

Beyond the Boundaries

Beyond the Boundaries

American
Alternative
Theatre

Theodore Shank

A New and Enlarged Edition of
American Alternative Theatre

Ann Arbor

The University of Michigan Press

Copyright © by Theodore Shank 1982, 2002
All rights reserved
Published in the United States of America by
The University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

2005 2004 2003 2002 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
applied for
ISBN 0-472-11166-3 (cloth)
ISBN 0-472-08535-2 (paper)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Especially I want to thank the theatre artists whose work is discussed here for their generosity in conversations, interviews, and correspondence. I am also indebted to the photographers who allowed me to use their photographs and in particular thank Gianfranco Mantegna and Paula Court. Also I am grateful to Tom Leabhart, editor of *Mime Journal*, for permission to use material from my book *California Performance*, volume 1. And finally, special thanks to my wife, Adele Edling Shank, for her careful and insightful work as the first editor of this book.

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Part I. American Alternative Theatre 1960-80

1. The Alternative Theatre	1
2. Primary Explorations	8
The Living Theatre 9	
The Open Theatre 38	
3. Theatre of Social Change	50
The San Francisco Mime Troupe 59	
El Teatro Campesino 74	
4. Environmental Theatre	91
Richard Schechner: The Performance Group 93	
The Bread and Puppet Theater 103	
Snake Theater 113	
5. New Formalism	123
Robert Wilson 125	
Suzanne Hellmuth and Jock Reynolds 134	
Alan Finneran: Soon 3 140	
Michael Kirby: The Structuralist Workshop 149	
6. Self as Content	155
Richard Foreman: The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre 159	
Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte:	
The Wooster Group 170	
Squat Theatre 179	

Part II.
American Alternative Theatre
since 1980

7. An Introduction to Alternative Theatre Since 1980	193
8. Outrageous Performance	199
“Indecency” and the National Endowment for the Arts	199
The Shock of Nakedness	202
Karen Finley, “The Chocolate-Smeared Woman”	202
Holly Hughes, Everybody’s Girlfriend	209
Tim Miller, Everybody’s Boyfriend	211
Juliana Francis and <i>GO GO GO</i>	213
Annie Sprinkle, Post-Post-Porn Modernist	215
Sacred Naked Nature Girls	217
Body Mutilation and Performance	219
Ron Athey: Self-Mutilation as Religious Experience	221
9. Social Commitment	225
The San Francisco Mime Troupe	230
Anna Deavere Smith	236
Guillermo Gómez-Peña	246
10. New Technologies and Techniques	252
Ping Chong	253
George Coates Performance Works	264
Alan Finneran: <i>Soon 3</i>	279
Antenna Theater: Putting the Spectator in the Performance	287
11. Self-Reflections	296
Mabou Mines	297
Richard Foreman	311
The Wooster Group	327
Notes	343
Index	351

PREFACE

This is really two books bound together. The first, *American Alternative Theatre*, was originally published in 1982 and deals with the period from the 1960s until about 1980. It is republished here unchanged. The second, which is entirely new, covers the years since 1980.

The companies discussed have been selected from a large number of practicing theatre groups, so in a sense they are exemplary. I have discussed only those whose work is unique for its creative process, concepts, techniques, or social interaction. Because direct experience with the work is important, I have written only about artists whose productions I have seen; and whenever possible, I have talked with the artists. I regret not being able to include other deserving companies.

My aim has been to describe both the work of these companies and their creative processes. Because my own activity in the theatre has been primarily as a director and playwright, the works themselves and the processes used to create them—rather than theoretical matters—are my principal interest. The companies and individuals discussed here are those who create work autonomously, from inceptive idea to public performance. While there are many excellent playwrights practicing an alternative aesthetic who deserve serious attention, I have not discussed their plays because they usually work in isolation.

In the new part of this book I have followed the practice in part 1, grouping companies into categories; but of course some companies could have been placed in more than one category. Included in part 2 are many new groups and a few that were previously discussed in part 1. Among those that would have appeared in the earlier book had I seen enough of their work are Mabou Mines, which was mentioned only briefly, and Ping Chong. Among other new inclusions are several solo performers, a phenomenon that burgeoned during the 1980s and 1990s. Included are groups considered outrageous by some, others dedicated to social issues, a few who are known for their imaginative use of media, and some whose work is self-reflective. Discussed in part 1 and now updated are the San Francisco Mime Troupe, probably the oldest surviving political theatre in the United States; Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater; Alan Finneran's *Soon 3*; Antenna Theater, which evolved from Snake Theater and has found a unique way of subsidizing its work; and the Wooster Group, whose founding members came from Richard Schechner's

Preface

Performance Group and which has developed, under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, into one of the country's most innovative theatres.

Certain companies from the earlier book, some still extant, are not included in the new part. Following the death of Julian Beck in 1985, the Living Theater continued under the direction of cofounder Judith Malina, but is best known for its earlier groundbreaking work. The Open Theater disbanded in 1974, although its founding director, Joseph Chaikin, continues to direct and perform. Michael Kirby died in 1997, bringing to an end the Structuralist Workshop, which for several years had been producing only intermittently. El Teatro Campesino faded when its founder and director Luis Valdez turned his energies to presenting Chicano and Latino issues in mainstream theatre and film (the sons and daughters of Luis and Danny Valdez have recently revived the company). Squat Theater disbanded and fragmented into smaller groups that have not been very active, though a few of its members have continued to work individually. Jock Reynolds, whose background was visual arts, turned from theatre to museum and has been one of the most vocal in protesting limitations that politicians would put on freedom of expression in the arts. The Bread and Puppet Theater and Robert Wilson continue as active as ever, but they are so well known that discussion here is not needed.

Because the first part of this book was originally published in England by Macmillan Press, its spelling and punctuation are British. In the second part, written for the University of Michigan Press, I have followed common American practice.