary dramas. For example, Elevator Repair Service, who came to deSingel with *The Select*, their performance of Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*, have organized all of their recent productions around major American novels. These are not “readings” of the text—although the complete words of the author are usually spoken—nor are they dramatic adaptations of the fictional narrative. Typically ERS's projects are events in which the novel is read as one element, with a series of visual actions involving the ensemble taking place simultaneously, sometimes in opposition to the text, sometimes in a happy collision or juxtaposition with it. In *Gatz*, their most significant accomplishment to date, an office worker in a post-industrial workplace finds the F. Scott Fitzgerald novel *The Great Gatsby* in his desk, and begins reading it out loud; his office co-workers come and go, gradually infiltrating his consciousness, merging with the novel's narrative and substituting for its characters. The performance lasts approximately 6 hours.

Another good example is Nature Theater of Oklahoma, who record conversations and interviews with ostensibly ordinary people, then transcribe and perform their speech, revealing the eccentricities of our thought patterns and the ironies of our self-expression. For Nature Theater's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the group interviewed friends and acquaintances, asking them what they recalled of

Shakespeare's tragedy; their words contrast theatrically with Shakespeare's verse. In *Life and Times* – a co-production with Vienna's Burgtheater, which has toured throughout Europe-- an entire autobiography is meticulously re-constructed and exuberantly sung and recited from a similar transcription—it is an epic of the self bringing to mind Robert Wilson's early experiments because of its scale and because of the depth of its examination of the individual (*Life and Times. Episode 1* was included in the festival).

In New York's experimental playground, realism is under serious reinvestigation, but not the psychological kind—call it hyperrealism. Nature Theater—perhaps the most intellectually nourishing and formally ambitious of these New York groups—stands on the frontier of this unfolding territory as well. The group applies absurdly scientific precision to their dissections of contemporary language, revealing our splendidly otherworldly thought processes, and showing how we struggle to articulate our individual realities (thereby creating new ones). It is the reality of thought, a naturalism of 21<sup>st</sup>-century language in the American vernacular.

It's no accident that Nature Theater works a lot in Europe, where fellow performance artists like the German company Rimini Protokoll are deploying amateur "experts," civilian nonactors, and audience interaction to slash theater's fictive fabric. That idea has also popped up in New York performances such as the group CiNE's 2008 audience "seminar" *Venice Saved* (staged at P.S.122), which put interactivity and spontaneity at the live event's core. *Venice Saved* asked attendees to debate the political efficacy of theater today, as if it were a discussion group; however some of the participants were really actors voicing various points of view; the supposedly democratic event was actually scripted, which the audience gradually realizes; the result varied nightly, frustrating some and stimulating others—but the change of terms was provocative.) Ironically, modern avant-garde dramatists reacted against realism throughout the 20th century, cooking up new aesthetics like surrealism and Brechtian epic theater as antidotes. Now the pendulum may be swinging back in the other direction, with performance-makers instead looking to radically expand "real" elements to keep up with other media's "reality" programming and a vogue for DIY documentary. "It's Up to You" – you make your own reality and choose your own media to express it. This looks like one of the most exciting dynamics to watch in the new decade.

Another characteristic: this generation grew up in the most media-saturated world ever known. Naturally they create work that communicates through other media forms—previous generations of theatermakers used video and film as layers or additional elements. Today multiple, simultaneous media is completely integrated

into performance and embedded in its structure. Big Art Group, for instance, makes a touchstone out of synthesizing media elements. *SOS*, their 2009 show at the Kitchen, offered a spiraling series of hallucinations of consumer catastrophe—simultaneously humorous and apocalyptic. Scenes alternated between terrified animals fending for themselves in the Darwinian wilderness, and grotesque chats between urban creatures of consumption. The group used live projections, computer graphics, and a dense soundtrack to create an overstimulated (but deliberately oppressive) mediascape, which was somehow charmingly homemade.

Indeed, for this new generation, individual identity cannot be easily separated from mass media; it is entwined, interwoven with the popular forms which dominate and infiltrate the psyche. In his two solo shows, Zachery Oberzan, a member of Nature Theater, has created compelling performances out of his desire to locate an authentic autobiography via the popular entertainment that permeates his memories. In *Rambo Solo*, he found his adolescent anxieties and his aspirations to make art within the popular Sylvester Stallone film *Rambo* (and its literary source). In *Your Brother, Remember* – presented at deSingel festival – Oberzan traces his family's breakup when he was a teenager by comparing 3 layers of video and film sequences: there are scenes from an action movie (*The Fighter*), there is video footage he and his brother Gator recorded when they were adolescents, precisely imitating the original movie; and there is recent video footage of him and his brother, now adults, attempting to recreate their teenage videomaking. Oberzan's personal history, his identity, is expressed using the same media forms which colored his childhood; implanted in his imagination, he becomes free by embracing it as his own story.

Another category of experiment under way in alternative theater, is what I like to describe as Internet dramaturgy: live performances structured around nonlinear associations, a continual or escalating series of non sequiturs, or constantly regenerated narrative frames. These dramatic forms echo our now-daily experiences of clicking through multiple sites and toggling between realities. Stage compositions increasingly reflect structures and patterns from the Web, a development ripe with potential. In addition to Big Art Group, the performance group Radiohole is a good example of this web-of-consciousness strategy, with company-devised pieces such as *Whatever Heaven Allows* full of visuals and free association. Another example: *Crime or Emergency*, a shamanistic cabaret created and performed by Mike Iveson and Sibyl Kempson at P.S.122 last year. As Kempson performs approximately 10 characters in a sequence of interconnected tales, the scenario simultaneously progresses and falls apart, relying on Kempson's virtuosity and Iveson's musical scoring.

But New York's performance artists *have* rekindled an interest in assaulting America's national myths. This new generation of New York artists pushes back against mainstream American culture; New York, after all, is an island, geographically detached from the main continent of America, and in some ways it is both the most American place in America and the least American place. But these artists are rarely overtly political commentators. This is certainly *not* the New York avant-garde who launched the off-off Broadway movement in the 1960s, using its creativity to unlock and assert the power of a left-wing, sexually-liberated Greenwich Village community who actively resisted the U.S. government. Even during this last decade of astonishing social transformation and political upheaval, with the catastrophic destruction of the World Trade Center in our own city, only a few streets or subway stops from our homes; even with a declaration of an abstract war on "terror" with no clear end, with allegations of torture abroad and limitations of civil liberties at home, most young American performance groups showed few signs of dissent or engagement. The emphasis remains firmly on cool eclecticism and irony, formalism and fragmentation—perhaps reflecting a downtown theater culture dominated by (mostly white) aesthetes.

But remarkably, in this post-9/11 context, this generation does love to depict and take apart America's national myths. Among many notable recent productions touching on this theme: Elevator Repair Service's textured stage explorations of classic modernist American novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway; Radiohole's *Anger/Nation* casting a psychedelic eye on a 19th-century temperance crusader; and *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, Les Freres Corbusier's satirical musical salute to an American president's violent conquests, which even transferred to Broadway (unsuccessfully).

Miguel Gutierrez, the young choreographer-director-dancer, inhabits and blurs American film icon James Dean in his performance piece *Last Meadow*, which played at Antwerp's deSingel and other European venues this year. The show begins and ends with an image of James Dean collapsed on the floor, slurring his words; Dean personified a certain postwar American masculinity, becoming an icon of disaffected, alienated youth, whose famous death in a 1955 car crash enhanced his mystique. Gutierrez blends dialogue, images, poses and gestures from three of James Dean's movies – *Giant*, *East of Eden*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*, reversing genders, and transferring lines among characters. These hallucinations of masculine postwar youth are juxtaposed with a menacing soundtrack of militaristic film music and street sounds—a darker American underground that competes for our senses with the virtuosic trio of dancers. "America is a disaster," whispers Gutierrez into the microphone, this nostalgic-apocalyptic landscape is



"The Shipment", door Young Jean Lee's Theater Company  
(©Paula Court)

the “last meadow” in what he calls “my dearly departed country.” Then a man standing upstage, dressed in a blouse, wig, and skirt, gently sings a patriotic anthem.

Another young artist who explicitly challenges American values is Young Jean Lee, a Korean-American playwright-director whose performance *The Shipment*, also shown at deSingel, directly confronts audiences with American culture’s racial myths. With a cast of African-American actors and a structure consisting of short sketches and scenes, *The Shipment* deliberately presents a series of outrageous character stereotypes in order to express, challenge, mock, and question all *idees reues* about African-Americans from a white point of view. *The Shipment*’s final scene asks the audience to evaluate the way in which it watches social behavior for racial indicators—and why it does so. (I will be very curious to hear how this theatrical dynamic functions in Europe, outside of an American context; will European audiences think it is about white American racism? Or will they perceive it to be about their own social assumptions?)

Most performances by these New York artists voluntarily stay within certain genteel perimeters of “art” theater: audiences book tickets, go to familiar venues, and (usually) sit in folding chairs with xeroxed programs in their laps—and maybe a beer in the more permissive venues. But other performance artists have nudged things out of buildings or out of bounds, experimenting with interactivity and community in the city at large.

Flash mob instigators like Improv Everywhere, for instance, have exploited phone and wire technology and challenged definitions of performance and audience by sending texts, Facebook messages, and Twitter tweets asking a crowd to assemble at a certain time and place somewhere in the city. Their recent spectacles have resulted in pageants of slow-motion shoppers in Home Depot and frozen train passengers standing all around Grand Central Station. Also breaking beyond four walls was *365*, the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’s massive experiment in democracy and dramaturgy; Parks wrote a short play every day for one year, then disseminated her scripts and used the internet to coordinate staged interpretations of her daily dramas in all kinds of communities across New York City and the USA over the span of *another* year. It was perhaps the first truly viral theater project, conceived and executed to exceed the boundaries of performance, which is supposed to take place in one room at one time. Results ranged from the banal to the expressive, but the experiment was never about the finished product; it attempted to activate an artists’ network where none existed before and tried to find a common catalyst for creativity.

Those projects held elements of surprise, risk, and uncertainty—vital aspects of 20th-century performance breakthroughs by previous American avant-gardes like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and the Judson Church dance circle – and these ingredients always needed to spice things up. If New York wants to stay in the performance vanguard, it must encourage and embolden progressive artists to try projects that aren’t strictly outcome-driven. Young performance-makers’ creative evolution may be stunted, however, by New York City’s notoriously commercialized large-culture infrastructure. Few theaters or arts organizations commission or present experimental work on a large scale; much of the work shown in this festival, in this wonderful palace of the arts, would normally play in a basement or studio venue. Nature Theater’s *Life and Times* has toured to top houses across Europe, and is a co-production with the Vienna Burgtheater, but American presenters – who must rely on box office revenue with no subsidy -- consider it too long, too large, and too esoteric to play at, say, the Brooklyn Academy of Music or Lincoln Center. So groups like Nature Theater and Miguel Gutierrez’s company have short runs in small or medium-sized spaces in their native city; they spend a lot of their time raising money or touring when they could be in the studio further advancing their art forms; this is the material fact, even though they are among our best, most pioneering artists and are welcomed by a wider public in Europe and Asia. That’s the economic reality—if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere. It is up to New York artists to survive while they innovate, and it is up to New York audiences to discover them and give the recognition that they are due.

But still, despite all that, there’s no denying it: in the new century—now under way—there’s an appetite and opportunity for enlarging the theatrical experience in New York, and it starting to happen. If anyone can seize the day, it may be the artists visiting here this month -- and anyone else with the do-it-yourself spirit, who can take on a tough town, a city that expects a lot -- and receives it too.