

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS.
THE WOOSTER GROUP'S *THE EMPEROR JONES*
(1993; 2006; 2009): REPRESENTATION AND
TRANSGRESSION

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ABSTRACT

In 1993, the iconoclastic American troupe, The Wooster Group, set out to explore the social issues inherent in O'Neill's work and to shed light on their mechanisms by employing varying metatheatrical strategies. Starring Kate Valk as a blackfaced Brutus, The Wooster Group's production transgresses all traditional artistic and social norms—including those of race and gender—in order to heighten the audience's awareness of the artificiality both of the esthetic experience and of the actual social conventions it mimics. Transgression is closely linked to the notion of emancipation in The Wooster Group's work. By crossing the boundaries of theatrical illusion, they display their eagerness to take over the playwright's work in order to make it their own. This process of interpretative emancipation on the part of the troupe appears in its turn to be a source of empowerment for the members of the audience, who, because the distancing effects break the theatrical illusion, are invited to adopt an active writerly part in the creative process and thus to take on the responsibility of interpreting the work for themselves.

RESUMEN

En 1993, la iconoclasta compañía estadounidense The Wooster Group, se propuso explorar las cuestiones sociales inherentes a la obra de O'Neill y arrojar luz sobre sus mecanismos mediante el uso de diferentes estrategias metateatrales. Protagonizada por Kate Valk que, pintada de negro, tiene el papel de Brutus, la producción del Grupo Wooster transgrede todas las normas tradicionales del arte y de la sociedad - incluso las que atañen a las cuestiones de raza y de género - con el fin de realzar la conciencia del público respecto a la artificialidad tanto de la experiencia estética como de las convenciones sociales actuales que imita. La transgresión está estrechamente ligada a la noción de emancipación en el trabajo de The Wooster Group. Cruzando las fronteras de la ilusión teatral, muestran su afán de apoderarse de la obra del dramaturgo con el fin de hacerla suya. Este proceso de emancipación de interpretación por parte de la compañía parece ser a su vez una fuente de empoderamiento para el público, a quien, gracias a los efectos de distanciamiento que rompen la ilusión teatral, invita a adoptar un papel de escritor activo en el proceso creativo y así a asumir la responsabilidad de interpretar el trabajo por sí mismo.

Of all Eugene O'Neill's plays, *The Emperor Jones* is one of the most controversial. This play in eight scenes, first produced at the Provincetown Players' Playwrights' Theatre, New York City, in 1920, tells the story of African-American Brutus Jones, who, having escaped from prison, establishes himself as emperor over the Black residents of an island in the West Indies. In an attempt to escape his former subjects who are now rebelling against him, Jones makes his way through the forest, a spatial journey which leads him to recall scenes from his earlier life. In 1993, the iconoclastic American troupe, The Wooster Group, set out to explore the social issues inherent in O'Neill's work and to shed light on their mechanisms. Starring OBIE-winning white actress Kate Valk as a black-faced Brutus, The Wooster Group's production transgressed all traditional artistic and social norms in order to heighten the audience's awareness both of the artificiality of the esthetic experience and of the actual social conventions it mimicked. By crossing the boundaries of theatrical illusion, The Wooster Group displayed their eagerness to take over the playwright's work and to stage their own interpretation of O'Neill's representation of Brutus's fate.

With its staging of *The Emperor Jones*, The Wooster embarked the spectators on a journey through the looking glass, beyond both theatrical and traditional social representations of reality. Like the Provincetown Players, as we will first see, The Wooster Group played with theatrical traditions and broke the boundaries of illusion to unveil the fabric of representation. By doing so, the troupe explicitly staged representation as both the *theatrical rendering* of an object or a subject through artifice but also as the *social image* of that same object or subject as it is *perceived* or *constructed* by an author and, more widely, by a culture. By focusing, in the second part of this study, on race and gender crossing, this paper shows that social

representations were exposed as *mis*representations upon which, as is finally demonstrated, the spectators were invited to reflect. By involving the audience in the process of interpretation, The Wooster Group empowered the viewers and gave them an active writerly part in the artistic creation.

I. FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE: STAGING (DIS)ILLUSIONS

FROM THE PAGE TO THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS' STAGE: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF ILLUSION

In his introduction to “Brutus Jones ‘n the ‘Hood: The Provincetown Players, The Wooster Group, and the Theatrical History,” Roger Bechtel sets Elizabeth LeCompte’s company as the rightful heir of George Cram Cook (1873-1924) and Susan Glaspell (1876-1948)’s amateur theater troupe, which was greatly influential in the emergence of an off-Broadway stage in the 1910s-1920s. As Bechtel notes, the similarities between the Provincetown Players and The Wooster Group abound:

Geographically, both of these companies were literally born downtown (below 14th Street in Manhattan), and more importantly, aesthetically and ethically they typify “downtown,” a term that has become synonymous with a nonconformist and noncommercial attitude. The Provincetown, like The Wooster Group, was committed to experimentation, and was a—if not *the*—preeminent member of the theatrical vanguard of its day. Occupying roughly the same neighborhood (in more than one sense), even their performance spaces are similar: the Provincetown converted a storehouse and stable into a theatre, while The Wooster Group occupies a modern equivalent, a converted garage (130).¹

To Bechtel’s list can also be added, among other things, the emphasis on collaborative work for both troupes: Cook and Glaspell dreamt of a “community [of artists] working together, developing unsuspected talents” and, in interviews, LeCompte emphasizes “the collaborative nature” of her approach (Glaspell 193; Quick 10).²

Eugene O’Neill was a member of the Provincetown Players. The Provincetown production of *The Emperor Jones* on the first bill of the 1920-1921 season consolidated O’Neill’s growing success and launched his Broadway career at the

¹ The garage, known as “the Performing Garage,” is central to The Wooster Group’s work as it both serves as their creation and rehearsal home and as a performance venue as The Garage.

² In the case of the Provincetown Players, the members of the group were expected to get involved in every facet—artistic but also administrative—of the production process. Although LeCompte stood as the director of The Wooster Group, being thus the one who had the final say, the active collaboration of the actors throughout the creation was central to LeCompte’s theatrical process.

expense of the company.³ A turning point in the history of American drama and theater for many reasons, *The Emperor Jones* is rarely remembered as the play which caused tensions to flare up among the Players, whose pioneering historical adventure was eventually brought to an end. However, the play is often referred to as a landmark in African-American theatrical history. With *The Emperor Jones*, an African-American actor was offered a leading role by a white company for the first time. Another important feature of *The Emperor Jones* concerns the playwright's aesthetic experimentations with expressionism, breaking thus away from the realist tradition of the time.⁴ *The Emperor Jones* is considered "as a remarkable tour de force both as drama and as an exposition of expressionist techniques" (Gassness and Quinn 259). Although the first and last scenes can be qualified as realistic, the six intermediary scenes, in which "the forest and the night appear to embody the limitations of his mind," read as projections of Jones's inner world (Styan 101). As Mardi Valgemæ explains in his pivotal *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s*, expressionism is regarded as the attempt to "penetrate through life's surface reality and portray man's inner world" (2). Expressionism extols subjectivity and puts "inner experience above external life" (4). If expressionism typifies the modern quest to go beyond objective reality, its intention is however not to break the boundaries of theatrical illusion but instead to unveil its hidden facet by giving the readers and spectators access to the intimacy of the character's mind. To immerse the spectators in the infinity of Brutus's mind, George Cram Cook, who directed the play, was eager to experiment with the set in order to render visually the author's expressionism and thus launched himself upon the construction of a dome. Ivonne Shafer writes:

By 1920, when O'Neill had written *The Emperor Jones*, Cook realized a dream he had long held. He installed a sky-dome in the theatre. It was modeled on the famous *Kuppelhorizont* in Max Reinhardt's Grosses Schauspielhaus in Berlin. This was a dome

³ The day after the premiere at the Provincetown Playhouse, Provincetown Players member Edna Kenton remembers, "offers came in from half a dozen Broadway managers to take *The Emperor Jones* uptown" (127). For Kenton, and most probably for her friends Cook and Glaspell, the Players' decision to take O'Neill's play uptown signed the death warrant of the founders' dream of an amateur theater on the fringe of Broadway and its commercial traditions. In 1922, the troupe split over disagreements concerning the Players' internal policy.

⁴ In his preface to *Realism and the American Drama Tradition*, the editor William W. Demastes even refers to the "tyranny of realism" in order to emphasize the tremendous impact that realism has had on American drama and theater. He writes:

The tyranny of realism. This phrase summarizes the impression expressed in numerous critical analysis of twentieth-century American drama. It is true that since the beginning of the twentieth century, realism has been the dominant mode of expression (Demastes ix).

Demastes's collection was published in 1996, that is three years after the first production of *The Emperor Jones* by The Wooster Group.

which backed on the stage and which reflected light in various directions, increased the impression of size, and allowed many possibilities for theatrical lighting effects [...] Amazingly, this amateur group was the first to use this theatrical device in America (76).

In The Provincetown Players' 1920 production, the power of illusion was reinforced thanks to Cook's dome, which gave the illusion of limitless space, thus enabling the members of the audience to discover every recess of Jones's mind.

THE WOOSTER GROUP'S *THE EMPEROR JONES*: "ARTISTRY AND ARTIFICIALITY"

If illusion prevails in the Provincetown Players' production of *The Emperor Jones*, The Wooster Group, on the other hand, deconstructed illusion to lay bare the artificiality of representation. The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* was first produced in 1995. Due to its original success, the production was revived in 2006 and again in 2009. The present analysis of The Wooster's staging of O'Neill's play is based on the performance given on January 10th, 2009 at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, during the O'Neill Festival.⁵ The Wooster Group has often been hailed by theater critics as an epitome of what Hans-Thies Lehmann defined as post-dramatic theater.⁶ Lehmann coined the phrase "post-dramatic theater" to account for the theatrical tendencies which have been dominating the avant-garde stage since the 1960s, tendencies in rupture with modern theater as defined by Peter Szondi and others. The text is no longer central for post-dramatic artists, who consider it as a mere ingredient of the theatrical experience which blends together different media such as cinema, music, plastic arts.... *The Emperor Jones* stands however as an exception in The Wooster's repertory since O'Neill's text does remain central: as Bechtel notes, in 1993, "it was the first time the Group had presented a play under its original title, largely uncut and unaltered textually, and without the interpolation of any other scripted text" (128). Apart from this major change in their work approach, a change which seems to depart from the stylistic character of post-dramatic theater, The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* was faithful to their non-realistic multi-media aesthetic.

⁵ The show has been made available on DVD by The Wooster Group, who sells it in their on-line shop. Besides the revivals of the show, the marketing of this by-product also proves that *The Emperor Jones* was a great success.

⁶ The Wooster Group is not only introduced as "postdramatic" or "postmodern" theater in Lehman's seminal *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), but also in Johannes H. Birringer's *Theatre, Theatre, Postmodernism* (1991), Kerstin Schmidt's *The Theatre of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005), Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender and Robin Nelson's *Mapping Intemediality in Performance* (2010), Nicola Shaughnessy's *Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (2012), Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney's *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook. From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (2012), to name just a few.

The Emperor Jones starred three performers: the Black-faced Kate Valk playing Brutus, Ari Fliakos and Scott Shepherd who alternated in playing Smithers and the Stage-Assistant.⁷ Brutus and Smither's outfits were akin to Japanese Kabuki costumes with African undertones. This blend of cultural aesthetic disoriented the spectators, who had but few signs to help them define the location of the scenes. The two plastic palm trees on each side of the raised boxing ring-like stage hinted at the fact that the plot takes place in an exotic location but they also worked as signifiers referring to the artificiality of representation: the ostentatious fakeness of these props made clear that the spectators were watching a world made of "plastic," a construction, a fiction. The fabric of the performance was made all the more apparent by the presence of visible cables and backstage equipment, which were manipulated by the Stage-Assistant, who came and went on stage and whose activities back stage were also visible because of the absence of curtain between the stage and the wings. Two TV monitors were placed at the rear of the stage. The screens displayed the faces of some of the characters, creating an effect of spatial and temporal multi-layers calling into question the "here and now" essential basis of theater. Asian-like music to which Jones and Brutus danced was played. Electronic sounds and the sounds of African drums punctuated the play. This mixture of performance, cinema, dance and music is characteristic of the intermediality of post-dramatic theater. The creation of a heterogeneous universe, both in terms of cultural references and of the nature of the media used, departs from the realist tradition. The attempt at making apparent the fabric of the show through the profusion of media and of technological devices whose cables are left apparent is metafictional, a strategy which transgresses the boundary of illusion. As Werner Wolf writes: "explicit metafictional laying bare of [artificiality] is one of the important processes responsible for breaking illusion" (284). In his book devoted to the company, *The Wooster Group Work Book*, Andrew Quick declares that "the most important preoccupations in the work of The Wooster Group" resides in "the search for a profound form of experimental reality that challenges the ordinary, which is, paradoxically, always negotiated and filtered via the very artistry and artificiality of performance itself" (8). I would argue that, in the case of *The Emperor Jones*, LeCompte's troupe experiments with the "artificiality of the performance itself" to "challeng[e]" an "ordinary" which, *in fine*, is artificial.

II. ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE: STAGING (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS

⁷ In the 2009 production under study, the part of Smithers is played by Ari Fliakos and that of the Stage Assistant by Scott Shepherd.

RESUSCITATING THE “DEAD AUTHOR”: REPRESENTING AUTHORIAL AUTHORITY

In its theatrical endeavor to lay bare the fabric of illusion, The Wooster Group represented on stage the very agents of the artistic process. The black face and the Kabuki costumes, emblems of the actor's impersonation in the American Minstrel tradition and the classical Japanese tradition, identified Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos as actors. The stage assistant was present throughout the play: his conventional off-stage role was put in the limelight. The character of Smithers was staged as a figure of authority. Physically absent from the stage at the beginning of the first scene, the white trader was however “technologically” present on the TV screen; he could also be seen off-stage, speaking his lines into a microphone. Jones turned his back to both the technological and the real off-stage Smithers as if the emperor were interacting with a voice only. This presence-absence strategy conveyed the impression that, from the start, Smithers was both literally and figuratively “behind” Jones, that this character, who can be seen as the narrative catalyst of Brutus's doom, stood as a voice-spirit triggering Jones's actions and thus controlling him.⁸ Smithers's control over Jones was akin to that of the stage-director or of the author over her or his actors or characters. Smithers's made-up moustache bore a striking resemblance to Eugene O'Neill's. This “metatextual” echo established Jones as “the representational creation of [O'Neill], the seemingly ‘absent’ playwright but the true arbiter of Jones's fate” (Bechtel 148). Rather than staging Jones, a character created by a “scriptor” and freed from the author's authority, as Roland Barthes puts it in *The Death of the Author*, The Wooster Group resuscitated the author and staged Eugene O'Neill's Jones, the creation and the vision of the authorial authority. As mentioned above, *The Emperor Jones* departed from The Wooster Group's previous works in that it was the first time that the troupe kept the original title of the play and did not alter much of the original script. This eagerness to go back to the original *The Emperor Jones* further shows that The Wooster was interested in exploring the play as the product of an author's interpretation of complex themes including that of identity. It was thus *their interpretation*, or in other words their staging, of *O'Neill's interpretation* that the company was eager to present to the audience.

RACE AND TRANSGRESSION: BLACKNESS AS A THEATRICAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

⁸ I refer to Smithers as the “narrative catalyst” of the play because it is his narration of the islanders' rebellion that initiates Jones's journey into the forest.

“For featuring a central black character and for actually casting a black actor to play the role,” Aoife Monks notes, O’Neill and his works “were seen to be radically progressive in an era of widespread black-face minstrel practice on the stage” (540). In 1924 in “The Negro and the American Stage” and two years later in “Negro Art,” African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois praised *The Emperor Jones*, which he saw as “splendid tragedy” (“The Negro and the American Stage” 228). Du Bois’s views were however not shared by all his contemporary peers and, in his 1926 article, he actually deplored the protests against the play:

[O]nly yesterday a protest of colored folk in a western city declared that ‘The Emperor Jones’ is the kind of play that should never be staged under any circumstances, regardless of theories, because it portrays the worst traits of the bad element of both races (“Negro Art” 228).

Scholars have often argued that *The Emperor Jones* betrays O’Neill’s stereotypical vision of black men. If the play is stylistically remembered for its expressionism, the first and last scenes are nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, realist, that is, representative of what the author sees as objective reality, which thus amounts to a representation of O’Neill’s subjective reality. Matthew H. Wikander, among other critics, has underscored O’Neill’s caricatured description of Jones: “In *The Emperor Jones*, the stage directions abound in stereotypes (*Jones’s eyes begin to roll wildly. He stutters ...*) and the dialect is reminiscent of the minstrel show” (225). A man with “*typically negroid*” features, as indicated in the didascalia of character description, Jones is indeed reduced to a “type” (O’Neill 8). Thus, in spite of his attempt to depart from minstrelsy—“one of the few truly indigenous American entertainments”—by giving center stage to a Black protagonist performed by a black actor, O’Neill paradoxically fell back on some of the stereotypes which were conveyed in minstrel shows (Banham 682). As David Savran writes in “Obeying the Rules,” The Wooster Group used “*The Emperor Jones* to interrogate O’Neill’s dependence on the very stereotypes of minstrelsy he attempts to displace” (67).

The black actor entrusted by O’Neill and the Provincetown Players with the part of Brutus Jones was Charles Gilpin, who, “by the time he took on the role of Emperor Jones was a veteran of minstrel shows” (Aberjhani and West 102). When in 1946 O’Neill declared that Gilpin was the sole and only actor who could “carry out every notion of a character [he] had in mind,” he seemed, as Wikander points out, to “have forgotten his dispute with Gilpin in 1920” when he learned that the actor “suddenly finicky about using the word *nigger* (called for in the script), was rewriting the role.” O’Neill was reported to have threateningly said to Gilpin: “If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I’m going to beat you up” (Wikander 224-225). The Wooster Group’s staging of Scene 7, when the Witch-Doctor summons a crocodile god to eat Jones as a sacrifice, could be seen as a staging of O’Neill’s threat to Gilpin. The crocodile is performed by the O’Neill-

like character, who pantomimes a fight against the prostrate Jones embodied by Valk, who wears the black-faced mask of the minstrel “nigger” to which Gilpin was thus reduced not only as a *character* but also as an *actor* who had to obey the white authorial authority.

Kate Valk impersonated the stereotypical vision of the black man conveyed in minstrelsy: she was black-faced with exaggerated red lips; she spoke with caricatured booming elongating words; at the kinesic level, she made grotesque gestures and expressions as she bulged her eyes, for instance. Blackness became the subject and the object of representation in The Wooster Group’s play as they represented on stage the way theater traditionally represented black people for about a century in the United States. In the words of Aoife Monks, “The Wooster Group foregrounded the performative nature of theatrical representation,” they showed that “theatre itself is implicated in the construction of racial identity” (555). In explicitly *representing* race as a theatrical *representation*, The Wooster Group appeared to break the boundaries not only of theatrical illusion but also of social illusion. The final scene of *The Emperor Jones* could be seen as an invitation to transcend the socially constructed concept of races which engenders misconceptions that were staged as representations. In this closing scene, the characters of Smithers and Lem, the Native Chief, appeared on the TV monitor. The characters were both played by Fliakos: the black negative image (with a white mouth) represented Lem and the positive image stood for Smithers. “The use of technological masking [...] called into question the stability of racial origins.” If the “technological masking worked to break down the opposition between the black Lem and the white Smithers by containing both figures in the body of [the same actor]” it also underscored the inherent racism of Eugene O’Neill’s American culture which viewed blackness as negative and whiteness as positive (Monks 556). As Brechtel argues, basing himself on Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism*, racial representations are consequently staged as cultural and thus social misrepresentations (152). To tie up Brechtel’s point with my previous conclusion, it can be said that the *theatrical representation* of race—the physical or technological black-facing—was thus emblematic of *social misrepresentation*.

Interestingly, however, LeCompte declared in an interview about their 1981 show *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, in which they experimented with black-facing, that her staging should not be interpreted sociologically: “the blackface is not sociological. It’s a theatrical metaphor” (qtd. in Savran, *Breaking* 31). This claim appears ambivalent in that theater being a social product, it seems contradictory to negate the sociological dimension of black-facing. This statement, which was made at a time when the company was heavily criticized for their use of black-face, considered as ideologically problematic, reads as an attempt to respond to the storm

of criticism they faced.⁹ It may be assumed that, unlike *Route 1 & 9*, *The Emperor Jones* was received favorably by the critics notably because in it black-facing was explicitly introduced as a mask, both a theatrical and a social construction of blackness. In contrast to their 1981 show in which the actors' whole bodies were blackened, a strategy which symbolically concealed the "white underpinning principle" in the construction of blackness, in *The Emperor Jones* only Valk's face was made up in black—her neck, hands and arms were white. The contrast between her unconcealed natural whiteness and her painted black face therefore posited black-facing as a mask. The "nigger" of the minstrel show is black on the surface but white underneath.¹⁰ On a symbolic level, it reveals that, in the normative United States, black identity was, or is, an interpretation of white culture, a white social construct.

The omnipotence of whiteness as the social "author" of identity is underscored in the text by Jones's eagerness to pass as white, which stands as the norm, the normality that any free powerful man aspires to reach. Aoife Monks writes:

The fact that Jones is cross-dressed as white is revealed initially through his costume, which is a kind of parody of white clothing, a garish version of a western military outfit. This is an outfit that O'Neill describes as "not altogether ridiculous," which reveals O'Neill's view of the combined comedy and menace of a black man's dressing "up" in the garb of whiteness (546).

Instead of staging the crossing of the boundary of whiteness as menacingly destabilizing, The Wooster Group derided this attempt by representing Jones's quest for white power as ridiculous. At the end of Scene 1, The Wooster staged a fight between Smithers and Jones. This burlesque power struggle visually conjured up Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as Jones was wearing a bucket as helmet and Smithers used a flyswatter as a weapon. This intertheatrical reference hints at Jones's failure, a hint which was already introduced at the beginning of the play by the wheel-chair-throne on which the protagonist sits. In their production, The Wooster Group seemed to demonstrate that it is Brutus's attempt to conform to white culture and its

⁹ In a note to her article "'Genuine Negroes and Real Bloodhounds': Cross-Dressing, Eugene O'Neill, the Wooster Group, and *The Emperor Jones*," Aoife Monks explains:

Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act) was a radical revisioning of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and was a mish-mash of popular past performance styles, including blackface minstrelsy and pornography, the combining of which caused controversy, protest, and the rescinding of forty per cent of the Group's funding from the New York State Council (561).

¹⁰ Originally, minstrel actors were white males who smeared their faces with burnt cork. Later black actors got involved on the minstrel stage.

stereotypical visions of both black identity and white power that led him to his death, a death which was staged as symbolic at the end of the play.¹¹

GENDER CROSSING: REPRESENTATIONS AND POWER STRUGGLES

In her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber, who theorizes black-facing as cross-dressing, notes that “the possibility of crossing racial boundaries stirs fears of the possibility of crossing the boundaries of gender, and vice versa” (274). The Wooster Group not only staged the crossing of racial boundaries but they also explored the social representation of genders, questioning, thus, O’Neill’s all male-world.¹² Like race crossing, gender crossing raises the question of theatrical representation. Drawing on the “canonical moments of greatness in the history of drama of the ancient Greek theater [or of] the public theater of the English Renaissance” and on the Asian traditions of “Kabuki and Noh theater in Japan [and of] the Chinese Opera,” Garber reminds her readers that theatrical cross-dressing or “transvestite theatre” is “the *norm*, not the aberration—that what we today regard as “natural” in theatrical representations (men playing men’s parts, women playing women) is itself a particular troping off, and from, the transvestite norm.” “Historically’ or ‘culturally,’ but [also] psychologically, through the unconscious and the language,” “transvestism and theater are interrelated.” Thus, as Garber concludes, “transvestite theater *is* the symbolic on the stage.” She writes:

[T]he phenomenon of cross-dressing within theatrical representation [... may be seen as] a return to the problem of representation that underlies theater itself. Transvestite theater recognizes that *all* the figures on stage are impersonators [emphasis in the original]. The notion that there has to be a naturalness to the sign is exactly what great theater puts in question (39).

Through gender cross-dressing, The Wooster Group put in question the contemporary tradition of realist theater and its norms of “natural” representation. In traditional all-male theater, costumes were major signifiers of the gender identity of the characters. Valk’s Kabuki costume in the play complexified the gender issue—as it did that of race. This traditional male Japanese costume—which was Africanized in the play—looked like a dress to a contemporary Western audience who conventionally associates this outfit with women. This choice of costumes by The

¹¹ In Scene 8, Valk enters the stage to lie down on the floor, ostentatiously displaying her bloody chest, then gets up and leaves the performance space before the end of Smithers and Lem’s exchange on screen. Brutus’s death is not realistic but explicitly staged as symbolic.

¹² Apart from the character of the WOMAN, who has no other function than setting the context of the rebellion, the characters of O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* are all men.

Wooster Group cast doubt on the culturally gendered conventions of dressing and conversely, the socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity.

In having a woman play a man, and not a man play a woman—as was long the norm in minstrelsy—the company reversed the “caricatural [pattern of] representations of women by men” imposed by patriarchal society.¹³ Alison Solomon notes that “men dressed as women often *parody* gender” at the expense of women and asks: “what can happen when the borderlines of gender are transgressed toward power instead of away from it, toward a critique of gender roles instead of toward a parody of them?” (145-146). When asking, along with Solomon, if the transgression of gender boundaries from femininity to masculinity in The Wooster Group’s *The Emperor Jones* equated with a progression towards power for the character, the answer is “no.” In O’Neill’s play, Brutus Jones’s journey through the forest symbolizes his descent from Emperor to primitive. Dressed as a King at the beginning of the play, he is progressively stripped of his clothes making his black skin apparent. In The Wooster Group’s production, it was not Jones’s black skin which was revealed but Valk’s white and smooth feminine body. In Monks’s words, “as Valk performed her journey through the forest, she became progressively more feminine, [conforming] to the trajectory of the playtext,” that is a descent from power to weakness (557). Instead of becoming an “*ape-faced old savage of the extreme African type*” like Lem in O’Neill’s play, Brutus became a woman in The Wooster Group’s production (O’Neill 47). Over the course of the play, Valk’s costume progressively lost “its Japanese qualities and reveal[ed] an American-style plaid shirt and an African print skirt underneath the Kabuki style robes” (Monks 557). Monks interprets this “striptease” revealing different “layers of clothing” as “significant of different kinds of bodies, racial, cultural, gendered, and historical.” She writes:

From Japanese to (literally) African/American clothing, from blackened features to white arms and feet [...], from bulky masculine to smaller, feminized figure, Valk’s Jones did not unearth an authentic body beneath the costume but reveal yet another set of representations beneath the layers of aristocratic, Orientalist, blackface masculinity. Unlike Jones’s body in the text, Valk’s body was never fully revealed on the stage. Instead of revealing a “real” body in contrast to a falsely “masked” body, as O’Neill did, The Wooster Group suggested that the “real” body was a construction *through* its masking, that in fact, the mask *constituted* the real (557).

Like the white skin underneath the black mask, the North American-type shirt showed that Jones was a product of the United States, that the representation of masculinity in the play-text was at core American. Contrary to O’Neill’s Jones, the

¹³ As William Beneman points out, “for most of its history the minstrel show employed only male performers, with men in drag playing ‘wench parts’” (Beneman 151).

body of The Wooster Group's Brutus was indeed not "fully revealed." In *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse*, Joel Pfister argues that the "striptease served to identify the black actor with a sexuality that white audiences could [...] fascinate themselves with as an embodiment of their own psychological primitivism" (130). The body of O'Neill's black actor, that is, Gilpin's in the first production, would thus be an object of sexual fantasy displayed to the voyeuristic gaze of the spectators. If Valk's feminine silhouette became slightly apparent through the loose shirt as her breasts and hips were no longer totally hidden by the Kabuki robe and if a part of her bloody chest was revealed at the very end, the actress's body was not staged as an object of "to-be-looked-at-ness," as Laura Mulvey puts it in her 1973 seminal essay. Hence, if Jones lost power at the end of both O'Neill's text and of The Wooster Group's production, the actress embodying him in LeCompte's work recovered her dignity, contrary to the stripped Charles Gilpin.

III. STAGING POLITICS/POLITICAL STAGING: SETTING THE STAGE FOR SPECTATORIAL EMPOWERMENT

"THEATRE OF RESISTANCE": FROM THEATRICAL DECONSTRUCTION TO SPECTATORIAL RECONSTRUCTION

The Wooster Group played with both artistic and social traditional constructions which they deconstructed to unveil the mechanisms of cultural representations. According to Philip Auslander, this deconstructive purpose typifies "postmodernist political theatre" that is a "theatre of resistance that 'investigate[s] the processes which control [given representations]' through the examination of iconography and the effects of mediatization on political imagings" (104). Through gender and racial cross-dressings subverting the given codes of representations, the company offered a carnivalesque vision of O'Neill's work, disorienting the spectators who were led to question those same codes. Rather than imposing on the audience their conclusions about the superficiality of conventions, as didactic art tends to do, The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* raised questions to be answered by the viewers themselves. The company involved the spectators in the interpretative process, theatrical deconstruction thus giving way to spectatorial reconstruction. By giving the members of the audience an active role in the creation of meanings, The Wooster empowered them, a power which is indeed characteristic of political theater. As Graham Holderness reminds his readers in his introduction to *The Politics of Theatre and Drama*, theater can be political in content or in form but he considers

the latter “to be the more radical and creative intervention” (9).¹⁴ By the politics of form, Holderness refers to the formal strategies set by the artists to get the receptors intellectually involved in the creative process. The Wooster Group’s *The Emperor Jones* was political in form in that alienation effects were at work to ensure that the audience did not remain passive but instead reflected upon what was going on on stage and in society.

EXPECTATIONS AND DISORIENTATIONS

The first strategy used by The Wooster Group in order to have their viewers question artistic and social representations was linked to the concept of expectation. The company led their spectators off the beaten track, inviting them therefore to be always on the alert instead of resting on ready-made preconceived patterns. When considering the actual reception of a play, it is important to take into consideration the profiles of the viewers. As Hal Foster pinpoints in “For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art,” “[c]learly, the politics of representation is a strictly contextual affair” and therefore what may appear as shocking on Broadway may be perceived as radically progressive in Greenwich Village (143). The Wooster Group’s audience was mainly made up of devout followers and spectators who were looking for new theatrical experiments and experiences. By keeping both the original title and the original text of Eugene O’Neill’s play and thus departing from their previous works which dismantled original scripts, the troupe was bound, with *The Emperor Jones*, to surprise their faithful audience, who, from the title of the play and therefore from their entrance into the playhouse, knew that their habits as spectators of The Wooster Group’s shows would be challenged. Rather than losing their originality by going back to the original text, this return to a classic text can be seen along with David Savran as “an as example of what Bourdieu calls ‘the strategy *par excellence*’ of ‘all aesthetic revolutions,’ ‘the return to the sources [...] because it enables the insurgents to turn against establishment the arms which they use to justify their domination’” (Savran, “Obeying” 67). As previously pointed out, The Wooster Group did turn against the establishment by presenting the audience with *their interpretation of O’Neill’s interpretation of Black Americans*.

In the program given to the spectators before their entrance into the auditorium, The Wooster Group had had reprinted W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1924 essay “The Negro and the American Stage,” in which the activist praised Eugene O’Neill’s portrayal of the “Negro” in *The Emperor Jones* for managing to go beyond the “almost universal

¹⁴ Graham Holderness’s theory of political theater is based on modern theater. Although Philip Auslander shows that postmodern theater is a theater of deconstruction and thus differs from modern theater in that respect, Holderness’s concept of the politics of forms appears relevant when referring to post-modern theater: see Philip Auslander’s *Presence and Resistance. Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*.

misinterpretation” of the African-American.¹⁵ Du Bois’s eulogy can be seen as an introduction to the play, which was likely to influence the reception of the work: as they read the program the viewers would have expected The Wooster Group’s work to be faithful to the historical context of the original play and to illustrate Du Bois’s point. However, the spectators’ initial expectations were smashed as the company presented the audience with a play whose plot was temporally and spatially decontextualized: the anachronistic blend of the black-facing culture with that of the media culture blurred the time frame; similarly, it was impossible to define the location of the plot, as the Kabuki-African costume illustrates. Moreover, as we saw, The Wooster Group called into question O’Neill’s realistic representation of Brutus by resorting to the Minstrel tradition. The contrast between Du Bois’s interpretation of O’Neill’s characterization and that of The Wooster Group’s could be seen as an invitation for the spectators to reflect upon the notion of interpretation, a notion which was staged as subjective. If the playwright had the “sympathy” of Du Bois, he did not have that of the company who appeared to perceive O’Neill’s portrayal as racist. The spectators were thus left to choose between the two interpretations.

On the level of expectations, The Wooster Group also played with the audience’s *literary* expectations. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Hans-Robert Jauss lays the foundations for analyzing a reader’s reception to literary texts. In the third chapter of this seminal book, Jauss expands on the notion of literary genres, their historical relevance, their diachronic evolution, and introduces his concept of “preconstituted horizon of expectation.” Even though genres are liable to changes and adaptations, a reader of any piece of fiction, according to Jauss, systematically identifies the work with a specific genre, its literary conventions or norms. This identification process, depending on the reader’s or the spectator’s “preconstituted horizon of expectations,” conditions the reception of the work.¹⁶ When the

¹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois’s essay reads:

We all know what the Negro, for the most part, has meant hitherto on the American Stage. He has been a lay figure whose business it was usually to be funny and sometimes pathetic. He has never, with very few exceptions, been human or credible [...]

The most dramatic group of people in the history of the United States is the American Negro. It would be very easy for a great artist so to interpret the history of our country as to make the plot turn entirely on the black man ...

Any mention of Negro life in America for a century has been occasion for an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast. The result is that the Negro today fears any attempt of the artist to paint Negroes. He is not satisfied unless everything is perfect and proper and beautiful and joyful and hopeful. He is afraid to be painted as he is, lest his human foibles and shortcomings be seized by his enemies for the purposes of the ancient and hateful propaganda.

Happy is the artist that breaks through any of these shells, for his is the kingdom of eternal beauty. He will come through scared and perhaps a little embittered,—certainly astonished at the almost universal misinterpretation of his motives and aims. Eugene O’Neill is bursting through. He has my sympathy for his soul must be lame with the enthusiasm of the blows rained upon him. But it is work that must be done. No greater mine of dramatic material ever lay ready for the great artist’s hands than the situation of men of Negro blood in America (“The Negro and the American Stage” 56-57).

¹⁶ Jauss writes:

spectators saw Kate Valk appearing on stage with a blackened face, they identified this code with the Minstrel genre. However, The Wooster's *The Emperor Jones* fell short of the audience's preconstituted horizon of expectations, since the play did not meet the other defining requirements of this traditional American genre. In fact, the Minstrel genre was denied at the same time as it was introduced, since by having a woman play a man, The Wooster disbanded from the start the Minstrel codes of representations. The spectators should have thus reconstructed the codes for themselves, questioning the old artistic but also any social preconstituted horizons of expectation. By dismantling the literary codes, The Wooster Group challenged the viewers, shaking them out of their intellectual and political lethargy. Besides, with their deconstruction of the Minstrel show, The Wooster Group moved away from what Ralph Ellison defined as a "ritual of exorcism" in which the minstrel mask, by reducing the African in America to a 'negative sign,' managed both "to veil the humanity of negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask," as Marjorie Garber puts it (275). Instead of repressing the audience's awareness of their moral responsibility as regards Black Americans, the company used black-facing as a consciousness raising strategy.

The play with "the rules of expectation," in Fiona Shaw's words, may explain the contrast in terms of reception between *Route 1&9* and *The Emperor Jones*.¹⁷ If Roger Bechtel argues that the difference as regards reception lies in "the historical evolution of authorial license," it also may be assumed that the negative critical feedback was also due to the fact that, with *Route 1&9*, unlike with *The Emperor Jones*, the company did not depart *enough* from the tradition of the Pigmeat Markham comedy, *enough* for the spectators' horizon of expectations to be smashed, and was at risk, therefore, of giving the impression that they actually embraced what was seen as a racist tradition.¹⁸

[The] horizon of the expectable is constituted for the reader from out of a tradition or series of previously known works, and from a specific attitude, mediated by one (or more) genre and dissolved through new works. Just as there is no act of verbal communication that is not related to a general, socially or situationally conditioned norm or convention, it is also unimaginable that a literary work set itself into an informational vacuum, without indicating a specific situation of understanding. To this extent, every work belongs to a genre —whereby I mean neither more nor less than that for each work a preconstituted horizon of expectations must be ready at hand (this can also be understood as a relationship of 'rules of the game' [*Zusammenhang von Spielregeln*]) to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception (79-80).

¹⁷ In her foreword to *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, edited by Liz Goodman, actress Fiona Shaw gives an account of her experience as Richard II in Deborah Warner's staging of Shakespeare's play and writes: "Being a female and Irish, I thought that there were no rules in the world of imagination. But of course there are other rules. The rules of cultural history, the rules of expectation and the rules of timing (xxiii)." Shaw's crossing of both gender and ethnical boundaries in *Richard II* is akin to Valk in *The Emperor Jones* in which the white actress breaks the rules of expectation by playing a black man.

¹⁸ Roger Bechtel writes:

FROM DISTANCIATION TO REFLECTION

If the use of black-facing by The Wooster Group disoriented the spectators whose expectations were defeated, it also worked for Kate Valk as a mask ensuring psychological distance, as Andrew Quick explains in his conclusion to *The Wooster Group Work Book*. Quick argues that the mask serves three functions including that “of establishing a sense of distance between the performer and the audience, creating a barrier between a two-way process of potential psychological identification: the performer with the audience and the audience with the performer” (274). Psychological distance and physical distance with the spectators were two of the tenets of the company’s approach. Contrary to Richard Schechner’s Environmental Theater, “there is no place,” as Quick notes, “for a physical interaction between performers and viewers; [t]he audience is always spatially separated from the scenic landscapes that she constructs” (9). The Wooster Group emerged from the Environmental Theatre in which members of the company, including Elizabeth LeCompte, who served as Schechner’s assistant, were initially working with Richard Schechner. However, they broke away from the director’s “subjective theatre concentrate[ing] solely on ‘the psychology of perception’” to establish a more distanced relationship with their spectators (Innes 271). This psychological and physical distance in The Wooster Group’s works and in *The Emperor Jones* counteracted the spectators’ identification with the characters and thus favoured intellectual reflection. Distanciation with the characters was also conveyed by the use of different media on stage, attracting the audience’s attention to the fabric of the show: the spectators, who were thus constantly reminded that they were watching a performance, were thus prevented from “suspending their disbelief” and therefore from sympathizing with the world of fiction.

A member of The Wooster Group, Ron Vawter, confided to Andrew Quick that his and Elizabeth LeCompte’s theatrical quest was to “figure out what’s there,” that is, “the necessity to have an ethical relationship with what takes place on the stage and before audiences. [...] The relationship is ethical,” he explained, because to “figure out what’s there’ entails a willingness (an openness) to surrender themselves to the immediacy that is the experience of what is being encountered. [...] To do this,” he added, “they have to abandon all predetermined modes of thinking, to set aside the rules through which the world might be known (this would be a moral order), to be receptive to what is really happening in the room.” Quick concludes:

Historical perspective can help explain why the critics seemed to perform such an abrupt about-face: the negative reviews and NYSCA’s revocation of funding were, in a sense, just the beginning of a very public dialogue on *Route 1&9* [...] Ideally, perhaps the public dialogue actually served a suasive function; or perhaps, in the face of such formidable support for the Group’s aesthetic choices, it became very unfashionable, if not intellectually suspect, *not* to support the blackface (either explicit or implicit) (160).

Ethics is not necessarily a mode of discovery, although finding out is inevitably part of the ethical process. The openness to experience, to being present provokes a practice of judgment: what to do next, now that I know this; how to be in the future, now that I have had this experience? It is a mode of judgment that proceeds with criteria, one that demands an imaginative or inventive way of responding to the immediacy—the occurrence—of the event that is the performance. This form of ethics, of thinking the future, like the work itself, is always a matter of pragmatics (274).

This ethical relationship of the artist with the work could be applied to the relationship between the work and the spectators, who, because they could not rely on preconceived patterns, since these were always deconstructed, and could not be led astray by their emotions, should also have responded to the “immediacy [...] of the performance.” As Postmodern political theater, The Wooster Group’s production of *The Emperor Jones* could thus also be defined as ethical theater empowering its spectators with the power of judgment.

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