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THE WOOSTER GROUP AT 30:
THEATER'S CUTTING EDGE
The inside story of how NYC's most provocative players survived death, scandal and heartbreak

ACT UP!
The show goes on for Woosters
Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe
and Elizabeth LeCompte
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Willen Before
7:04

Elizabeth Lecompte
just kicked off
his directorial
roles.

Ron Kaver’s
film

Spelling Gray’s
Wooster Group’s
first production
with
his mother’s
suicide.

Ron Kaver’s
just kicked off
when he died.

Pertson Smith
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Wooster Group’s
Miller, promptly
issued cease-and-desist letter.

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"L.S.D."

Weston

"L.S.D."
“It was familial, incestuous, dysfunctional.”

As the Wooster Group turns 30, its surviving founders (and some of their peers) relive the saga of the provocative company that’s still revolutionizing New York theater. By Jason Zinoman

The Wooster Group: An Oral History

The 30-year story of the Wooster Group, the premier experimental-theater company in America, can be as melodramatic as a soap opera. Tangled romances, political brouhahas and shattering tragedies abound, alongside the troupe’s trailblazing narrative manipulation and high-tech innovation.

At the center of it all is an unlikely protagonist: an unassuming, maternal, 60-year-old creative dynamo named Elizabeth LeCompte. In a field filled with drama queens, LeCompte, who has directed all of the group’s productions, does not seem starved for attention; in fact, she comes off as a little shy. She had little interest in the theater until, while attending Skidmore College in the mid-’60s, she met and fell in love with a handsome New York actor named Spalding Gray. After she graduated and moved to New York, Gray helped usher her into the world of Richard Schechner’s influential Performance Group, which worked out of a dank Soho space on Wooster Street known as the Performing Garage. It was there that LeCompte encountered and began collaborating with a core group of fearless actors: Jim Clayburgh, Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe and Peyton Smith, along with Gray.
In 1975, LeCompte launched a series of now-legendary plays—in effect the first Wooster Group productions—known as the Rhode Island Trilogy, in which Gray explored his childhood, his mother's suicide and the monologue form that he would eventually master. The company soon established its house style, working communally round the clock to build shows from found texts and improvisation. (The group eventually took over the Performing Garage when Schechner disbanded the Per-formance Group in 1980.)

Early productions like Rumstick Road and L.S.D. (...just the high points... ) are now studied in universities and imitated by countless young directors and actors. But along with their many successes, the seven founding Wooster members have endured more than their share of turmoil and heartbreak from the mental illness of actor Libby Howes and the early death of Vawter (from AIDS in 1994), to the dual blow last year of Gray's suicide and the breakup of LeCompte and Dafoe, who had been a couple for 27 years (the pair declined to be in the same room together for these interviews). But through it all, LeCompte and Co. remain resilient and stubbornly avant-garde, producing boundary-pushing work with an all-consuming dedication. In early February, a new rendition of House/Lights, originally staged in 1998, opens at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn. According to LeCompte, the Wooster players' new show—like all of its predecessors—is about themselves.

The early days

Peyton Smith (Wooster Group founding member): The difficult part was living that life—the totally involved, communal life. I had a family and a child. I wasn't looking to make this my life. First of all, there's no money, and I had a child to support. I worked at bars—that's all I'll say.

Kate Valk (Wooster Group founding member): I was amazed how unmiddle-class it was. I grew up in a solid middle-class home, but I was never interested in marriage and children. When I met these people, it was very exciting.

Richard Schechner (Founder of Performance Group): Those Spalding shows were a totally new idea, disarming and autobiographical. It was before Eric Bogosian. Lenny Bruce may have done it, but not like Spalding, who had that New England reserve.

Elizabeth LeCompte (Wooster Group founding member): One reviewer from The Village Voice said [1977's] Rumstick Road was exploitative because Spalding had illegally taped a conversation with a psychiatrist talking about her mother's suicide.

Richard Foreman (experimental playwright and director): I remember Spalding running around pushing a lawn mower and everyone screaming. I used to like the sudden explosion of wild manic energy. Everyone remembers the scene in Rumstick Road when Libby Howes stood on stage waving her big black mane of hair back and forth in a very violent fashion. It was for, like, five minutes.

Vawter: Libby was just a mad aristocrat. It was a wearing very little underwear and catching everyone off the lights to start Rumstick Road and I was like, "Who is that?" I saw Spalding, but I was attracted to Liz.

Valk: There was a lot of energy between Willem and Liz. They had just fallen in love. Once in rehearsals, Liz read something; she was always reading to us. She read a passage from [French playwright] Artaud, and Willem grabbed a laundry-detergent bottle and read with the same authority from the back of the bottle. He was always for cutting the highbrow stuff.

Dafoe: The audiences in the early days were small. I remember someone offered to hire us for a private party after seeing Hula, in which we dance wearing very little clothes. It was, like, a lot of money—and all we had to do was go there and dance for ten minutes. So we went to this party, not knowing what it was going to be. They thought we were like Strip-O-Gram people. And they wanted to know what we were doing after the show.

Insight and infancy

Route 1 & 9 (1981), the Wooster Group's first major production without Spalding Gray (who was concentrating more on his solo career), was so inflammatory that the critics almost overlooked the fact it featured a porn movie on stage. The show opened with a video reconstruction of a 1950s educational film, in which Vawter dryly analyzed Our Town. Next, four white actors in blackface performed an Amos 'n Andy—style routine based on a sketch by vaudeville comedian Pigmeat Markham. The final chapter included the sex tape, starring Howes, Vawter and Dafoe. The show angered just about everyone, including the Thornton Wilder estate, the New York State Council for the Arts (which
The Wooster Group has faced a number of legal battles, none more famous than when Arthur Miller's agent sent a cease-and-desist letter for the unauthorized use of《The Crucible》in the production of L.S.D. (...just the High Points)... in 1984.

LeCompte: I was so upset when people said you can't use blackface. I was hurt by that and driven to examine why that was. I found《The Crucible》, where Arthur Miller had written a black character. Well, if we can't play a black character, why can a white writer write a black character? That was one of the driving forces behind《L.S.D.》.

Valk: That was the second show in which I wore blackface.

Clayburgh: L.S.D. was the first time when there was an attempt to use microphones on stage, and that gave the company a new performance style.

LeCompte: I got the idea from the McCarthy hearings. It was the image of the politicians in front of the microphones that made me think of using them.

Smith: I heard that Arthur Miller was going to be at an event at the Chelsea Hotel, so I went. I thought I would get some wine—and who's there, pressed up against me, but Arthur Miller. I was so nervous that I said, "Mr. Mi-Mi-Mi-Miller?" I gave him the address and invited him to the show. And he came.

Valk: He came upstairs afterwards, and he seemed really bemused, like, Who are these people and what are they doing? He didn't

withdraw funding for the Wooster Group and many in the audience who cried racism. In terms of provocation, it was a home run.

LeCompte: We were looking to structure a show in some way other than sense memory or techniques based on [Method acting]. We looked at all kinds of performance styles and started to act out the records that we had of comedians. We were going about it the opposite of the way most people build character: We were doing it from the outside in. We listened to an old P. G. Wodehouse record and tried to figure out what made it funny. Was it the timing? The rhythm? So we built the show around that.
understand it. Liz had terrible eczema, and I remember her bandaged hands going to shake the hand of this great American playwright who I had studied in school. And then the next day, I remember the cease-and-desist letter.

Le Compte: I think he didn’t get it—and that probably bothered him. So we rewrote the show using the original testimony from the Salem trial.

High-tech happenings

After a particularly harsh review of L.S.D. in The Village Voice, the Wooster Group stopped inviting critics to its shows—but its notoriety continued to grow. The film careers of Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter took off, adding Hollywood glamour to the 99-seat Performing Garage. American academics championed Wooster, and even the mainstream press, which had been decidedly cool in the early years, started praising the productions. By the '90s, the company, whose work had become increasingly rigorous, abstract and technologically complex, had joined Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman as the most celebrated avant-garde theater artists in America. Two decades after Route 1 & 9, the Wooster Group, in a sure sign it had entered mainstream culture, received a B+ from Entertainment Weekly for its production of To You, the Birdie! (Théâtre).

André Gregory (director): The audiences were very intellectual, and unlike my audiences, they didn’t care what the critics said.

Dafoe: I started having people come up to me and say, “I wrote my dissertation on you.” Very weird.

Smith: Ron started to leave before he died. But we made [Frank Dell’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony around and about his dying, and he was part of it.

Monk: Ron was completely fearless, a whirlwind, a lightning rod.

Smith: When Ron died, it changed things a lot. He was the glue. We still had Liz and her brilliant mind, and that held things together. When he was gone, we had to do more and be better. Liz loved to look at him, and it felt like it was up to us to fill that spot. And that was hard, because none of us could fill it.

Clayburgh: Brace Up! (1991) was the first time that characters who were live on stage were also presented live on video. The layers of sound had gotten continually more complex. The maturity of Liz is the ability to bring all of this together. To get the necessary precision of timing requires hours and hours of work.

Dafoe: It can be a kind of mechanical process. It’s tedious. Something happens, then you technically refine it. You find something and then you crystallize it.

Ken Kobland (Wooster member, film director): In the early work, the film pieces were

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CURTAIN CALLS

Blackface, porn and cease-and-desist letters—the Wooster’s best shows were anything but ordinary

Three Places in Rhode Island (1975–1979): This trilogy (plus the epilogue, Point Judith) constituted the Wooster Group’s inaugural work. Elizabeth LeComte and Spalding Gray used Tchaikovsky, T.S. Eliot’s The Cocktail Party and secretly taped telephone conversations to explore Gray’s childhood and his mother’s suicide.

L.S.D. (Just the High Points…) (1984): This concentration of the memoirs of Timothy Leary’s baby-sitter and The Crucible spurred Arthur Miller to serve the group with a cease-and-desist letter. The group then substituted a Cuban dance portion, sections of the Leary-Liddy debates and a meticulous recreation of an LSD-saturated rehearsal.

Route 1 & 9 (1981): This infamous production, a riff on Our Town, featured actors in blackface; the show didn’t sit well with certain audiences and foundations, leading to a temporary loss of New York State Council for the Arts funding. Oddly enough, a sequence involving a porno film generated no such controversy.

Hula (1981): Under the sobriquet Ray Whitfield, the Johnsons, a topless Kate Valk and a nearly bottomless Ron Vawter and Willem Dafoe danced to a record titled Hula by the Wallkiki Hula Boys. The piece concluded with three-part urination.

The Hairy Ape (1995): The only Wooster Group work to achieve a Broadway transfer, this staging of Eugene O’Neill’s expressionist drama starred Dafoe as a ship’s stoker and Kate Valk as a debutante and a gorilla. Critical praise was plentiful—as were audience walkouts.

To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre) (2002): A sweat-slicked Kate Valk acted the part of a lovesick, enema-addicted queen in this version of Racine’s Phèdre. A badminton coach—who’d trained the Chinese Olympics team—subjected the entire cast to rigorous drills. Several grueling matches were played on stage.

Poor Theater (2004): This work-in-progress explores the theories of director Jerzy Grotowski, the practices of choreographer William Forsythe and artist Max Ernst, and the group’s own performance history and methodologies. —AS
Many Off-Off Broadway players take their cues from the Wooster way

Many of the leading lights in New York’s risk-taking theater community talk about their first Wooster Group show as if it were a conversion experience. “I’ll never forget it,” 1988, was a Duke student, and I saw Saint Anthony,” says John Collins, artistic director of Elevator Repair Service, who worked on several Wooster productions in the ’80s. “That show changed the way I looked at everything.”

When I first saw the Wooster Group, I had two reactions,” says Randy Sharp, artistic director of the Axis Theater. “One, I wanted to kill myself because I could never do that. And two, I couldn’t wait to go back to my company, tell them about it and get to work.”

Steve Cossin, artistic director of the Civilians, credits the Woosters with expanding the vocabulary of theater, allowing for others to adopt new approaches and modes of expression. “We can all say a hell of a lot more now,” he states, adding, “I think of the Wooster Group as something akin to a founding family of the place where I live and work.”

Another major reason behind Wooster’s pervasive influence is the impressive number of ex-members, including Collins and Marianne Weems, artistic director of the Builders Association, who have gone on to start their own companies. “I worked with Wooster Group on Bruce Up! for two years and three more touring,” Weems says. “The sense of being able to luxuriate in a project was something that was unique and influential.”

“So many groups say, ‘Let’s sex up our show and Wooster Group it,’” Collins says. “That means putting technology on stage, but the Wooster Group didn’t invent that and that’s not Liz [LeCompte]’s genius. Her genius is her rigor and her commitment and her courage.”

Josh Fox, the artistic director of the international WOW Company, says the Wooster members set an example by buying their own space and continually doing their own work, while also building their careers through other outlets. “I remember meeting Willem Dafoe and asking him, ‘How did you get your career working in both movies and experimental theater?’” Fox says. “He said, ‘You can’t get there by telling everyone you’re a kid. You have to have a real job and you can’t get there by telling everyone ‘Fuck you’ all the time. You’ve got to find someplace in the middle.’ I thought that was cool. I think about that all the time.” —IZ

The past year has been a difficult one for Elizabeth LeCompte. One decade after the death of Ron Vanzett, Spalding Gray committed suicide by jumping into the East River. Around the same time, Willem Dafoe ended their relationship of nearly three decades (the couple has a son, Jack, who is currently making a documentary about To You, the Birdie). Through it all, she has poured herself into her work, directing Poor Theater (about director Jerzy Grotowski, choreographer William Forsythe and visual artist Max Ernst) last year and House/Lights (opening February 5). Next up, she has set her sights on the Everest of drama, Hamlet.

Smith: I feel like Poor Theater was a return to a more personal work for the group.

LeCompte: Perhaps I felt nostalgic about the loss of Spalding because we saw Grotowski to-