

To Be Subjected to De-Subjectification
I.E., Non-Subjectified Thoughts

A Conversation with Richard Foreman

by Fulya Peker

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“Hovering on the edge of understanding,
Waiting to see what direction it goes in.”
Richard Foreman

Four years ago, as a spectator, I visited the Ontological-Hysteric Theater for the first time to see *King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe*. I chose a seat that was right next to a marked chair—the chair with a sound control board attached to it—without knowing that it was not only a chair but a hawse through which the ropes of imagination passes. I remained unaware that it was him sitting on that chair, until he—the hidden subject of all the objectified thoughts floating on the stage that I was struggling to sympathize or connect with—cast the anchor and began to increase and decrease the volume of my reason. Last year, I was accepted as a production intern for *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy Your Unconscious Mind is Dead*. During the four months rehearsal process I was sitting right behind him, struggling to watch my mind watching his mind and to watch him watching his mind. This year, as a performer, I was invited to stand before him in *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland* and had the chance to deepen my exploration of the complexity of being/-non. Throughout the last seven months, I was busy with becoming one of those objectified thoughts floating on his stage, this time, resisting against being sympathized or connected with by the spectator. Although the sum of the inner angles of a triangle is always the same, these were quite different angles all along. However, here I am now, as I am and am not, as a performer; passing through the Foreman optics and becoming truly a form, without a center, without becoming a center, but with some hidden and contained intensity of watching my double lying on the ground like any other wrinkled or crooked piece of décor, or a prop at the end of the play every night. Interestingly enough, it is more intense to share the space with other objects as a performer than to own them as in a conventional play; especially if we consider the irony that everything is supposed to be created for or by man. Well, not in here ...

In 1968, Richard Foreman founded the Ontological-Hysteric Theater. This year he celebrates his fortieth year as its artistic director. He has written, directed, and designed over 50 of his own plays both in New York City and abroad. The theater is located in the St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery in New York and serves as the home to Foreman's annual productions as well as to the work of other local and international artists. For his work, Foreman has received many awards, e.g., the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship. His archives and work materials have recently been acquired by NYU's Bobst Library. Seven

collections of his plays, as well as studies of his work, have been published in New York, Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo. He remains one of the most active masters of experimental theater in the USA. His published works include *Richard Foreman: Plays and Manifestos* (New York University Press, 1976), *Reverberation Machines: The Later Plays and Essays* (Station Hill Press, 1985), *Love & Science: Selected Music-Theatre Texts* (TCG Publishers, 1991), *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theatre* (Pantheon Press, 1992), *My Head Was a Sledgehammer: Six Plays* (Overlook Press, 1995), *No-Body (A Novel)* (Overlook Press, 1996), *Richard Foreman (Art+Performance)* (edited by Gerald Rabkin, Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), *Paradise Hotel and Other Plays* (Overlook Press, 2001), and most recently, *Bad Boy Nietzsche and Other Plays* (TCG Publishers, 2007).

Foreman's plays, one may say, are full of symbols: psychological, social, or philosophical codes if you wish for any, stimulants of many kinds, flashes of momentous non-victorious comprehension, and loud sounds of brain as a muscle. Passing through the doors of all sorts of "why" questions, simultaneously, every moment becomes a possibility of reaching into an ecstatic yet awakened state where there is no more reasoning but transcendence of the mind. There is no linear story to follow; there is no story at all, but events. "Stories hide the truth," Foreman says. Everything is necessary and irreplaceable for the world to stand the way it does; however, nothing really depends on the other. "The feeling of no feeling, that deep feeling ..." is followed by an abrupt experience of the dispersion that is precisely and meticulously put in order through long rehearsals. After seeing his play, *Book of Splendors*, in Paris, Foucault told Foreman how he found the play very interesting but what was especially interesting about it was that, while he knew that there was some very rigorous scheme organizing it, he could not figure out what it was.

Richard Foreman begins his rehearsals with a menu of hundreds of sound loops, pre-determined but unsettled costumes, décor, props, and performers ... Along with the live action on stage, he has been using multimedia—as the base time frame and foundational inspiration for the live gesticulation—for the last three years. He shoots his movies in different locations throughout the globe based upon invitations he receives from various institutions and organizations. Foreman uses his actors as multiple non-identities activating the geometry of space and not always in relation to one another. Through the connection with the costumes, given gestures, and the décor, performers gradually absorb their shapes or colors in the space. He choreographs every minor movement on stage, but lets the performers arrange their formulas to become the most prevailing and cogent operation that each may represent in the world Foreman creates. Therefore, performers are playing themselves playing the play. He re-writes—not literally—his plays as he is directing them. While he composes a world of his own throughout the rehearsal process, it is

possible to witness a total becoming, a change, a constant editing of the forms and shapes and thoughts. Anything can change at any time, thus everything stands in a border of uncertainty that helps sustain the necessary tension all along.

Spectators usually either watch themselves watching the play or are mesmerized by the experience of witnessing somebody else's dream where everything may seem unreal. It is not easy to enjoy a Foreman play, because it requires less of a defense but more of an internal confrontation, less of a connection with the ideas but more endurance for the disinterestedness of one's own mind. It is often possible to see many audience members rolling their eyes. However, while rolling our eyes with lack of pleasure, we have the chance to see the inner sides of our very own eyelids; there it is red and gloomy. We turn back to ourselves and get out of ourselves, simultaneously. To suck the perceived, inhale and hold ... Reasoning is the thirst for owning a thought and in Foreman's plays there is no ownership. A light bulb twitches on and off, continuously, and the mind staggers each time it attempts to adopt the skewed reality. The momentum of a collapsing body wipes away the suspicious stillness ... Then one laughs before the knotted stare of a becalmed stranger ... And again ...

Instead of a Q&A parade—his work already tells what it tells—instead of questioning what the objects he uses indicate, I thought it would be more interesting to witness his mind re-communicating with his own thoughts, to create a similar experience of his work in an interview, to carry imagery into words. How would it sound if Richard Foreman talks, not answers, but thinks aloud ... “To suppose he was to postulate ...” Nothing needs to be linear or connected or clear; no sentence has to be finished or edited or related. A flow that resembles his notebooks ... “Just letting come out whatever is going to come out ...” This ocean of his carries waves back and forth, sometimes smashing against the spectators, sometimes gently moving over and beyond them for the last 40 years. So, I wanted to find a way to witness more, but neither through a pre-determined dialogue nor through a philosophical or psychological investigation. Just an attempt to open up the door to some meditations ... As they are in his plays, things might be juxtaposed or repeated or doubled when an overloaded mind gives up asking the question why, because only then one may truly experience and observe; only then one may recognize; because only through the free experience of the perceived, by sacrificing the thing-in-itself for a short period of time, one may stop lamenting for being “condemned forever to be free” to put it with Sartre's words. Below, in capitals, you will see the phrases that I directed to Richard Foreman during our conversation. They are indeed not questions asked by the other but some key words to provoke a self dialogue. So here we are now ... to not remember ... therefore be-fuddled again and again towards an “enlightened un-knowing.”

PAUSED UNCERTAINTY

Pause ... everything should pause. I do not know ... uncertain ... thank god, as I am getting older I am getting more uncertain ... most people as they get older get more certain about everything ... certainty ... certainty ... however the statements in my plays are just assertions ... so how can assertion be not certain ... everybody thinks when you make an assertion that is certainty ... no, no ... let's find a way to fight that and make assertions be uncertain ... unfortunately you have to pause, or fortunately ... in order to come up with the uncertain; statements and assertions ... it doesn't come easy ... nothing of any value really comes easy ... I mean there was a time when I used to write, and I thought the rule was to write easy ... first word, best word ... Kerouac, typing those rolls and rolls of paper ... now, I just want to pause and make the pauses longer and longer ... I am not talking about my plays, I am talking about my own head ... just waiting ... waiting ... waiting ... until, there is no choice but something comes ...

LIKE A PENETRATED LOOK OF A DEAD FISH

... yes ...

FILTERING THE TRUTH

You cannot do that ... filter ... yes, I have been saying I am a filter ... I am thinking filter cigarettes ... fortunately I never smoked ... but all I can think of when you say filter, but that is for free association, of filtered cigarettes ... but, actually, it is probably terrible to be a filter, I am filtering everything and I am keeping out all the good stuff ... I am sure. I am keeping out all the bad stuff, but I am keeping out a lot of good stuff too ...

WHITE CANVAS PAINTED INTO WHITE AGAIN

That is all the same ... All these things we've said so far. [Phone rings: "Hello, Ontological Theater"] No, I do not want to paint any canvas white ... why paint it white since it is already white ... why do anything if it is already done ... that's the big trouble with making art ... life has already done most of the things ... and you spend most of your time doing it again ... now you can say, well, but it has to be reasserted 'cause people do not remember, but it is much better to just let it be ... just stop ... don't paint the white white, don't paint the green green ... just get out of the way, get out of the way ...

IMAGINE SAYING, BUT NOT SAYING ... CONTAIN IT INSTEAD

Well, most of what we say should not be said, most of it is chatter obviously ... but it is much more interesting to imagine great things and not say them ... yes ... sort of it relates to when I was a young man in New York, just out of Yale, I

remember riding on the bus and thinking and this was probably my doom at that point, thinking ... it may be kind of interesting ... I want to be an artist, it may be kind of interesting to be an artist and getting increasingly unknown ... because especially in those days you know I wanted everybody to recognize me, “wow, isn’t that Richard Foreman?”, and I thought maybe it would be better, more fun and more interesting to just be totally unknown, that’s sort of like being invisible, yes, it would be nice to be invisible ... so you don’t have to say things, you shouldn’t say things, shouldn’t be seen, you should all be dug into the earth, planted like a seed that might sprout many years later ... you know, that is a better idea ... yes.

TREE-DE-TREE-RE-TREE

Seed does not necessarily mean a tree, who knows what it means, you know seeds are like, also, who was it in Greek mythology that planted the teeth and soldiers came up, it is like planting under the earth anything, obviously it is not the literal earth ... but it is like hiding things away, and if you have hidden them away, you fold them into death, they are going to maybe have some function there, less evil and more powerful than if it is said or done ...

MIND WATCHING THE MIND

When I was young, I started reading, I think Gurdjieff was the first person that talks about it, that I was aware of, who was talking about watching the mind, self observation, a lot of other people also talk about it, but that was his big thing ... obviously it is almost impossible to do, I do not do it, I pretend I do it, I pretend I do it in the way that I work, but I am sure I am kidding myself ... you cannot watch the mind ... and the reason why you cannot watch the mind is because, there really is no mind, there are just a lot of habits and a lot of things that occur ... the thought, like the thought, what interests me is the thought, that is a thought, that is out there, that is not thought by anybody but it is there, it is a thought ... so watching the mind is not connecting to that thought and that is the interesting thought ...

A THOUGHT THAT IS NOT OWNED BY A SUBJECT, JUST BY ITSELF, FLOATING

... yes ...

NOTHINGNESS ... THE VOID ... THE EMPTY FEELING

O, no, no comment.

THE MULTIPLE ... THE DOUBLE

The multiple, not the double, has been co-opted by this French philosopher Badiou, that the reality is multiple, is numbers ... I have always been interested in the double ... Maybe because I thought I had a double ... since I am

adopted, maybe I have a brother, or maybe I even have a twin, I doubt it ... but I might have a brother or sister, and that would be my unknown double ... I was fascinated because years ago I had a double in my plays, somebody named John Matori—he's still around—who especially in those days looked very much like me, and I put him in my play sometime to play me ... but I do not know why, I have always been fascinated, in theater with the double, having people in my plays who seem very similar ... I suppose because we are all doubles ... because the superficial part of ourselves—the way we look, the way we have been trained to talk—that is not double ... that is not the part I have ever been interested in, I have been interested in something underneath that, and that thing, that person that is behind all of that, looking out from everybody, through everybody's eyes ... it's the same person, it is the multiple, it is the double ...

FOCUS AND DISSOLVE CONTINUOUSLY

The artist defocuses ... I do not remember to do that in life; that would be good ... I do not remember to do that much when I am working ... People like D.H Lawrence were interested in it, and he talked about the whole problem of the west, that we have focus and we should not have it, I think Heidegger talks about that too ... But I read this man named Trigant Burrow, many years ago. He had all these techniques that he taught people ... to observe certain kind of tension in their eye and produce a cotentive state rather than a ditentive state, and essentially he was teaching people to defocus. Also Anton Ehrenzweig ... who wrote the great book on art that influenced me more than any other ... *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* ... He also talks about defocusing, registering the periphery ... I am not sure if registering the periphery is like defocusing, but to defocus is certainly a release ... I wear glasses, so that I can focus, and if I don't wear my glasses I cannot focus as well, but you would feel scary ... You feel like, I got to see ... Like an animal that is going to be attacked, I have got to have good focus, so that I can see what is hiding in the bushes ready to jump out ... If only one could really say "It is ok, eat me ... Here I am ... "

IMBALANCED BECAUSE

Just today I was writing something about being balanced. Just when I came to the theater, in the book I was reading I wrote, something about ... You should only say what you don't know, because if you say what you know then you introduce an imbalance, because you are split between what you think you know and all that stuff that you do not know. It creates an imbalance in a harmonious person. So maybe the idea is to only write or talk not knowing anything. Then you're really balanced, really harmonious [*The phone rings*] ... Harmony is not knowing ... you know ... [*The phone is answered: Hello Ontologica*]

UNFINISHED

Everything is unfinished ... everything ... obviously ...

PANIC THAT REPEATS ITSELF

I have always been a panicked person I think, basically. Maybe that is why I got interested in all the kinds of things that I have been interested in, in the mystical tradition ... Because I was hungry for escaping my own panic ... Maybe I am panicked because I was adopted ... I never fed at my mother's breast ... I am told by my parents that the first nurse they had for me wouldn't let my parents come near me, so they fired her after two weeks ... But, God, I must have been deeply wounded, so I had panic as a result ...

DEHARMONIZE

I don't know what that means, I don't know how to de-harmonize things ... Everything has harmony and de-harmony ... I just see things going around and around ... bumping into each other, doing things ... [*The sound of typing begins in the office and continues from this point on*] harmony ... I don't know the difference, as any advanced composer would say, there's no such thing as harmony; everything is harmonious ... Obviously western tradition established certain rules about that ... A lot of these rather boring people write books explaining that harmony is built into us ... we have certain neural systems that reflect and respond to certain harmonies ... but that is silly. Maybe we should expand and grow; we should transcend our biological physiological given ...

REASONING-SIDE EFFECTS

I was taught to reason; that has been my big problem ... My father was a lawyer, we used to have arguments ... he sort of conditioned me to reason much too much ... Now that's a lie of course, because I wouldn't like to be a 1960's hippie, "oh, man, I am just grooving," that does not use his mind ... But that is tension, there is deharmony in my life ... stress between the need to reason and a feeling that's cutting me off from a lot of things ... sure.

COINCIDENCES

Everything is a coincidence. Everything that has happened in my life is a coincidence. Really, all the significant things in my life have been a coincidence ... Again, I am also a person who likes to plan ahead, and anticipate all kinds of problems and prepare for them ... But, it's quite true, that every big thing that happened to me has been a total coincidence ... come out of the blue ...

PRESENT TIME ... NOW ... HERE

It doesn't exist ... doesn't exist ... It is always fading into the past or leaving

into the future ... It doesn't exist. I wish I could ... I wish I could be in the present ... But I cannot ...

CIRCLE IT

Center is everywhere, circumference nowhere ... Pascal ... My one mystical experience was my head exploding into a big globe, so that's a circle ... so ... again these are all things I have heard about ... You know ... God has been sending me postcards, but I never get to go ... [I laugh]

IS NOTHING IS

Yes ... I do not have to answer this therefore ...

LITTLE CHILDREN

Actually I think little children are the proof that the world is screwed up ... because everybody loves little children ... Why do they love little children, because they're dead, and they think little children are their one contact with something that obviously now they have lost, so their affection for little children means they are full of self loathing ...

RED

I have just been working on something in the opera I am going to do next ... I got this actor, he has red hair ... I thought, I am going to call him Mendel Cohn-Bendit, i.e., Danny the Red, the guy who lead the May 68 in Paris, his name was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, so this is Mendel Cohn-Bendit ...

SUPPOSE

Supposesupposesuppose ... suppose ... suppose ... suppose ... you can't go any further than that ... suppose ... If you are honest you can't fill it in ... you just suppose ... well, suppose ...

UNDERSTANDING

Well, thank God, I have total understanding ... [*He laughs ... I laugh*]

UNREAL FLOWERS

Best kind, they are dead ... quite suitable for us dead people ... us living dead ... best kind ... they don't disappear after a couple of day or two ... just like we wish we do not disappear after a couple of day or two ... artificial Richard, that would be good ...

KNEES OF WOMEN

[*He laughs*] Well, I thought that's very sexy ... Reich, Wilhelm Reich talks about something like that, about the eroticism of flesh, when it bulges, when

the body bends ... yes.

TWITCH

Well, from now on just take the answers to any one of the preceding questions and they will be applicable to whatever this question is, or the next one. Twitch ... everything I've said is a twitch ... [*That explains everything, I said*] but as I say, I can just work backwards and give the answers that I have already given. The truth of things ... [*Someone knocks on the door*]

come in ... [*He turns back to me*]

finished? [*One more, I said*]

STARE

My mind is twitching back and forth between stairs that you walk up, and the stares somebody gives ... [*Looks out of the window*] Normally I automatically would have thought stare is, somebody is looking ... But I had that dream I talked about where I woke up and somebody was staring at me, and I screamed and for several years; it made me nervous. Three or four times a week. Just the other day, I was writing, maybe what I should do is to use more stairs ... I like all the scenes in my movies that have stairs, the staircases ... So I am switching back and forth ... What is the relationship between stares and stairs ... Well, the one is sucking out your insides, that's for sure ... going up stairs or down stairs ... renting out the place that you've been ... much more than if you just go through a door, or walk along in the place ... you have a sense that you ascend or descend stairs ... sucking out the upper level or the lower level where you have been ...

REMEMBER

I do not remember ...

[*Thank you very much, I said*]