

Mediated Understandings

by Nicholas Birns

Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland

(A Richard Foreman Theater Machine)

Ontological-Hysteric Theater, New York

January 22 – April 13, 2008

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Seen: January 20, 2008**

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Richard Foreman's recent turn towards making extensive use of film in his theatrical productions evokes the argument of Philip Auslander in his seminal book *Liveness*: that the traditional distinction between 'live' and recorded media is no longer tenable in today's technological milieu. Not only do we watch 'live' telecasts of events that are in fact only conveyed to us through highly mediated mechanisms, but even when we see 'live' action in front of us, Auslander argues, our expectations of what we should see are influenced by our far more frequent encounters with recorded action, images, or sound—so liveness for us cannot be what liveness was for, say, the Victorians. Foreman's intermingling of the 'live' and the recorded summons what Friedrich Kittler might call the postmodern "discourse network."

The unlikely cultural similarities between Britain and Japan have long been pointed out by cultural analysts, for instance, the late David Titus of Wesleyan University. Both countries are made up of islands with often vexed relationships to the large continental land masses which adjoin them. In the terms of Gilles Deleuze, Britain and Japan think they are Oceanic islands—thus Orwell's use of 'Oceania' for the English-speaking totalitarian state in *1984*—despite the attempts of China, France, and Germany to periodically see them as Continental islands. Thus the near-total Japanization of any foreign import, from Buddhism to baseball; thus the long-established xenophobia of England, which has, in our day, been stanchd not by any sort of Europeanization but through the growing racial diversity of the contemporary United Kingdom.

Both Japan and Britain are constitutional monarchies whose royal family is valued in affective and symbolic terms long after all actual power has passed from their hands. Both have traditional class systems that have had to engage with more egalitarian discourses; for the past few centuries tea has played an important role in both cultures. In his latest multimedia production, *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland*, Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater takes this uncanny resemblance as his premise in a challenging production that ultimately sweeps far more beneath its purview.

The performance space is not separated from the audience by a glass shield as in recent Foreman productions. It contained two small pianos (never actually played), a large white basin on a red stand towards the back (complemented by a similar basin towards the left of the space). Two clocks—one hanging from the ceiling, the other on the wall flanking the space

to the right—ticked in real time through the performance, letting the audience know exactly how much time was left in a piece explicitly advertised as lasting one hour, two minutes. A glass-framed cabinet, eventually revealing various blankets and bibelots, stood at the right end of the space, flanked by Victorian spirit photographs on the wall; these are also on the floor. Four small light bulbs hung in a pendant fixture suspended from the ceiling. About 20 of the bulbs were placed beneath the large screen at the back of the space.

The décor of a Foreman set is important to think about because its effect often sharply divagates from its initial impression. When viewers first confront the set, they see items that could be the inventory of an old curiosity shop: bric-a-brac, old furniture, various hand-me-down items with a faded glory or piquancy. But what might seem to be an effort at quirky nostalgia or a general period style ends up testifying to a fragmentation of a totality of which the bric-a-brac items are mere shards. In other words, they seem to be vestiges of the past, but end up being the rubble of modernity. It is later than we think, later than the bric-a-brac has initially prompted us to think. This is particularly crucial when the production's on-screen images evoke unified images of other cultures, against which the 'live' actors on stage display a deliberately far less coherent and organic impression.

The haunted, disembodied nature of the set of *Deep Trance* is emblemized by the fact that it also contains Victorian spirit photographs of the sort displayed a few years ago at the Metropolitan Museum—photographs that were claimed by those who took them to actually capture spirit visitations, and which are somewhere between overt hoaxes and materially configured séances on which at the very least the yearnings for transcendence, if not its empirical manifestation, are troped. In its wish to bridge life and death, matter, and spirit, the Victorian photography frames and illustrates the piece's concern with bridging the ostensibly real and the allegedly unreal, between past and present, life and death, animate and inanimate, subject and object.

A woman, The Girl with the Golden Dress (Caitlin Rucker) enters the space. She swallows a pill, which on one narrative level (itself, ironically, a rather realistic topology) takes us into the dream-world, the trespassing of barriers, that encompasses the rest of the piece, which is seen as a sort of nomadic night-vision. This is a gesture that is repeated throughout the piece—with ambiguous reverberation. Is this a moment of privileged access to the sacred, to the extraordinary, a trip to fairyland? Or is it a mordant comment on the way our contemporary equivalents of the transports of past ages is the anodyne of prescription drugs, which, the novelist Sylvia Engdahl has recently contended in *Stewards of the Flame*, are arguably the most effective current means of social control. Is an otherworld conjured by taking a pill necessarily an ersatz otherworld? Or does the numinous end transcend the prefabricated means? Is the repetition of the gesture ritualistic, accumulating a succession

of enacted meanings, or does the repetition make it trivial, render it parodic? These sorts of questions recur throughout the piece, and with respect both to what happens immediately before us and on screen. *Deep Trance* does not permit us to assess it squarely or straightforwardly; we continually reassess not only what we see but our own role as spectators during the course of the performance.

The first actor is soon followed by Girl in the Sailor Hat (McDonough Thayer) and Girl with Black Hair (Fulya Peker), the only character not named, metonymically, by an article of clothing, also the only female character who does not wear red-striped socks. The theme of red in the décor and the actors' clothing is at once colorful and disturbing, with a sustaining force whose gaudiness can also alarm. The three actors display themselves in almost reverent postures. Stillness, or at least the taut potential of movement, is a major technique of the piece's 'live' aspect; it is a stillness given torque by the marked characteristics—usually denominated in terms of clothing—displayed by the actors. Throughout the piece, it is vision as much as movement that focuses our attention on the 'live' performance. The effect is far less choreographic than in earlier Foreman pieces. But music is unobtrusively present throughout, including intriguing melancholic snippets from Mihaly Vig's soundtrack to Bela Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*, a film whose dream-like evocation of a world whose constraints and modern uncertainties resembles Foreman's evocation of old Japan and old England as witnessed through the prism in today's America. There is also a brief, rousing American carousel-tune which spurts up in the middle of the piece, providing a wakeup call so jolting as to be almost disruptive in its hearty merriment. Images, 'live' and on screen, and spoken phrases, in various languages, dominate the scene, true to Bonnie Marranca's early characterization of Foreman as a practitioner of the theater of images.

The spoken phrases, voiced by Foreman and his wife, Kate Manheim, help frame the themes of the play. As, on duplicated screens, a woman strides down a corridor, regally gazing at the audience, the three women on the 'live' level scoot towards a glass cabinet. A voiceover intones: "Go to Japan." There is an invocation of a "mental window," a proving for the "real." A male actor (Joel Israel, playing "Man In Striped Suit") came onstage, looking foppish. A fourth female character, Girl With The Tiara (Sarah Dahlen) also manifests herself, scooting around the stage more boisterously than the other performers. Then comes the first of the piece's major verbal leitmotifs: "He who drinketh the water never shall thirst." This line from the *Gospel of John* seems, in context, to refer less to direct spiritual revelation than to the wisdom offered by cultural contrast, by an evocation of a Japan that the theoretical frame of the play concedes to be expressly fictive.

As has been true of all three of Foreman's productions since, in 2006, he

began to give film as much emphasis as 'live' action in his work, sometimes the action on screen mirrors what is happening 'live,' sometimes there seems a deliberate disjunction, sometimes no relation at all. Measuring the correspondence of screen to site is part of the interpretive and responsive work required of the audience. Five minutes into the piece, the action seems disjoined on the screen as several of the actors caterwaul in the 'live' space. But, for most of the piece, there seems to be more frenzy on screen, while the 'live' level is characterized by an eerie, limpid calm.

The calm, though, is certainly not without interruption. Several times during the performance, the house lights are dramatically switched on, breaking the frame usually maintained during a traditional performance, as if to alert the audience and prevent them from succumbing to any absorption into the tableau. In addition, from the left of the space an actor in a large green bird suit enters, with the legend "King Hummingbird" (perhaps reminiscent of Foreman's 2004 piece *King Cowboy Rufus Rules The Universe*, a parody aimed at George W. Bush in the wake of what at the time seemed his Iraq triumph) and bearing several small American flags on his shoulder, as if to break the illusion of cultural tourism-cum-explanation fostered by the exotic Japanese settings on the screen.

But what of the British level? This indeed is the most vexatious question of the piece, as the English images are simply not as frequent or as compelling as the Japanese ones. Despite receiving equal billing in the structure of the production, there is a noticeable asymmetry between the production's own investment in the Japanese level and the stake it musters in the English referents. As the voiceover announces "Young English People," we see these on the screen, all female, all seemingly privileged and upper class: chic, perky Bright Young Things. This is disconcerting when a young person in England today is as likely to be of West Indian, Bangladeshi, or Cypriot descent. The Japanese scenes seem far more varied both in terms of gender and cultural milieu. But is this difference deceptive? Are we lulled by our greater familiarity with things English, our jaunty ease with them? The audience laughs at the line about young English people, which itself is said with a kind of latent humor, whereas the contemplation of Japan is portentous and laden with the burden of cultural crossover, tourism, contamination. What we may not notice are the Victorian spirit photographs, which are by old, dead English people and attempt to claim to picture the spirits of other old, dead English people returned to life. In this way, the spirit photographs are the English-ghostly equivalent of the manifest ghostliness of the filmed Japanese locations.

But the very readability of both live and dead Englishness makes us wonder if there are there cultural codes in the Japanese settings that we cannot decipher. Do we need to look at that which is closer to us with a more detached, clinical distance? Like the young English people, the actors on

stage are young and attractive as well, certainly appearing closer to the English portions of the screened imagery than the Japanese. There is far more racial diversity in the Japanese filmic sections—although it is an old-fashioned sort of racial diversity, the modernist wholly other—not the postmodern hybrid, not a racial diversity in which London is far more multi-ethnic in composition than Tokyo, as is indeed true today. Indeed, the use of Japan in the piece—which Foreman concedes is touristy and an exoticist construct—seems to evoke Modernist anthropology more than postmodern Diasporas. As is discussed below, one is never certain how seriously Foreman takes his premises, and his use of the Japan/England frame may be just to explode it, or to unfold an elegy of the era in which it held as consistently as the piece seems to want it to do. This raises a question not just of culture but of media: Are we meant to compare one to the other, or to judge the two media fundamentally different? Is the idea of film and the idea of ‘live’ action evoked in the piece anymore congruent, formally or culturally, than the Japan and England sections of the filmed action? At the end of the piece, one appreciates the way Foreman has shown us that there is script in ‘live’ action, liveness in recorded film; what we might desire is more of a sense of concomitant racial diversity, both in the actors and in the audience. Foreman’s Britain is that of *Masterpiece Theater*, not of Zadie Smith or Monica Ali; his Japan is that of Lafcadio Hearn, not Banana Yoshimoto or Hitomi Kanehara. Foreman knows this, and makes artistic capital of the dreaminess and knowing artificiality and inadequacy of his vision. But the audience had better be sure it is aware of these circumstances, as well. People who have read a certain amount of recent theory in the humanities will have difficulty seeing anything as pure dream which involves cultural or political alterity—I am too much a disciple of the postmodern rhetoric of suspicion for that. On the other hand, art, particularly Foreman’s art, should not be subjugated to a monolithic or repressive political reading. Simplifiers of Edward Said too often see any attempts by a Westerner to represent the East as imperialistic. Nor is the point to chide Foreman for being out of date. Part of the piece’s subtext is the dramatists’ advancing age, and the entire turn towards film has, as George Hunka has suggested, an atmosphere of confronting mortality and the limit-situations of the last phase of life. A certain amount of distance from the contemporary world is needed for this, and any effort to seem au courant would end up seeming sophomoric. Indeed, it often does so in the work of younger artists who just end up listing reality rather than truly anatomizing or refracting it. But to reach the full depth of Foreman’s vision we must understand how suffused his images and the piece’s entire tableau are by mediation.

This is signified by another recited leitmotif, besides “He that drinketh of this water shall never thirst,” is, “I understand you immediately.” The word “immediately” is sounded with a faint accent, which brings out the little-

noticed aspect of the word “Immediate”—the way that, though it connotes pure presence, that which is before us, here, now, it is nonetheless as a word, mediated. The word itself presumes that, in effect, the natural ontological state is that of mediation, and that the immediate can at best be a momentary negation of it. When ‘I understand you immediately’ is said in a pronouncedly foreign accent, we are meant to conclude that the phrase cannot be true; its very enunciation is mediated. In addition, there is the “media-” in mediated—the fact that the entire piece is constructed out of the very different media of theater and film, and seems to insist that these media are clashing as much as complementary, that they are not simply versions of each other. Each media mediates the other, just as the cultural transpositions, even the all-American King Hummingbird, inflect each other without a determining core. There is no standpoint, even, and especially, for the audience; there is nothing but mediation, and whatever understanding the piece formulates must be, in turn, mediated.

Foreman always raises the issue of how much he is a dramatist of ideas, whether or not his plays have intellectual postulates or take them as premises they then farcically knock around. Certainly Foreman parades ideas as few contemporary American dramatists, realist or avant-garde, do. To see his productions over the decades is to witness the influence of European philosophy on American intellectual life in various phases and deployments. But it would be a mistake to see him as an earnest expositor of ideas, writing *dramas à these*; his relationship to his own postulates is, as Foreman says, ‘off balance’; and ideas can be premises in his work, but seldom conclusions. Crucially, to see the piece as only about England and Japan ignores the many other cultural referents that come into play, some, like playing French phrases that turn out to have been spoken by André Malraux, make sense within the frame (Malraux wrote extensively about Western/Asian cross-fertilization and set his most famous novel in China) but some disrupt it, such as the persistent counting to four in German. In the latter half of the piece, a pronounced Hebrew strand comes into play, with the Hebrew letters “Heth” and “Resh” being prominently displayed on a pull-down screen (this perhaps refers to “Ruach,” the Hebrew word for spirit, although the letters are arranged in the wrong order for this). (The letters of the Hebrew alphabet also serve as numbers.) Even more concertedly, the common Jewish prayer “Baruch atah adonai ha-melech ha-olam,” translated as “Blessed are you God, King of Eternity,” is uttered about three-quarters of the way through the piece. Unlike other Foreman pieces, though, the spirituality seems more horizontal than lateral; bearing witness to the dignity and profundity of cross-cultural encounter—also seen in translation between languages, or adaptations of cultural forms to transplanted contexts—rather than soliciting numinosity from above. “The letter is always dead,” we are informed. But there seems to be no palpably living spirit to transcend the dead letter. The splaying between ‘live’

and screen action—and the way the on-screen action is much more vigorous and frenzied—problematizes the opposition between ‘living’ and ‘dead’—as a repeated phrase wittily notes, “People are never dead if living people are dead when they are living.” This is in a way parabolic of the relationship between the ‘live’ and filmed action, and cautions us not to privilege one above the other as more ‘primary’ or even more ‘real.’ In this way, it testifies against various avatars of what Jacques Derrida might term ‘the metaphysics of presence’—even revisionist, avant-garde, or rebellious versions thereof. A Sixties hippie, for instance, might denounce society as dead, but what the above phrase suggests is that, if, say, bourgeois conformity is dead because it represses the inner spirit, that unhinges the very distinction between living and dead; if the society that is purportedly functional and constructive is already dead, then the secret of death is unbottled and can never conclusively come to haunt us in its most literal manifestation. Film, indeed, may be a kind of mediatized manifestation of the country of death; non-living; yet certainly still animate. This is one of the clearest iterations of the link between avant-garde practice and spirituality in Foreman’s work and in contemporary radical performance in general.

In *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland*, the particular grove in which this spirituality flows is that of cross-cultural encounter. Though at times, especially when the living songbird bumptiously strides onto the stage, seeming like a non-objective version of Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures*, in its deeper moments the piece reminds us of Dean McCannell’s observations on tourism, that tourism involves the staging of experience and that its approach to the other is conducted with a gravity and curiosity akin to religious faith. Foreman concedes we are not getting “the real Japan”—the glimpses we have of that deferred entity are turbulent, chaotic, psychotic—but something of this striving for, as opposed to the achievement of, the reality of the Other in the Lacanian/Saidian sense, motivates the reverent trance in which ‘live’ actors and audience are enmeshed. As is said by one of the on-screen actors, “I will be here long after you have vanished from my mental world.” What is represented is a kind of plenum that makes both ‘live’ actors and audience question the ontological grounds of their own existence.

By the end, the ‘live’ actors seem somewhat traumatized. The Man in Striped Suit wears an eye patch, testifying to some worldly weathering of his Byronic exuberance, and the Girl with Black Hair hits herself in the head repeatedly with a hammer, evoking such past Foreman productions as *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* and *The Gods Are Pounding My Head*. The Girl with the Tiara places a flower of garlands on the head of the Girl with the Black Hair, a gesture of ceremonial commemoration and mourning. We are reminded that “Big Girls Don’t Cry” (presumably reference to original Four Seasons hit, not the recent Fergie song of the same name). The micro-elegiac feeling this generates with respect to the ‘live’ actors emulates a general feeling of elegy

that has characterized Foreman's recent work (although this elegiac note can be seen as early as 2002's *Maria del Bosco*, an almost unremitting lament). In past productions, the elegiac sense has seemed directed to apolitical or social states now perceived as gone. But here it appears to be verging on an elegy for theater itself, for a form in which Foreman made his career and on which he staked his artistic vision but which he now seems to feel is inadequate. Foreman has stated that much of the frenzy that has characterized his 'live' actors in the past is now manifested on the screen—"manifested" being a better verb than "transferred" or "displaced." Symptomatically, Foreman's last piece before this to have the word 'Potatoland' in the title featured his wife, Kate Manheim, as Rhoda. Three decades later, Manheim is now not on stage, but a voiceover. The sense of stasis on the 'live' level is only reinforced by the final injunction: "The actors are only resting but the performance is over"—leaving a sense of the interminable, the unfinalized, on stage, as the actors, 'playing dead,' are not able to be properly congratulated by the audience. (At the production I attended, several audience members made commendatory remarks as they exited while the actors lay on the ground, prone and unresponsive, 'still resting.') In the course of just over an hour, we have gone from *jeunesse dorée* to desiccated decadence.

This aura is not due to any inadequacy in the production, but is a deliberate, engineered effect of the piece. So, as always in Foreman, is the manic, overcrowded quality of what we see—even though the 'live' action is less frenetic than in the past, we are still bombarded by an excess of stimuli, such that it is impossible to pay full attention to the piece—Foreman's work operates in too many channels for that to happen. There has to be an element of distraction in all art, a vacant space for the audience's mind to wander, otherwise art just becomes, in Benjaminian terms, aestheticized politics. Foreman's pieces are as short as they are because he knows the audience will not be able to pay attention longer. The raising of the lights, and the loud thumping sounds which erupt throughout the play, are ways of reminding the audience to keep alert, but they are also indicators of a distraction that would otherwise prevail. They also permit the actors to see the audience and to scrutinize the audience's behavior, generating an effect that, at one pole, dissolves any last vestige of a mental 'proscenium' between audience and artwork, letting us fully participate in the theatrical process, and, at the other, makes us feel our behavior is being watched and monitored as in Foucault's citation of Jeremy Bentham's vision of the Panopticon. The lighting, though, lacked the aggressiveness of last year's *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy*, when on the occasion of my second viewing of the piece on March 10, 2007, my seatmate almost fainted due to the heat generated by the constant showering of overhead light. In pre-2006 Foreman productions, the audience was entertained by the irreverent, freewheeling exuberance of the action immediately before it; the filmic sections do not generate the same kind of

intimacy. Perhaps the audience is resisting Foreman's tacit suggestion that we are also mediated, also, as it were, 'on film.'

Foreman's turn to film can be seen as a manifestation of what Edward Said calls 'late style'—the style of an artist late in his career, not necessarily their most lyrical or ebullient style, but their most complex, most multilayered, most, to quote the subtitle of Said's book *On Late Style*, 'against the grain.' Late style no longer asks to be measured as part of the artist's maturation, the appeal to cultural consensus, the adherence to general scenarios. Late style transpires when an artist, no longer bound by the struggle for recognition loses herself or himself in their inner and ultimate complexity, is in a way free to be more than just herself or himself (Beethoven's late string quartets, for instance). The utopian urgency of Foreman's multimedia practice now, late in its unfolding, has a tragic dignity to it, an elegiac lament, signified by the film, whose continual performance is yet a vehicle of hope, signified by the 'live' action.

This third of Foreman's productions to include film exhibits both this tragic sense and this adamant hope, and demonstrates that mediated understanding is a powerful vehicle for cultural and performative encounter.