

KATE VALK AND HER WORK WITH THE WOOSTER  
GROUP, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kate Valk and Elizabeth LeCompte are the only female founding members still performing, directing and working regularly with the Wooster Group. As their relationship has evolved, it has driven the Group's work. Without Valk or LeCompte, the Group's repertoire might be completely different from what it has become over the years. Although Valk did not participate in the Group's initial Rhode Island Trilogy, she was present at those performances and therefore present at the Group's inception. She had already become a member of the Group, performing onstage and doing various tasks off stage, when the Group broke from the Performance Group and took control of the Performing Garage on Wooster Street.

Kate Valk met the Wooster Group through the Experimental Theatre Wing program during her last semester majoring in theatre at NYU. Ada Calhoun recounts Valk's history before working with the Group:

[Valk's] family moved frequently, from Spokane, Wash., to towns in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Maryland. At 16, Ms. Valk began working part-time at a nursing home, then attended two years of state college in Pennsylvania. Still, she longed for New York, and transferred at 19 to New York University's drama department. She

found an ideal day job at Ding-a-Ling Taxi. [...] Through N.Y.U., she spent two years studying with Stella Adler. "She was very much oriented to physical circumstance, not emotional recall, which suited me," Ms. Valk said. "I liked working from the outward in — probably because I could escape my own psychology. "With only a semester left, she reached a crisis point: "I thought, am I going to be an actress?" Ms. Valk didn't see how she could go through the process of getting headshots and auditioning. She felt (and still feels) an inability to sell herself when not onstage. Through N.Y.U.'s then-new Experimental Theater Wing, Ms. Valk encountered Elizabeth LeCompte, Ron Vawter and Spalding Gray of the Wooster Group and was smitten. When she got out of school, in 1979, she volunteered for Ms. LeCompte, the group's director. In 1981 she appeared (and made live phone calls onstage to takeout restaurants) in "Route 1 & 9," a commingling of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" with the minstrel stylings of Pigmeat Markham. [...] Ms. Valk distinguished herself as a performer and has appeared in every Wooster show since. (Calhoun)

Valk began working with the Group as a seamstress after seeing their Rhode Island Trilogy (1975-1978). As Calhoun describes, she performed with the Group in their next piece, Route 1 & 9. Since then, Valk has continued to work with the Wooster Group on every piece, and her input often informs director Elizabeth LeCompte's decisions. In the Group's 2007 showings of Hamlet, Valk was the only female with

spoken lines in the show. Valk is an important figure in the development of the Wooster Group's pieces, and her presence has helped shape the work of one of New York's most important avant-garde theatre companies.

There is little information about Valk in newspapers and magazines, nor lengthy commentaries about her personal life and professional accomplishments. She has not become as undeniably famous as her former fellow Group members Willem Dafoe and Spalding Gray have done, although Valk has received rewards and recognition from the theatrical community, including the 2003 Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts Individual Artist Award, the 2002 BESSIE for Best Performer for her performance in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre), and the 1998 OBIE Award for Sustained Excellence in Performance (thewoostergroup.org 2008).

There is little mention of Valk's impact on the Group in scholarly essays, the focus instead being on the Group as a whole, or on director LeCompte as the driving force behind the Group's work. Most of the work that focuses on Valk consists of personal interviews with her that illuminate the Group's history and working process from her perspective. Indeed, books like Andrew Quick's The Wooster Group Workbook and David Savran's The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking the Rules utilize interviews with both LeCompte and Valk to shed light on the Group's work, but essays on the subject do not highlight Valk's work. There could be various reasons for this lack of focus on Valk. She is not always in the spotlight during performances, and she did not start her work with the Group on the stage, instead working behind the scenes for LeCompte.



It seems to be understood that the director and performers, as well as the technicians, are all essential members of the Group, although the individual roles they play are seldom addressed, save for that of LeCompte as director. For example, in The Wooster Group and Its Traditions, Johan Callens compiled several essays about the Wooster Group's body of work and its status as one of America's longest running avant-garde theatre groups, as well as its impact on current American avant-garde theatre as a whole. The essays discuss the Group's work from its beginnings with the Rhode Island Trilogy to the impact it has made on such groups as the Cannon Company and Elevator Repair Service. Little is said of Valk throughout these essays and of her influence on the Group. In his interview with Philip Auslander, Willem Dafoe gives Valk credit for her role in shaping the Group, saying "I could as well speak of Kate [Valk], who figures very largely in the decisions of the group" (Callens 100). The focus of this essay was not, however, Valk.

This focus on the Group, instead of the actors who comprise the Group, is common, not only in this book, but in other scholarship as well. Generally, the people discussed in depth are Elizabeth LeCompte and members who have come into fame through other routes, such as Spalding Gray, Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter. Discussions about the Group, as opposed to individuals within the Group, are not necessarily detrimental to understanding the Group's work, but a deeper look at Valk's contributions is warranted because of her influence on LeCompte's decision-making process, as well as her tenure with the Group.

In Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents Nick Kaye sums up the attitude toward the Wooster Group in academia, stating "[t]hrough its challenging and

innovative nature, the Wooster Group's work has become a point around which much contemporary practice as well as performance theory and criticism positions itself" (Kaye 253). Valk's contributions to the Group's shows are mentioned in scholarly pieces of writing, but her impact on the Group is left in the background, with the authors instead focusing on the Group's impact on the theatrical community.

That is not to say that she is not given credit for her contributions to the Group's work, but academic essays do not focus on her, which is arguably a sign that her efforts to smoothly facilitate the Group's work and productions have been successful, drawing attention away from herself and onto the Group and the implications of their work. Valk is a sometimes silent, sometimes central worker in a team of collaborators, and she follows LeCompte's lead while simultaneously offering her abilities, ideas, and service to LeCompte and the Group.

Valk described the philosophy that drew her to the Group in a 2007 interview with David Salle and Sarah French:

I wanted to come to New York and hang around artists. So I went to theater school at NYU, in the studio program. [...] But after two years there I knew I didn't want to get a picture and a resume and be an actor. Wasn't interested in it. I'd go see plays, and I was always very disturbed about the fourth wall. Things seemed very artificial to me. I had one semester left, so I attended this new program, the Experimental Theatre Wing, and the Wooster Group was teaching that semester. I met Liz [Elizabeth LeCompte] and Spalding [Gray] and Ronnie [Ron Vawter]. I went to see the first trilogy, Sakonnet

Point (1975), Rumstick Road (1977), and Nayatt School (1978). It meant everything to me. Everything spoke to me. Everything was vibrating. It was so exciting that I gave up my apartment and moved in upstairs at the theater and volunteered (Salle and French 64-66).

Salle and French's article, though not an essay, gives Valk credit for her contributions to the Wooster Group, saying "I should add that she [Valk] is a national treasure" (Salle and French 64). They do not, however, go into detail about Valk's contributions.

Susie Mee's description of the Group, with a quote from Valk herself, might explain the lack of scholarly focus on Valk over the years:

[I]f there's any truth in the expression "theatrical family," the Wooster Group – the performers, director, assistant director, sound technicians, video engineers, set and lighting designers, and all the crew members – seems the embodiment of it. As group member Kate Valk says, "We're like a band; each of [us] has a sixth sense about the other, about when to step forward and when to draw back" (Mee 144-145).

In reference to Fish Story, Valk explained that she "wanted to step back and chose to be mute. But, I loved moving the props and spinning that energy around" (Quick 162). She further described herself as a "puppet queen" in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre) (Quick 162). As opposed to drawing attention to her own talents as an actress, she has utilized such devices as the in-ear feed she used in House/Lights and To You, the Birdie! (Phedre). Valk describes her ability to relinquish control in an interview with Quick:

Well, let me tell you the story of the in-ear, because it really sums up the whole metaphor of the puppet. When we were first starting to work on To You, the Birdie! – the Phedre text – I had a difficult time saying the words. I could be very big on stage physically, but unable to say the words naturally. [...] When Liz took the words away from me – and thank God she did, because I was ready to relinquish the crown at that point anyway – I still wore the in-ear, even though there was nothing coming through it. [...] I wanted to have that channel open and available if something interesting came along. [...] I remember a couple of days before we were going to do our first open rehearsal, I went back to a bit of rehearsal video tape to work out some blocking. Liz was calling out directions and orders from the back of the room on the bit of tape I was watching, and I thought to myself, “The most interesting thing in the room is Liz.” So, I asked Geoff Abbas, our sound man, “Can you put Liz on microphone and get her to come through on the in-ear,” and he said, “Yes.” [...] That was the reality that To You, the Birdie! was built on, that was the reality from which the piece was made. I was not the queen in the room. We know who the queen is, and I needed her power (Quick 162).

It is this ability to step back and cede control to LeCompte, and this lack of need to be the dominant force in the room that makes Valk vital to the Group and fuels her working relationship with LeCompte. She does not cling to a need to demonstrate her prowess as

an actress. She gives credit to LeCompte for vitalizing her performances, as expressed in the aforementioned interview, letting herself rely on LeCompte and listening to LeCompte to find the life in each performance.

Valk's work with the Wooster Group falls into three main categories: servant, narrator and physical performer. Through these three categories of her work with the Wooster Group, Valk has acted in service of the Group and LeCompte's vision. In her roles as servant and narrator, she has acted as the glue to hold shows together. This function remains when she acts as physical performer. Her working relationship with Elizabeth LeCompte mirrors her roles as servant, narrator and physical performer. Looking at the evolution of her work with the Wooster Group could provide some insight into how she will shape the Group's work in the future.

Valk started her work with the Group out of the spotlight, as she describes in Bonnie Maranca's article "A Dictionary of Ideas":

First Liz asked me to make a copy of a satin dress that had been worn in Three Places in Rhode Island. [...] Liz had me sew gold furniture trim on a lot of the costumes. She had me make a black silk lampshade for the standing lamp in the Long Day's Journey house (8-9).

Valk again described her behind-the-scenes start with the Group in a 2007 interview:

I was working as a seamstress when I got out of school, so I just offered myself to Liz. She said, Well, what can you do? And I said, I can sew. So I started making things for her. I was *very* lucky. At first, this was what it was: a place to go every day, and to make

things. It wasn't primarily as an *actress*. I never really felt like an *actress* (Salle and French 66).

In this way Valk began her work with the Wooster Group as a servant off the stage, building costumes and props and eventually acting as stage manager, as well as working in a technical capacity with lights and other equipment (Quick 158, Salle and French 66). Her first role onstage was in the Group's production of Route 1 & 9. This appearance onstage rose from her task off stage transcribing Pigmeat Markham routines. Her familiarity with those routines organically developed into her taking a role onstage as a participator (Quick 158).

In an interview with Andrew Quick, LeCompte stated that her favorite character is that of the "servant or the maid" (Quick 263). Valk clarified the importance of the servant character in another interview with Quick:

AQ: We're back to facilitating again.

KV: Yes, making everything happen but quite delicately – back, not the center of the attention.

AQ: It's not subservience, is it?

KV: No, there's a lot of power in being a maid or the servant.

There's a tradition in literature and film of power residing in the servant. I think I was more the servant in the early part of my work with Liz. Yes, first, the servant. Later, I probably changed into the medium.

AQ: So, is this partly about your relationship with Liz?

KV: Well, as facilitator. I think everybody is her on stage, but I could be really close because of being a woman and having the freedom in the subservience (Quick 162).

Valk portrayed a servant in Fish Story, the Group's production based on the last act of Chekhov's Three Sisters, and Geinin, a documentary about a traveling Japanese theatre troupe. Valk's responsibilities onstage included snapping open a fan and batting a fly swatter, as well as dancing and bringing necessary equipment onstage (Quick 122-156). Her role, albeit silent, was constant and essential to the other actors' performances. Her presence onstage as prop and set master superseded her role as actor.

When Valk portrays a servant her tasks of moving furniture and providing props to the other actors onstage eliminate the need for stagehands and blackouts. Instead of these necessary tasks being hidden from the audience's view in order to maintain the illusion of everything happening magically and the world of the stage being real, Valk's presence as a performer provides the audience the opportunity see and accept that they are watching a performance, and they do not have to wait during tedious scene changes as furniture is moved around, nor do they have to lose an actor to a trip backstage to retrieve a needed prop. Valk's work as a servant limits the amount of time the Group needs for incidental tasks such as scene changes, giving them more time to engage the audience and keep the audience present in their performances.

In a more vocal role, she also supported and enhanced the other actors' performances in the Group's related piece, Brace Up!. For Brace Up!, which preceded Fish Story and explored the other acts of Chekhov's Three Sisters, Valk combined the role of servant with that of narrator. Valk's role as the narrator kept the audience

engaged in the action and eliminated the need to constantly consult a program as the mediator between them and the stage. As the narrator in Brace Up!, Valk was responsible for keeping the audience apprised about what was going on in the play. Her presence allowed the audience to understand what was happening even as the Group used nontraditional theatrical devices, such as television monitors, and a nonlinear treatment of Chekhov's script. She began her role as servant/narrator off the stage for this piece, explaining the story of Three Sisters to LeCompte when they saw the show in Dutch in 1984. Valk had acted in a production of Three Sisters and thus explained the plot to LeCompte as it unfolded onstage (Mee 146). When the Group began working on the production in 1990, Valk continued her role as narrator off stage, using her knowledge of the play to keep track of the action for LeCompte so that LeCompte did not need to look at a script (Quick 110).

Valk's importance as narrator extended beyond the stage, into the rehearsal process. She kept the Group in contact with Chekhov's text, as well as giving them the opportunity to shift their focus away from trying to keep track of the text. Valk described this in an interview with Susie Mee:

No, it came about as a direct extension from reality. About eight or nine years ago, the Wooster Group was in residence at a theatre in Holland working on North Atlantic [1984]. The company we were to work with was presenting a four-hour production of Three Sisters in Dutch. I was sitting next to Liz. She doesn't understand Dutch, and I don't understand Dutch, and the play was very long. I had played Anfysa in a college production of Three Sisters and knew the play



well, so I told her what was going on. That was the beginning of my role. [...] When we began doing readings here, I sat in for some of the characters, but my tone was never right for anybody except the narrator. So I read all the stage directions from beginning to end, and even orchestrated the readings (Mee 146).

Valk's role also provided an important link with the Japanese style the Group was emulating, as explained in her interview with Mee:

Superimposed on that – as we discovered through our research – is a long tradition of the Benji narrator in Japan. In the silent film, everybody had their favorite Benji who would summarize and comment on what was going on. In Brace Up!, I, as the Benji narrator, have free range to do that, and to give necessary information within a given structure. The piece is made up of modular units. They are carefully choreographed, but within these are certain sections that are more or less improvised (Mee 146).

As her explanation shows, Valk not only supplied information to the audience but was also able to comment on it, acting as the audience's voice in the piece.

In performance Valk provided props to the actors, moved furniture, and prompted the dialogue with questions to the characters (Quick 65-81, Mee 150-151). Euridice Arratia recounts Valk's role in the performance as beginning with Valk "walking around the stage, delivering stage directions, introducing the performers and the characters they are playing" (Arratia 125). Phaedre Bell further expounds on Valk's tasks as facilitator and narrator: "Narrator/emcee Kate Valk also moves the [television] monitors around in

the stage space” (Bell 568). Bell goes on to say that “[i]n the role of narrator/emcee, she clearly runs the show and has the most power of any figure in the production” (Bell 569).

Valk again played narrator, albeit in a different manner, in the dual role of Faustus and Elaine in the Group’s production of House/Lights, based on the 1964 film Olga’s House of Shame and Gertrude Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights. Valk repeated lines from Stein’s script as fed to her through an in-ear piece, acting as a conduit for the playwright’s words. Her ongoing narrative through the piece provided a thread to hold the action together (Quick 216, House/Lights 2004). The criticisms and reviews of House/Lights do not focus on Valk’s important role as narrator and conduit, instead focusing on the piece as a whole, with its implications of homosexuality, and its thrilling interpretation of Stein’s work (Callens 189-202, Salvato). This does not, however, undermine the importance of Valk’s role as narrator. As Valk describes:

[Kate Valk]: I was the channel for the text. I would try to just let the words pass through me, not be ahead of them or behind them. My task was to speak as I heard it, although I had learned it.

[Andrew Quick]: Coming back to House/Lights, you’re sort of facilitating Stein’s text through the in-ear device, aren’t you? Was this task difficult? It must have put you under severe pressure in the performances.

KV: To channel the text we had recorded? No, it was liberating. At the time I had a very good memory and Stein’s text was very hard to memorize because of the repetitions, because of the plasticity of each word. So, I was having to rewind the tape, fast forward it, play

it back and the sequences were very difficult to memorize. So when we did it from memory the text was laborious. Then, when we started using the in-ear and I worked directly off the tape it was more like channeling it, and the words...started to percolate (Quick 160-1).

In her review of House/Lights Cynthia Gendrich assesses Valk's triple role as Elaine, Faustus, and narrator:

The Elaine character and Faust are both played by Wooster company member Kate Valk. Valk's soft, unsteady delivery of lines directly into the microphones keeps both characters she portrays hanging on her like an ill-fitted suit. Valk's indirect treatment of dialogue and her quirky actions nevertheless keep the audience from identifying with either Faust or Elaine. [...] As Valk's baby-voiced Elaine/Faustus foolishly wanders through the story, Faust's struggle seems at once silly and self-important (Gendrich 380-1).

In his analysis of House/Lights Nick Salvato explores the gender and sexuality issues in the piece, and mentions Valk's importance to the production, due to her creative collaboration with LeCompte during the preproduction and rehearsal process:

I asked LeCompte and Valk whether their initial enthusiasm for Olga stemmed from attraction or revulsion, and they responded without hesitation that theirs was an unalloyed attraction to the film. In addition to the aesthetic appeal that Olga held for them, as a piece that could call into question the boundary between highbrow art and

lowbrow entertainment, they must also have been intimately interested in the film's exploration of power dynamics between women. LeCompte and Valk described House/Lights as, in part, a reflection upon and assessment of their own working and personal relationship (Salvato 49).

Salvato goes on to discuss the sexual implications of the piece in depth, drawing attention to the importance of Valk's performance and her relationship with LeCompte.

Valk's roles develop from her willingness to do the tasks that are needed and fill in the gaps that need to be filled for each Wooster Group production. In performance she uses her physicality to command the stage, as her leading dual role in Hamlet indicates. In a more extreme example, although her role in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre) was central to the story, she completely physicalized her performance by not speaking, and let LeCompte's voice guide her actions.

Valk's work in shows such as Hamlet and To You, the Birdie! (Phedre) is important because of her compelling physicality. She commands the stage through use of her body in gesture, vocal work, movement, and costume. Valk uses her physicality to communicate strong ideas about text, gender, race, and overall production concepts.

In March 2007 the Wooster Group presented Hamlet as a work-in-progress at St. Ann's Warehouse in New York City. The Group used a film of Richard Burton as the backdrop for their performance of Hamlet (Hamlet 2007, Salle and French 66). Valk played the only female speaking roles, Ophelia and Gertrude. During the performance she switched back and forth between the two characters, donning a different wig and dress for each (Hamlet 2007). In her article "Two Hamlets: Wooster Group and Synthetic

Theater,” Sarah Werner states: “Valk’s doubling as Gertrude and Ophelia not only works thematically to link the frailty of woman, but gives the Wooster’s lead female actor a powerful stage presence” (Werner 325). Valk used her physicality to support the production through skilled gestural imitation of the Richard Burton film, as well as through use of costumes which imitated the costumes worn in the film (Hamlet 2007).

Valk played the title character in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre), in which she relied solely on her physicality and did not speak any dialogue. Gaby Cody describes Valk’s representation of Phedre as an “[a]nemic Phedre, played with exquisite timing and histrionic countenance by Kate Valk,” and goes on to comment on Valk’s silent physical actions as Scott Shepherd acted as her voice, intoning her inner monologue (Cody 174).

In her essay “The Body in Pieces: Contemporary Anatomy Theatres,” Amy Strahler Holzapfel discusses the Group’s production of To You, the Birdie! (Phedre). Holzapfel says of Valk, “Phedre, played by the dynamic, sinewy Kate Valk, could barely stand up on her own two feet, confined to a walker, commode, or wheelchair, and trailing an enema hose from her buttocks throughout most of the production” (Holzapfel 5). Holzapfel’s focus on Valk’s physicality highlights the importance of Valk’s physical stage work in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre).

As Valk has acted as a servant, narrator, and collaborator for and with LeCompte, her roles onstage have developed in the same manner, resulting in her three repertory specialties of servant, narrator and physical performer. By putting the Group before herself in performance and filling both her needs and theirs in each production, Valk has played an important role in keeping the Group’s work strong and constantly changing.

Valk's contributions do not limit her classification to that of performer or actress, nor does she shy away from being onstage. Her roles in the Group range from being a dancer in the background to being the leading lady, and her work offstage is as important as her work onstage. Her versatility is a great asset to the Group's work and their ever-expanding repertoire of avant-garde theatre pieces. She is truly an essential member of the Group, as demonstrated by her past and current work. She contributes something unique and powerful to each production through her work backstage and her physicality onstage.

It is not merely her willingness to step back and fill roles where she is needed that makes Valk a fundamental part of the Group, but this willingness combined with her skill and experience as a performer. Valk has grown in her abilities as a performer. She does not go into a piece expecting to perform in a set way, but instead leaves herself open to continually growing. She is fully open to the possibilities she might discover with each new role and each new responsibility. "I don't want to say that the performer is subservient to the piece as a whole, but, in a way, there is a system that is larger than any single ego. [...] So, there is no place or need for a singular ego" (Quick 158).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SERVANT

Kate Valk's work in servant roles has helped propel the Group through several shows. As she and LeCompte have expressed, the servant role is powerful (Quick 162). The servant takes care of incidental business and knows all the secrets of those she serves. Valk's actions hold the show together when she plays maid or servant. Her work offstage is often servile as well. Valk performs odd jobs, such as building costumes and bringing in dramaturgical materials, without receiving the title of costumer or dramaturg. Valk's onstage and offstage tasks often keep shows running smoothly.

Her performances as servant onstage are few in number, but the productions of the Wooster Group are also few in number because of their long working process. The Group does not produce four or five shows per year, instead focusing on one or two shows over the course of a few years, often going back into their repertory and revisiting old shows to explore new concepts within these shows or run encore performances. This being the case, even though Valk has been a servant onstage in a small number of roles, her work as a servant still comprises a healthy chunk of her work with the Group.

Valk's work as a servant for the Group began offstage, and she continues to act in servitude to the Group's needs. Her work on Point Judith, which acted as an epilogue to Three Places in Rhode Island, remained an almost completely backstage job, which

eventually evolved into an onstage role when she replaced Libby Howes, while her work on Route 1 & 9 also began as an offstage task.

Valk's first performing role with the Group was not as a servant onstage but as a member of the ensemble, performing a Pigmeat Markham routine in blackface. Although this was not a servant role, it rose from her role as a servant to LeCompte offstage with the tasks she was completing, as she expressed in an interview with Savran:

When we started working on Route 1 & 9, it was just Our Town, reading Our Town, and I was still stage managing. Then I transcribed the Pigmeat Markham records, trying to figure out what they were saying. By the time I finished I could imitate...I could do all the voices. And that's how I got started performing in Route 1 & 9, with the blackface routines (Savran 9).

In this case her role onstage grew organically from her role offstage, and it was not a question of her wanting to be in the spotlight but of feeling passionately about the show and the Pigmeat Markham material within it (Savran 19).

As described in William Coco's review, the Pigmeat Markham routines comprised a substantial amount of the show:

The two black men play stagehands preparing the stage for the last act of Our Town. While they fumble with drill and architectural plans and attach the fourth wall to the small house, a black woman on the other side of the stage telephones her friend (who is watching TV), inviting her over for a blind date and birthday party. The women order chicken and party fixings; then they phone the



stagehands, whose eyes light up at the idea of a "birthday punch."

Carrying a two-foot bottle of rye, one man sashays around the stage with such excitement that the uncapped rye splashes on himself and all over the floor. The second man mistakenly brings castor oil in his large bottle, and everybody laughs. The four break into the choreography of an ebullient joke-and-boogie session which, the program note tells us, is "a reconstruction of a Pigmeat Markham comedy routine as performed at The Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., circa 1965." The mood is raucous, the music and dancing jivey, sexual, and full of joy. (Coco 250)

Although Valk's offstage role in this production was substantial, her work in transcribing the Pigmeat Markham routines and dancing with the ensemble did not put her into the spotlight. Her contributions took a backseat to the overall picture of the production. Reviewers do not mention Valk by name, and Savran's text puts Valk's role into context within the show.

As she worked with the Group, Valk went on to fill in for Libby Howes in Nayatt School and Point Judith. Although these were not traditional servant roles either, Valk acted in service to LeCompte, standing in where she was needed. In Point Judith LeCompte dressed Valk in a servant's costume, as inspired by a painting:

I was already working on the blackface for Route 1 & 9 and that's why Liz made me...why I was in blackface for Point Judith. My hands were white. And actually there's a painting that inspired Liz for Willem's character, for Mary. Manet's Olympia. The naked

white woman and behind her, the black maid. That's why she had me stand back there, as the maid.

In this way LeCompte visually set Valk as a servant onstage.

Valk also acted as a servant in her tasks onstage in Point Judith. Savran describes in detail Valk's role in Point Judith as a particularly servile role derived from O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night. The Group, however, took this role and made it more powerful than O'Neill wrote it:

She plays Cathleen, the outsider, relegated to the background, to tending the house. Unlike the other characters in Long Day's Journey, O'Neill treats her contemptuously, the servant whose "stupid, good-humored face wears a pleased and flattered simper." In reconceiving Cathleen, Point Judith gives Libby Howes (and later, Kate Valk) a part totally different from the series of victims she played in the earlier pieces. In doing so, the Wooster Group undermines O'Neill's hierarchical distinctions between class and gender and dramatizes the constructive nature of the work that O'Neill gives his "stupid" serving-girl. In "Stew's Party Piece," she runs the house. She turns on the vacuum cleaner from which the fog pours. She arranges the furniture outside the house. She billows the white sheet and, at the end, throws it over the house. After the chaos, when the other performers have left, she cleans the house and straightens it up. She is the one character in Point Judith who performs useful, instrumental activity. [...] [S]he works. [...] For

the first time, she is connected, clearly and simply, to the concrete reality of everyday life and to the mechanics of performance. In her activity, she discovers a new energy; she develops strength and direction, like the Biblical Judith (whose story Cathleen reads in Part III) who approaches her conqueror, Holofernes, as a maidservant. (Savran 148-149)

As Savran points out, Valk's onstage role as a servant made her an essential part of the production. While all the other performers merely performed, she accomplished functional tasks through her performance and kept the production moving. As she accomplished concrete tasks, Valk took a position of importance within the Group. She facilitated the production from onstage.

This initial servant role onstage marked a beginning to Valk's performance style. She has continued to perform tasks such as these onstage, whether in a servant role or in another role. Valk works well physically and possesses an adeptness at moving stage pieces that propels the Group's productions in a way that is exciting and constantly evolving.

Her offstage tasks as a servant were also important to Point Judith. Her work as a seamstress for LeCompte could be seen as a traditional maid's task, and her role onstage in blackface was a reflection of her willingness to push boundaries for LeCompte and the Group. At the same time Point Judith performances were running, Valk was completing other tasks for the Group's production of Route 1 & 9, transcribing routines and stepping onstage as needed.

The importance of Valk's role as a servant/maid was more evident in Fish Story and Brace Up! as she kept the onstage action running smoothly. Her work as a servant in early and later shows became progressively more important, as did her role within the Group. During her time with the Group, Valk's servant roles evolved onstage. While she has continued to help where she is needed, much of that help has found its way into performance, in front of an audience, helping each production to run efficiently and dynamically. Valk's onstage servant roles grew from the time she wore blackface as a maid in Point Judith to her highly active servant roles in Brace Up! and Fish Story.

As the Group explored Chekhov's Three Sisters in their production of Brace Up!, Valk's role was partly as servant but also as narrator. Specific aspects of her performance as facilitator supported her role as servant. As she moved furniture and provided props to the actors, she acted in the capacity of servant. The movement of furniture included moving television monitors around the stage, taking care of the media element in Brace Up!. Valk's tasks as servant drove the action onstage without interfering.

Valk also acted as a servant when she took care of the other characters onstage. For instance, as Arratia points out:

Similarly, at the end of Act II, Irina is alone on the dark stage sitting in a wheelchair. The Narrator begins to massage her head and neck. Whenever the Narrator twists Irina's head, the synthesizer produces a noise like a ratchet grinding. (Arratia 132)

This gesture underlines Valk's willingness to perform such a servile task for another character. Her role demanded that Valk take care of everyone onstage, whether that

meant she must move furniture and props, provide cues, or massage another character. In this instance, Valk simultaneously acted as a caretaker and a servant, like a live-in nurse.

Valk also acted as a servant to the audience. She eased the way for them to understand what was happening in the play, both as the servant and as the narrator. In her role in Brace Up!, Valk not only entertained the audience but also explained where they were heading in the action of the play and which characters were speaking.

Valk introduced the characters to the audience. Without her introductions the audience would be forced to consult their programs and waste time trying to correctly identify each character. Valk also provided information to the audience about the setting of each scene. Her descriptions linked the audience to the action on a level which the action itself did not. She acted as a living program and guidebook.

Valk also served the audience when she moved furniture and props. These actions eased transitions and allowed the audience to watch the production uninterrupted. With stagehands, the audience might deal with blackouts and new, nameless people onstage as they rearrange the scene and props. Valk made the transitions between scenes a natural extension of her servile and narrative role. The audience saw a character setting each scene.

At the same time, Valk's role was separate from the other characters and their world. She controlled the proceedings. She also identified with the audience. Because of this the audience could feel as though they knew more than the other characters in the play. They joined Valk as co-conspirators in the action. She provided them with enough information for them to know what was happening and which characters and events were important.

In his essay “Fugacity: Some Thoughts Towards a New Naturalism in Recent Performance,” Simon Jones details Valk’s accessibility to the audience in her role, describing “Valk-Narrator with her stage-management, organizing the narrative, the performers, the props, as if they were all equal objects of her gaze, through which everything appeared to us, with the oh-so-friendly maximized efficiency of a fast-food operative delivering the appearance of customization to her umpteenth hungry-to-be-different consumer” (Callens 151-152). This accessibility brings Valk to the audience’s level so that they do not feel threatened. The audience can then connect with Valk and she can serve them, as Jones points out with his analogy, as her consumers.

While Valk played a maid and narrator onstage, “serving people, moving around the main characters, taking some of the lines” (Quick 106), she also continued to be a servant offstage. Valk and LeCompte collaborated on initial costume design (Quick 107), and she helped with background work on the video materials. “It was very easy making a piece with the video because Chris and Katie were completely on my wavelength with it. Katie loved certain parts of the language and stories in some films, so she would bring in something appropriate to that story” (Quick 109).

Valk’s placement as a servant within this piece imbued her with power. The positioning of the three women playing the three sisters in wheelchairs clearly put them into a position of weakness and emphasized Valk’s power as servant and narrator. As the three actresses sat in their chairs and spoke their lines, Valk brought the microphone to each actress as she spoke, as well as moving the television monitors for them. Her mobility, as well as her physical position of standing as opposed to sitting, made her role as servant the place of authority. In one particular picture from rehearsals, Valk blinded

one of the actresses as she held the microphone for the actress to speak, emphasizing her control over the situation and the proceedings (Quick 86).

Her role offstage as a servant in translating the show for LeCompte and providing prompts naturally developed into the other part of her role on and offstage, that of narrator. Her tasks as servant would have been powerful had she not been narrator, though, since she was able to shift focus with microphones and television monitors, and on any performance night could have shifted focus into a different physical area, onto a different character, or onto a different element of the production, had she chosen to do so. “Not coincidentally, she is also the only performer never to appear on-screen” (Bell 569). As servant and narrator, Valk was able to supervise the action without being caught in the center of the story, or on the television monitors, as Bell points out.

Her role in Brace Up! naturally flowed into her role in Fish Story, since the Group was exploring the last act of Chekhov’s Three Sisters in their production of Fish Story. However, Valk’s role shifted into a more physical role and she was no longer the narrator. The narration was electronic, taken from the Japanese documentary Geinin, eliminating the need for Valk’s onstage narration. Her role in Fish Story was still important to the production, however, despite the elimination of the narrative aspect of her performance.

The Group began rehearsals for Fish Story in 1993. They worked closely with Geinin and let the documentary guide the production and their use of the last act of Three Sisters. Movement, text, sound, and video were mapped out in a detailed score. The focus was the parallel between the Group and the performing troupe in Geinin, with Chekhov’s script used as needed throughout the piece (Quick 114-157).

Valk played the role of Asako the maid, introduced early in the script through narration from the documentary:

Narrator: Asako, the maid, wanted very much to express her feelings about the troupe. She says, “Everyone agrees Sentaro’s troupe is the best of them all. I’ve seen everything they have done. The performers work perfectly together. I owe very much to this troupe” (Quick 123).

Valk was onstage before this, doing servile tasks for the traveling theatre troupe.

Valk’s tasks onstage began with a dance and ritual with a flyswatter, as outlined in the script. She then “discreetly arrange[d] the stage” in preparation for Peyton Smith’s entrance (Quick 124). Smith played the dual role of Olga from Three Sisters and Sensha from the theatre troupe in Geinin. After Smith’s entrance, Valk arranged microphone equipment in further preparation for the Group and Smith’s performance.

Valk’s performance as Asako the maid entailed more of this arrangement and rearrangement of equipment onstage, as well as elaborate rearrangement of furniture. Often her movement of tables was scored out as part of a dance in the middle of the action. In a more traditional sense, her servant duties included setting out coffee for the troupe, bringing cups to them and setting a fork out for them. Throughout these tasks, Valk performed dances, sometimes as part of a larger dance with the troupe, sometimes as part of her servile tasks, sometimes as a ritualistic element within the structure of the piece, and sometimes as a shadow to movements other actors are performing (Quick 123-156).



Additionally, in her performance Valk provided lighting cues with a wave of her hand or fan, as well as cues to the actors. Her servitude was imbued with a sense of running the show and being the manager of the troupe. Her movement of furniture and props was done ritualistically, as part of the performance, but it was necessary, nonetheless. Valk eliminated the need for a stage manager and the use of a third party to tell actors and technicians every cue, since they could see her cue them from her position onstage. Through Valk, the Group removed any need for a third party acting in a managing capacity offstage during the performance.

While she ran the show, she did so silently. Asako had no speaking lines in the script, but she was always present and performing essential tasks to keep the show running and emphasize movements and dances for the audience. As the troupe's servant, she had the power to listen and know what was happening to them and around them, while she was allowed to focus on her physical tasks without speaking. Valk's Asako was the omniscient presence, knowing when the actors needed props, when to move set pieces and furniture, and when she needed to cue technicians and actors.

Through all these tasks, Valk made the production of Fish Story a cohesive whole. As outlined, she took care of all the incidental tasks that keep the production from slowing or halting.

Valk's role in Fish Story was part of an evolution of her roles as servant with the Group. From the blackface maid in Point Judith to Asako in Fish Story, Valk's servant characters have become progressively more central, and in the case of Brace Up!, more vocal in each production in which she has portrayed a servant. For example, Savran's discussion of Point Judith studies Valk's role in relation to gender identity. Valk's role,

previously cast with Libby Howes, put the woman into a position of authority. She cleaned the space and by doing so also ran the space. Further, Savran discusses Valk/Howes's character in the context of the characters Howes played in Nayatt School and Rumstick Road, which were victims of the men around them (Savran 148). While Savran briefly mentions Valk's role in Point Judith in the context of gender roles, the score in Quick's Work Book mentions Valk's character Asako frequently and indicates that she is the character running the show from onstage and commanding the actors and technicians. Through this study of her servant roles it is clear how influential and important Valk is to the Group's repertoire.

Aside from her work onstage as servant, Valk has become more important and influential through her work backstage with the Group. Valk's position is powerful as well, because of her knowledge of all that is going on around her. By playing servant on and offstage, she has gained intimate knowledge about what needs to happen onstage and what LeCompte is trying to accomplish.

Since she often helps with tasks such as building costumes, gathering background material and remembering important plot points from scripts, she is able to be there for the core development of each piece as LeCompte's partner. She does not act as director or take away any of LeCompte's authority, but Valk does wield her own authority under LeCompte. She contributes to the direction of each production because of her contributions of materials and willingness to work any odd jobs that need to be done, from stage managing to managing performances as a servant character onstage.

When Valk helps LeCompte she is in the position to know what LeCompte is thinking and to discuss LeCompte's and her ideas while the Group is developing each

production. Even as Valk was building costumes for Point Judith, she had knowledge of the direction LeCompte wanted to take the costumes and props. This does not set her apart from other costumers, but it does set her apart from other actors not involved in the costuming process. Valk is familiar with the types of props and costumes the Group regularly uses.

Valk's work as a servant has greatly impacted the Group's work, and as her work as a narrator will show, she often stands apart from the Group as a facilitator, running things as LeCompte's right hand. This stems from her history of working as LeCompte's servant, performing the needed tasks and performing the roles onstage which need filling. Valk always functions essentially as a servant to LeCompte and the Group, whether she is in the spotlight or the background, silent or narrating.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE NARRATOR

Kate Valk's work as a narrator with the Group has been equally as important as her work as a servant. She worked as a narrator onstage in the Group's productions of Brace Up! and House/Lights, and her work has also extended offstage to encompass explication and transcription, as well as being a public representative through her interviews in articles and books.

Valk began her narrative role during her earliest work with the Group. Valk's transcription work on Route 1 & 9 transcribing Pigmeat Markham routines from old tapes would lead to her acting as transcriber for other Wooster Group productions, such as House/Lights and Brace Up!. This work has made Valk a textual authority for many Group productions, and by extension a sort of offstage narrator.

The most central narrative role Valk has filled was that of the narrator in Brace Up! Valk began narration for LeCompte in this production when she and LeCompte saw Chekhov's Three Sisters in Dutch while on tour in Europe. Valk had performed in Three Sisters when she was in college and was therefore able to understand the action, despite not being fluent in Dutch. Valk explained key plot points and the action occurring onstage for LeCompte. This position enabled her to be LeCompte's right hand during the

rehearsal process of Brace Up! since she knew Chekhov's script well enough to be able to track the action.

Valk's knowledge of the Chekhov script enabled her to "orchestrate readings" for Brace Up!, by reading stage directions and guiding the other Group members in their dialogue and action, as told in her interview with Susie Mee (Mee 146). This role usually falls to the director during a rehearsal process, so Valk's work in this capacity was unique. Being a narrator, she was able to simultaneously function as an actress, an assistant director, a stage manager, a stage hand and a dramaturg. As previously stated, this textual expertise has marked Valk's work with the Group through several productions.

In another offstage position of facilitation during Brace Up!, "[t]he dance numbers evolved under Valk's direction separate from the work on Chekhov's text" (Arratia 135). This is a trend in Valk's work which has continued from her work with Route 1 & 9. As an authority on dances within many of the Group's pieces, she acts as narrator, translating and transcribing these dances and directing the Group in rehearsing them. During each production, as she dances her body acts as a narrative tool with which she can explain more clearly to her audience the events which are unfolding.

Marianne Weems, the dramaturg for the Group at the time they were rehearsing and performing Brace Up!, expresses Valk's importance in an interview with Susie Mee:

WEEMS: I should add that this piece has been set up so that anybody in it could go away, except for Kate, and we would still be able to continue.

MEE: How?

WEEMS: Because we work with modular pieces, we simply close up the gaps, and have Kate narrate what's missing. We had to do that a lot on tour, and it worked extremely well. (Mee 152-153)

Valk's role as narrator eliminates the need to fill each onstage role. The Group is free to have as few actors in the production as they like. Valk holds the show into a cohesive entity regardless of what actors the show might lose or what obstacles the Group might encounter.

In her role as narrator, Valk also provides simple information to the audience about the actors in the production and the information from the script that would not usually be spoken onstage, such as the time and place of the action (Arratia 129). Valk fulfills the function of providing the audience with a clear picture of what Chekhov intended with his stage directions, while at the same time freeing the Group from following these stage directions. Her readings of stage directions comment on Chekhov by drawing attention to his original intent.

In another onstage task, Valk provides a connection between the audience and the Japanese material the Group uses in Brace Up!.

Besides Godzilla, a scene from a highly stylized Samurai film in which a child king and his court throw themselves into the sea rather than be taken prisoner by a conquering enemy is played during the stick dance. The film, with English subtitles, is shown without sound in slow motion while Valk dramatizes parts of the action, imitating phonetically the sound of Japanese at the front microphone while the rest of the performers dance at the back. (Arratia 140)

Valk's narration connects the Group's sources of raw material for the production, specifically Japanese material and Three Sisters.

Bell's essay highlights Valk's role as narrator by pointing to the comedy of the production. "Valk interrupts her, yelling over the loud music, 'You know they're both hard of hearing. I don't think either of them heard you say that'" (Bell 583). Valk's ability to comment on and question the events onstage helps bring out the comedy Chekhov originally intended with his works, including Three Sisters. She stands apart from the action, and this detachment enables the audience to view the world of the play with some objectivity and see the humor. The presence of a narrator gives the audience a chance to laugh with the narrator over the ridiculous characters in Chekhov's writing.

As narrator in Brace Up! Valk was in contact with the audience in a more direct way than the rest of the Group members. She was not playing a character, nor was she projecting a character's emotions for the audience, although she could emotionally engage the audience in a way that was unique to her as narrator. As outlined in the documents in Quick's Work Book, Valk spoke plainly to the audience and to the characters, and fulfilled an explanatory function as she guided the audience through all that was occurring with the characters onstage.

Arratia's article "Island Hopping: Rehearsing the Wooster Group's Brace Up!" recognizes the importance of Valk's role as narrator and facilitator. She is the closest person to the audience, as Arratia recounts from Valk's own words on the subject. "But more significantly, as in Our Town, the Narrator becomes the cohesive figure that exposes and links the multiple levels of reality being played out onstage. As Valk said, 'I am located in this piece as the free agent between the audience, which is now Liz, and the

play'" (Arratia 129). Through this intermediary position Valk was able to influence the audience's interpretation of the Chekhov script. She was simultaneously acting as narrator and critic.

This direct connection with the audience put Valk in a unique position to gauge audience reaction and adjust her performance or not adjust it as she chooses, and she was able to adjust other performers' onstage work by manipulating her role as narrator. She could control the timing of performers' lines as she injects narration, and she could also control performers' actions through the timing of her narration. If Valk decided to slow the action onstage during a performance, the other actors were compelled to follow her lead. In her essay, Bell calls Valk an emcee, meaning that not only was she narrating the action for the audience, she was also propelling the action and controlling the timing of the onstage action (Bell 568, 569). She was the person in charge of onstage events and pacing.

The active nature of her role as narrator is established in Arratia's article:

In another scene, the Narrator drinks vodka and after every drink throws her arm down as if smashing the glass against the floor. This gesture is repeated several times, and for every gesture the sound of glass shattering is added. In one rehearsal the sound was played before Valk had initiated the gesture. This accident is incorporated in the structure. Every time it occurs, Valk establishes eye contact with the sound booth as if to say, "I didn't do it, did you do it?" thereby revealing the mechanism of the trick and forcing the



audience to acknowledge the un-natural origin of the noise. (Arratia 132)

This was also an indication of the nature of her role as narrator, being separate from the play. Valk's role emphasized the unnatural environment within which the drama was playing. Her Narrator alienated the audience by reminding them consistently throughout the production that they were watching a show that was full of the human error of the people running it.

In Brace Up! Valk's physical position and mobility as narrator enabled her to remain an outside entity to the world of the play. She began by narrating for the audience who the characters would be and also narrating for the characters, giving them commands to help them find their positions. As the show progressed, she remained an outside entity, not joining the ensemble as they came together. "For Irina's birth- day lunch scene, all the performers except Valk move to the upstage table area" (Arratia 125). The audience could identify with Valk in her outside role to the action, as they sat outside the action. She acted as an ally and aide, helping the audience to understand and commenting for them in their silence.

Valk's role as an outsider who controls the action also mirrors LeCompte's role in the Group. As narrator, she can be seen as LeCompte's alter ego, calling out commands to the ensemble and participating without being caught in the middle of their onstage story. Valk's role as an extension of LeCompte is at once powerful and powerless, as she is able to command and lead the cast, but must rely on their ability and willingness to comply with her commands and guidance. At the same time, Valk's role is a direct

extension of her role offstage, leading readings and being a guiding force during the rehearsal process, due to her knowledge of Chekhov's Three Sisters.

Valk also had an onstage relationship with Paul Schmidt, the translator who provided the Group's version of Three Sisters. As the show progressed, their onstage relationship put Valk into a position of control. She was able to ask him to summarize events for the audience, and he provided her with corrections for her narration. "In Act I as Valk is introducing the men at the table, Schmidt interrupts, telling her she should say that 'the men at the back are all in uniform.' Later in Act II when Valk suggests that since 'we are running out of time we should cut and go to another scene,' Schmidt speaks up" (Arratia 129). This description reflects Valk's role as an onstage LeCompte, mirroring the way rehearsals were run, with LeCompte relying on Valk to remember and keep track of the script, thereby enabling LeCompte to focus on her role as director.

Valk's role in House/Lights was not as clearly that of narrator, but she nonetheless acted as a medium between the text and the audience, the Group, and the spectators. Being the medium, Valk wore an in-ear piece and repeated the words from the text as she heard them spoken on the recording. "I was the channel for the text. I would try to just let the words pass through me, not be ahead of them or behind them" (Quick 160).

Her performance as Elaine/Faustus in House/Lights did not focus on her skills as an actress but instead on her reading of each line and the clarity of the language of the text for the audience. "Valk's indirect treatment of dialogue and her quirky actions nevertheless keep the audience from identifying with either Faust or Elaine" (Gendrich 380). As Gendrich highlights, Valk's performance kept the audience listening to the text

rather than her treatment of it as a performer. This is the dominion of the narrator, to assist the audience in understanding the action or text without engaging them emotionally.

In her performance in House/Lights, Valk spent a good portion of her time onstage maintaining a narrative pose at her microphone, leaning onto her hip on a table in a semi-casual yet theatrical posture. In this posture, Valk was able to engage the audience in an inviting way, while directing their attention to the text she was repeating from her in-ear piece. Valk then ran around with the rest of the cast, imitating the movements and action from Olga's House of Shame, but while she was moving, she usually did not speak. Her speech was largely confined to those times when she was stationary, speaking clearly into the microphone. In this way, she switched between being another player within the onstage action and being a narrator who reads lines from Stein's text for the audience to hear, instead of see (House/Lights 2004).

Her focus on vocal affectation in House/Lights emphasized Valk's dual role as an actress and a narrator in the production. As expressed in Gendrich, "Valk's soft, unsteady delivery of lines directly into the microphones keeps both characters she portrays hanging on her like an ill-fitted suit" (Gendrich 380). While many narrators choose to speak in clear, calm voices, Valk's treatment of the text in such an unusual voice helped to accent Stein's language and draw attention to it. Her vocal work was not a hindrance to the work, but helped the audience focus on the peculiar language in a way that a normal voice could not.

By repeating lines from her in-ear piece, Valk put herself into the position of being the audience's primary connection to Stein's text. In her narrative role within her

two characters of Faust and Elaine she acted as an extension of the written text of Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights. Valk did not rely on her memory of the text, and so could provide the audience with a clear narration as Stein originally wrote the play. Through human error, actors often make small mistakes in their memorization of scripts. No words are lost or switched around within Valk's narrative role. Valk's dialogue in this production was authoritative, due to its pure accuracy. Her role could be seen as similar to that of someone sitting onstage with a script and performing a dramatic reading, except that she performed a much more complicated role.

The physical narration Valk performed while Olga's House of Shame was playing helped emphasize important clips the Group had taken from the film for their production, such as Elaine's chase scene. Valk's physicality mirrored and mocked the film, pointing to its heightened nature, such as the use of black and white cinematography, odd camera angles, and stylistic acting choices, while spotlighting the dark comedic element that is evident in Stein's text, as well as in the film. Valk took off running and continued running; however, she stayed in one place as she ran and simply faced another direction to indicate a change in direction or camera angle. As she ran in place, she kept a blank facial expression, further heightening the comedic aspect of the language and the film (House/Lights 2004).

Olga's House of Shame is a film which has not been widely distributed, and the Group did not have access to the film script. Due to this, Valk transcribed dialogue from the film to use as a script and therefore acted as an offstage narrator:

[Elizabeth LeCompte]: [...] I would separate the text out into segments and I'd say, "I hear this with this." Then, I'd say, "Well,

we will skip all of this,” but Katie was so good at remembering what happened, what the order was, and she’d take me back to certain things.

[Kate Valk]: I think I had a compulsive relationship with the text during the early rehearsal period. I memorized it and it’s hard to memorize. So, I knew the text and the different parts and so I’d be, “We need something here” – “I remember this” – “this section for here.” [...]

EL: I didn’t want to take it out of order. And Katie knew the whole of the Stein. So, we’d skip a huge section and we would get to a place in our score and I’d go, “What have we missed here that could go next to this image or these words from the film? Is there anything we can use, because it needs Stein here?” It’s like playing around with colors – we needed the Stein color at that point and Kate would be able to go through the Stein and come up with, “Well, what about this?” She was emotionally connected to the text. She and I really depended on Clay (Hapaz), who was on both scripts all the time.

KV: I also transcribed Olga’s House of Shame, so I got quite familiar with the film. It always helps to have the parts transcribed when you actually start working with the material. (Quick 217-218)

This offstage work as a narrator for LeCompte provided Valk with the opportunity to be comfortable enough with the material that it would naturally flow from her as she acted

as a medium for the text and the film. Similarly to her work in Brace Up!, Valk's knowledge of the text in House/Lights enabled her to guide LeCompte in the direction that the text moves to recall the storyline and important lines for LeCompte. This made Valk an authority offstage for the production and a natural choice for the roles of Elaine and Faustus.

Valk often becomes an authority on whatever text the Group is using and the process through which LeCompte molds each production. Given this knowledge of the Group's process and materials, Valk is a good narrator and ambassador to spectators and readers who might be curious about the Group's work. She fulfills this audience need through public interviews.

Valk's many interviews with journals, newspapers, and books are an extension of her work offstage as a narrator. Through interviews which the public can later read, she provides a link between the Group's work and its audience. Her explanations of the processes used for each production enable readers to better understand what the Group seeks to achieve with each performance, as well as how they arrived at a particular way of performing a piece.

David Savran's The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking the Rules contains an early set of interviews with Valk. In this book, Valk's explanations of the Group's work are not highlighted above any other Group member's interviews, instead acting as part of a whole picture given by the entire Group. It is in later books and articles that she begins to emerge as one of the Group's main ambassadors to the public.

While Valk's interviews are not Savran's main focus, she still provides important narration about the Group's early work in Breaking the Rules. In a longer quote in

Savran, Valk helps play mediator between reader and the Group, speaking about the background of and controversy connected with their Route 1 & 9 piece. As previously explained, Pigmeat Markham originally performed routines in blackface, and the Group's use of blackface was an homage to his performances, as well as to the tradition of blackface. However, the Group's use of blackface in Route 1 & 9 sparked controversy and raised questions of racism. They subsequently lost funding for their work due to these blackface routines. Valk shares her own thoughts about the piece:

When we started working on Route 1 & 9, it was just Our Town, reading Our Town, and I was still stage managing. [...] I swear, I didn't think the Pigmeat Markham was going to be a problem. I really didn't. All the time we spent working on it, I thought it would be so evident because of the context. My feelings are hurt easily... I'm not interested in offending the audience. Really. I got upset that some people reacted so strongly against the piece. But it was also a very exciting time. Because of the controversy, houses were packed. [...] Route 1 & 9 was really Liz's meditation on death. Her father had just died that summer. The death of the dead in Our Town. And then, sure enough, right after we opened the piece, Pigmeat Markham dies. It just seemed like a wild coincidence. [...] After doing Route 1 & 9, everybody's heads were spinning. Because Liz couldn't say, "No, it's not racist." Yes, it is racist. Yes, I'm racist. You're a liar if you say you're not. That's what it

was about. And then, to be censored. It just seemed that suddenly the issues were burning. (Savran 9, 19, 35, 39)

Through these interviews with Valk, the Group's audience can receive information about their process on Route 1 & 9. Valk's role as narrator in this capacity is useful, given the controversy connected with the piece. By explaining the Group's thoughts, she cleared up any questions about the reasoning behind their use of blackface. While this may not have convinced readers to enjoy Route 1 & 9, it did make the production more accessible because of Valk's personal connection and her openness in talking about the show.

Savran also shares interviews with Valk about another controversial piece, L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...) in Breaking the Rules. Valk's narration about the backstage process behind this piece does not address any of the controversy connected to it. Instead she provides narrative information about her own process as an actress and the practical work that went into the piece:

When I was growing up, slumber parties were the big rage and one thing to do was to try to make ourselves pass out. Pre-drug highs.

Then we'd tell each other, "Oh wow," what it was like when we were passed out. And we'd do levitation and séances and trances.

The faint dance really upset my little sister when she came to see the piece. (Savran 204)

Most essays and articles about L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...) focus on the copyright controversy in which the Group had to cease performances due to Arthur Miller's threat to sue them for their use of The Crucible. While Valk did not address the controversy



connected with the Group's use of Miller's text, she did direct attention to interesting side notes about how she arrived at her particular performance choices. Through Valk's comments, the reader might become more personally invested in this production and appreciate the intellectual foundation for a performance which might seem erratic at a first viewing.

Valk also provides information about her wardrobe choices for the piece, giving the reader a better understanding of LeCompte's thought process behind some of her artistic decisions:

After The Crucible I smudge the blackface and put chalky stuff over it and blush and lipstick. It comes from a book Liz was looking at one day of the prostitutes of India, with the dark skin, that paint their faces white. (Savran 216)

Again this gives the reader a chance to more intimately understand the production and the work that went into it behind the scenes.

In interviews conducted solely with Valk, such as the interview from Bomb by David Salle and Sarah French, the interviewers focus more specifically on Valk and her work within the Group. In these interviews she also provides information about the Group's current and past productions, including information about her own process, LeCompte's process and the Group's process as a whole:

Improvisation might be some game structure set up to spur rehearsal time and develop the shared vocabulary, or some section of the piece might be structured in a way that allows improvisation each night. For instance, in Route 1 & 9, there was a timed section where

the guys built a little house, wearing glasses that totally blocked their vision, and they built it a little differently each time; meanwhile, I was making random phone calls to bars and delivery joints. [...] Well, I meant that we would train ourselves, or commit to finding a way to do something by working at it, but actually lately we have brought in professionals to help us try to acquire specific kinds of expertise. For Poor Theater we did a lot of training with the Forsythe dancers Helen Eve Pickett and Natalie Thomas, and we had a Polish teacher for the Grotowski sections. For To You, the Birdie! we had first a ping-pong master and then Chi Bing Wu, a badminton champion. I didn't end up playing badminton in the piece, but I did all the training in order to develop the vocabulary.

(Salle and French 67)

Valk's explanation of the Group's overall working process and their improvisational work under LeCompte's guidance, as well as their physical training for recent productions, gives insight into their working style. She gives an overview of the actions that have occurred with the Group during recent shows and a description of their journey through these productions. In this way, she again acts as a narrator to readers, guiding them through the events which led the Group to their complete productions.

In her interview on House/Lights Valk sheds light on the Group's process and the concepts of the show:

It's hard to figure out where one idea emanates from because the Wooster Group's been together for a couple of decades. But we

were working on a film [Wrong Guys] and we needed some torture footage for a fever sequence. We asked a friend of ours, Dennis Dermody, who's kind of a living, walking film archive, if he could think of anything - and he showed us Olga's House of Shame. We used a small snippet of it at that time. Liz became interested in using the Olga movie as a pattern and translating it to theatrical space. At the same time, she was considering doing a Stein piece. We started working with the film and reading Stein's works concurrently. We have quite a long and developed relationship with television - we use the monitors as mirrors, or as sources of information that either illustrate what we're doing or disrupt what we're doing. But in this instance, we were using the monitors very directly as a way of channeling something: We had the performers watching the Olga film on TV and mimicking exactly what they saw gesturally and translating the logic of the camera - close-up, medium shot, long shot - into the theatrical space. It was making for a very quirky physical vocabulary. Then we did readings of Stein's works. When we read Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights aloud, we said, "Ah, this is it! This is what we want to do." It struck an emotional chord. That began our journey into merging those two worlds. (Rosten 16)

Valk's narration about the process of using television monitors and working with technology provides a link between the audience and the finished product. As with her

other interviews, Valk is able in this interview to share the information she deems necessary for the audience or reader to receive to better understand the production.

Most recent interviews with Group members have fallen to Valk, which enables her to make decisions about the Group's public image. She can decide what she will tell an interviewer and how she will phrase her narration. Any demystification of the Group's backstage work falls to her discretion during these interviews. Valk also chooses which target audience of readers will receive narrative information about the Group's shows. While Valk's interviews with Savran and Quick fell to other Group members' interviews, it was her choice to grant those interviews and her choice to give interviews to Salle and French, as well as Rosten. While this does not grant Valk absolute narrative power, since she cannot decide what publications and people will want to ask for interviews, she does have the power to say no or yes as she wishes.

Valk's roles as servant and narrator inform her other roles within the Group, when she is purely a part of the ensemble. As the next chapter will explore, Valk's core work narrating and facilitating has clearly shaped her other onstage work. Specifically, the physicality she has developed through her onstage servant and narrator roles pervades all her onstage work.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PHYSICAL PERFORMER

Valk's physicality as a performer sets her apart from the Group and vitalizes her performances. As this chapter will explore, her physicality includes gesture, movement of set pieces, and use of costume. An exploration of her central roles in the Group's productions illustrates her prowess as a physical performer and the captivating presence she has become onstage in the Group's productions.

Valk describes her early experience as a performer in Frank Dell's the Temptation of St. Antony, and her discovery of the importance of physical work, in an interview with Andrew Quick:

What was very shocking for me as a performer was that I did not protect myself enough going into the actual performance of the piece. Performances aren't rehearsals and I wasn't experienced enough to make the jump from who I was in rehearsal to what was demanded of me in the performance. I was stunned when I got into the performances, I wasn't able to hang on to that kind of dropped out energy I had in rehearsals – that you can just pick something up, drop it, go on to the next thing. Try this, drop it; try that, cut it; try that, go back and do it again, with the kind of real presence and

sense of drop-out that I had in rehearsal. It got very brittle. When I went into performance it was almost like I wasn't breathing – it was, “Oh my God, what was I doing?” – I didn't know. As a performer, in all the pieces up until St. Antony, I had performed in blackface. I'd always had a huge mask. So, here I was, maskless and not experienced or aware enough to be able to play myself as a person in front of the audience, taking on and dropping all these different personas for the sake of getting the show up. I panicked. I choked. I really did. Then, it was the long slow journey of building up the score, the structure, gaining the confidence to be able to make it work. (Quick 158-159)

As she expresses in her interview, Valk's role in St. Antony provided an important learning experience for her as an actress. To better work with the Group, Valk needed to learn to ask for what she needed from LeCompte. As her reference to blackface indicates, as well as information from other central onstage roles discussed later in this chapter, Valk focuses on her physicality as a performer.

Valk's physicality, and her focus on her body and appearance onstage, traces back to her role in L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...). In this production Valk took a more central position in the dual roles of Mary Warren and Tituba. In these dual roles Valk donned blackface to play Tituba and later covered the blackface with white makeup. Her role in the production brought up questions about race and the Group's theatrical treatment of race, as well as questions about the similarities between Tituba and Mary Warren.

During her time onstage Valk also performed a faint dance, as mentioned in her interview with David Savran in Breaking the Rules. Her representation of hysteria, as inspired by a videotape the Group had filmed of a rehearsal during which they took LSD, provided a layer of intensity to her performance and to the production as a whole (Savran 204). Her physicality as a performer makes Valk a dynamic stage presence. She does not need to speak to make her point to the audience.

Later, Valk's physicality as a performer proved an important aspect of her performance in The Emperor Jones, in which she played the title role of Brutus Jones:

Kate Valk appears as Brutus Jones. Mask is both symbol and substance in this performance as a series of masking devices brings identity issues to the foreground. Race and gender are seen as roles. Acting style becomes another mask. Valk draws upon the tradition of minstrelsy and Kabuki as she struts around the bare stage wielding a microphone as though it were at once both scepter and cane. She entertains the audience with a vocal cadence that imitates stereotypical "black" speech even as she indicates that she is doing an imitation. She strikes commanding poses and demands to be watched at all times, often rolling her eyes to set the whites against black, a gesture that recalls pictures of Oliver's performance as Othello. (Brietzke 384)

Brietzke focuses on Valk's manipulation of her voice and body, both of which she has honed during her years with the Group. Valk's ability to manipulate herself and the set pieces around her, when needed, makes her performances resonate in a way that

traditional performances would not. Valk has a unique performance style that goes beyond acting and into brilliant manipulation of the body and environment.

Valk's femininity was also an important part of her performance in The Emperor Jones, as Monks explores:

[A]s Valk performed Jones' journey through the forest, she became progressively more feminine, again conforming to the trajectory of the playtext. For an audience familiar with the play, her journey created the anticipation of Jones' exotic striptease. However, rather than revealing the "authentic" African body through her loss of clothing, as in O'Neill's version, Valk revealed more and more of her whiteness. As her arms and legs were not blacked up, she progressively undermined the stability of her blackface.

Furthermore, as the costume begins to unravel, it also loses its Japanese qualities and revealed an American-style plaid shirt and an African print skirt underneath the Kabuki style robes. The bulkiness of the costume began to disappear and, by comparison with her earlier statuesque presence on stage, her masculine powerful stance in the first scene, Valk became a diminutive feminized body.

(Monks 557)

As Monks describes, Valk's femininity acted as part of her costume in her striptease in The Emperor Jones. Valk used her body to illustrate the idea of Jones becoming progressively more feminine. Her feminine frame, revealed when she stripped down to a skirt and shirt, contrasted with the bulky, padded



form she presented when wearing layers of clothing and robes. Consequently, Valk's body acted as a vehicle for posing questions of gender in The Emperor Jones.

Valk also used her body to pose questions of race and identity through her use of blackface in The Emperor Jones. She provided a visual representation of race questions since she was in blackface and revealed white arms and legs once she began her striptease. Her physical appearance raised questions about the differences and similarities between these races.

Valk again took center stage in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre). In this role Valk used her physicality to connect with the character. She did not speak and relied completely on her body to convey each character impulse and emotion. As Gaby Cody recounts:

Most of the time Phèdre does not have the agency of her own voice. When Scott Shepard is not playing Théramenes, his ironic voice interjects Phèdre's lines and melodramatic asides into an onstage microphone. At one point, Valk tries to drown her despair in the potentially curative powers of a pair of new red shoes (projected onto the screen) as Shepard whispers: "New clothes always make me feel good. But this isn't working." His exposed ventriloquism is as hilarious as it is devastating because Phèdre's petty interior monologues are physically offered by Valk as if she were plumbing the depths of Phèdre's psyche. By estranging Phèdre's voice from the actor playing her, LeCompte is able to unapologetically

dramatize the cliché of Phèdre's tragic inner consciousness. (Cody  
174)

Valk used her body to express the dialogue. This completely physical approach provided the audience with a picture of duality between a woman's body and a man's voice.

Elinor Fuchs also recounts the importance of the physicality of Valk's performance:

For all that, the performance belongs to the actors, led by long-time Wooster member Kate Valk. If the U.S. cared enough about the stage to designate its artists "living national treasures," as in Japan, Valk would head the list. She breaks through the Wooster signature deadpan in moments of harrowing expression: at one moment, a silent tantrum; at another, a lascivious slackening of the jaw; and at the sexual turning point, an abandoned grabbing and grappling while attendants rain her with an anal douche. Shades of Artaud. (Fuchs  
40)

Fuchs's description shows that Valk's physicality made her performance emotionally charged and compelling.

Valk did not begin rehearsals of To You, the Birdie! (Phedre) in an exclusively physical performance style. LeCompte describes the process of moving Valk into a completely physical role in an interview with Quick:

I was desperately looking for something else to put against the text.  
I went through lots of possibilities and it was only when I took  
Katie's voice out that I finally realized that it would work. [...] I

would hear Scott say the lines and I'd say, "Perfect." He was able to throw them away; he was totally comfortable with them being funny. [...] I remember hearing him and saying, "That's the tone." Once I had that tone I didn't have to worry about cutting it with something else. [...] [A]nd when he got this role I felt free. It just freed me up to do whatever I wanted physically because I realized that there was no way that Katie was going to be able to do all the physical movement I wanted and still say the lines. When she tried to combine the two you couldn't see any of the physical stuff. All you could see was her trying to say those lines. (Quick 262-263)

LeCompte's description indicates that, for this role, it was essential that Valk work from her body.

Valk's role in Hamlet put her firmly into the spotlight as the only female in the cast, and she continued to utilize her physicality. She moved in imitation of the Richard Burton Hamlet film which played on the screens behind the stage. She played with the timing of these imitative movements, flitting between moving in sync and moving out of sync with the film. With this role, Valk also moved set pieces with the other actors in imitation of the jerky camera angles in the Richard Burton film (Hamlet 2007).

Valk performed both of the production's female speaking roles, Gertrude and Ophelia. Smalec explores how Valk's physicality provided a chance to look at Hamlet from a new perspective:

While performer Kate Valk "failed to act" in the sense of interpreting Shakespeare's characters, her meticulous engagement

with her filmic doubles (Eileen Herlie as Gertrude and Linda Marsh as Ophelia) opened a critical gap through which to analyze enduring archetypes of feminine frailty. During the closet scene, the slight delay between Herlie's onscreen gestures and Valk's onstage replication obliged viewers to *notice* what we might otherwise have accepted as normative. Even as Valk wept, swooned, and wrung her hands in exact simulation of the film's actress, she did not passively justify Gertrude's shame; on the contrary, her belated reenactment unleashed freakish possibilities. Can Hamlet, a drama acclaimed for exploring man's inner depths, perversely be restaged at the level of *surface*? What was supposed to be a psychological showdown between mother and son became a riveting chance to watch Valk interact with the spectral image of Gertrude. Valk did not deconstruct this hindering façade so much as inhabit it. Her process recalled the risky ways in which she conversed with racist stereotypes in The Emperor Jones. (Smalec 278)

Once again Valk's physical work added layers of meaning to her role.

Sarah Werner further describes the production in her essay "Two Hamlets: Wooster Group and Synetic Theater":

The furniture gets its close-ups, too: when the film zooms in on actors standing by a table, a table onstage is rolled to the front of the stage as the Wooster actors move. "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.150) exclaims the film's Ophelia (played by Linda

Marsh), as she leans on a chair and the movie camera comes in for a close-up; the Wooster Group's Kate Valk, also speaking the line, stands on stage behind her chair (the top half of which echoes the shape of the filmed chair, while the lower half looks more like a wheelchair) and shifts it downstage. The effect is somewhat dizzying. It's less like a camera approaching for a close-up and more like the performance zooming out toward the audience—not a bad metaphor for how this performance moves outside itself, drawing on other performances and producing multiple views. (Werner 325)

Valk's performance clearly added an element of excitement to the spectacle onstage, as Werner confirms. Valk was at once both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Her movement was not the only way Valk played with and imitated the film. In her interview with Salle and French, Valk expresses the importance of costumes to her performance, specifically in Hamlet: "I started with the costumes. The wigs" (Salle and French 70). Valk's costume was another tool she used to play with the film clips of Hamlet. She wore a blouse and skirt as Gertrude that were echoed in some of the film work playing behind the actors:

The pattern and color of Valk's blouse are added to the clothing worn by Eileen Herlie, playing Gertrude in the black-and-white film shown upstage. [...] By recording the performance, simultaneously rendering it as digitized information, the live action can be blended into and alter the archival Hamlet: Kate Valk's costume as Gertrude appears—in color—on Eileen Herlie's Gertrude just after the closet

scene. The blouse worn by Kate Valk as Gertrude replaces that worn onscreen by Eileen Herlie. Valk is costumed like Dench, in a head wrap. (Worthen 315-320)

Worthen's description indicates that Valk's costume reflected the film clips, and it also inspired digital manipulation of the film. While her costume was derivative of Herlie's costume in the film, the film was digitally altered to reflect Valk's costume in its colors. When transitioning into Ophelia, Valk donned a dress that opened down the back and echoed the skirt and blouse which Ophelia wore in the Richard Burton film (Hamlet 2007). Through costumes that imitated the film, Valk commented on and played with the film clips.

Currently Valk is performing in the Group's production of La Didone. According to the Group's website, the production is a melding of an opera and a film:

In The Wooster Group's production of La Didone, Francesco Cavalli's opera, with libretto by Francesco Busenello, (1641) and Mario Bava's cult movie Terrore nello spazio (1965) collide in a war-like symbiosis, dropping Aeneas' ships onto a forbidding planetary landscape and forming a synergy between early baroque opera and pre-moonlanding sci-fi. (thewoostergroup.org 2009)

The show requires specific physical work in performance. Given this highly physical approach to the Group's productions, including their production of La Didone, Valk's skilled work with her body makes her an important asset to the Group in performance. For example, in her review of La Didone, Yvonne Korshak explains the production and some of the physical demands:

Two stories are played on stage concurrently. La Didone, a 17th century opera based on Virgil's Aeneid is beautifully sung and performed. [...] The other is Terrore nello spazio after the 1965 film Planet of the Vampires, populated with Star Trek look-alike talk-alike cosmonauts in metallic jumpsuits, and complete with a spaceship that you'd swear lands and lifts off with plenty of G's in the course of the play. Live actors interact with video monitors showing the same, or different, or partly the same actions.

(Korshak)

Korshak, however, does not quite capture the degree of physical work and skill required for the production. The physicality of the show goes beyond mere imitation of filmed actors, as Ryan Tracy describes:

One of the main challenges was having to learn Baroque gesture along with the rest of the cast. Taught by Jennifer Griesbach, these gestures determine a large part of how La Didone is staged. [...] And La Didone, as with most early music, gives singers with smaller voices — still trained and beautiful, just not naturally big enough to fill The Met — a chance to have their gifts put to good use. (Tracy)

The Group's performers were required to learn a new set of physical gestures for the production and use their bodies in a way they had not previously been asked to use them. Valk has extensive experience in learning and teaching choreography from her roles in previous shows. Her familiarity with her body and its abilities enables her to focus on her physicality in her approach to each role.

From her initial role in Route 1 & 9, through her current role in La Didone, Valk has often acted as an ensemble member with the Group. In this capacity, it is often her physicality that makes her performance resonate with the audience. This physicality, as discussed, includes her movement and her physical appearance. Through this physical work she makes major onstage contributions.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Kate Valk constantly acts as an ensemble member within the Wooster Group. Her work helps the Group's overall production goals and sets her as a part of the process. She does not act as someone apart from the Group or above the Group. Valk acts in two main capacities in the Group: as dramaturg and as performer. Valk's ability to serve multiple dramaturgical functions, while maintaining a powerful physical onstage presence, makes her a vital part of the Group's ensemble.

Many of Valk's tasks as narrator and servant offstage might be defined as dramaturgy. Dramaturgs often work with transcription, as Valk did for Route 1 & 9 and House/Lights. Valk's work enables her to contribute textual material to the Group. While she works with these scripts she does not take control of the Group's rehearsal process or control which scripts the Group will use. Instead, Valk performs this task as needed to support the Group's productions.

This aspect of her dramaturgical work enables Valk to step in and contribute powerful performances to the Group's productions. She can approach these roles from the perspective of having heard and written down dialogue. She has intimate knowledge, not only of her lines, but of other performers' dialogue that she has transcribed from film

or audio recordings. Valk can ease the rehearsal process through her memory of important lines, as discussed in her work as narrator in House/Lights and Brace Up!.

In an example of how her work with text influences her work as a performer, Valk explains her process in an interview with Quick:

St. Antony was a very interesting piece, because Liz built my role, and I can only speak for me, around my rehearsal energy, which had been very much determined by my role as facilitator. In this facilitory role I'm always creating what I think she wants to see, keeping track of all the material and finding, as a kind of editor on my feet, a way to put it all together. I had an intimate relationship with the material, literally all the pages of the different scripts on the stage, and my drive in the rehearsals was to put all this together.

(Quick 158)

As described in her interview, Valk linked her role as a performer with her knowledge of the text in rehearsal. This example illuminates the connection between her dramaturgical work with text and her work onstage.

Valk also performs the dramaturgical task of public outreach. When she gives interviews for magazines and journals, she presents the Group to the public in a way that promotes their ideas. Her interviews help audiences understand the Group's work. She has the potential of educating people who have not yet seen any of the Group's productions, and bringing new audience members to productions by introducing them to the Group's work, its process, and its ideas. This contribution to the ensemble allows the Group to speak to the public through Valk. As her interviews have shown, Valk speaks

about controversial issues, such as the race issues involved with the Group's use of blackface in Route 1 & 9, and she also explains her process and the Group's collective process. When she discusses these aspects of the Group's work, she influences the audience's perception of the Group's productions.

In another contribution to the ensemble, Valk often brings dramaturgical research materials for LeCompte's consideration. These materials include recordings, prior knowledge of the text, and found materials that might go into building costumes and props. As an extension of acquiring found materials, she often builds costumes and props for the Group's shows. She approaches her dramaturgical research from the unique perspective of someone who will also be performing the material and using the costumes and props. Valk does not approach her dramaturgical research as an objective outsider, as other dramaturgs might, but as a full participant onstage in each production. She knows what she needs as a performer, and has worked extensively onstage with the other performers in the Group. She tailors her contributions to match the needs of the Group's performers.

In a position often reserved for dramaturgs, Valk usually sits as LeCompte's right hand during preproduction. She acts as a consultant and contributes artistic ideas and input. Dramaturgs often have a similar relationship with directors. Valk's relationship with LeCompte, however, is more complex due to her role as a performer within the Group. As an actress she cannot maintain the objectivity of a dramaturg. This does not, however, hinder her ability to contribute ideas. On the contrary, her role as actress informs her role as dramaturg. For example, Valk suggested the use of in-ear devices in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre) so that the ensemble members could receive LeCompte's

commands about where to look and when to move (Quick 162). She has intimate knowledge of the material from her perspective of working with it in performance. Valk's suggestions, as indicated by her request in To You, the Birdie! (Phedre), focus on her needs as a performer and the ensemble's needs in performance.

Valk's dynamic physicality sets her apart from the Group. Her highly physical approach, combined with her work backstage, enables Valk to contribute powerful performances to the ensemble. Valk approaches performances from the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical. The purpose of her dramaturgical work is to help the creative process and support LeCompte's and the Group's artistic ideas, and her physicality is another tool for accomplishing this. She supports the Group by using her body to communicate ideas.

Valk acted as an ensemble member in the Group's 2004 production of Poor Theater, in which they honored Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, as well as choreographer William Forsythe. Valk's physicality within the ensemble greatly enhanced this production, as the Group performed both choreographed and improvisational dance.

In this production "Valk portrays a woman identified in the spring version as 'A Longtime Associate of Grotowski's' and in the fall as simply 'the Polish Tour Guide'" (Dunkelberg 46). Valk's role contained shades of narration when she played the Polish Tour Guide, although her narration was directed into the world of the production and not toward the audience:

In the old days, Valk/Tour Guide tells them, there was no money at all: "so [it] was really poor theatre." She laughs at her own joke.

The company asks a few questions about Grotowski, but is continually drawn back to the parquet floor—“like a Park Avenue apartment.” The scene focuses on this missed communication—the Wooster Group actors seeing the space through their New York eyes, Valk/Tour Guide wanting to share her deep personal sense of the history of the place. (Dunkelberg 46)

Valk’s guidance of the Group within the show, as an ensemble member, reflected her guidance of the audience in other shows as narrator. In this show, she was able to use her body and her narrative skill to support the production without stepping into a central role onstage.

There are numerous ways in which Valk might apply her skills and continue her dramaturgical and performance work as a member of the Group’s ensemble in the future. As outlined in Chapter 4, Valk is currently performing in the Group’s production of La Didone. Valk has further contributed to La Didone through interviews to inform the public about the show, once again spearheading public outreach for the Group. Elisabeth Vincentelli mentions an interview with Valk in her review of La Didone:

Backed by a band that includes lute, accordion and electric guitar, the cast, clad in silvery outer-space outfits, performs both the cheesetastic movie and the opera often at the same time. "The two stories have a lot of parallels," says the magnetic Kate Valk, who plays the female lead of Planet, Sanya. "They orbit around each other." [...] "People in straight plays are just not in concert with the technicians the way we are," Valk explains. "With us, the lights are

performing, too." Still, it's the actors who have the biggest challenge: In La Didone, they carry out parts of the opera, although Valk dryly confesses, "I don't sing, I don't read music, and I don't speak Italian." (Vincentelli)

Valk's interview sheds light on the performers' rehearsal process and the demands of the show. Audience members who read this can better appreciate the performances in La Didone. Through her performance onstage and her public outreach for La Didone, Valk has continued to function in the capacity of a dramaturg and a performer for the Group.

Valk's previous work with the Group indicates that she has established herself as an unofficial dramaturg, as well as a performer. Whether Valk's unique position as both dramaturg and performer will influence other performers and dramaturgs to take a similar path is a question that has not yet been answered. Valk's work has certainly demonstrated the power and depth that come from combining dramaturgical and performance roles. However, her unique dual function might be a difficult position for other performers or dramaturgs. Her position as an equal member of an ensemble enables her to naturally fill these two roles for the Group. She has already built trust with LeCompte and other Group members, so she can step into the role of dramaturg without offending or threatening LeCompte in her role as director. If Valk were to audition for various groups and perform with each one once or twice, she would not have the opportunity to build trust with each director, and therefore would have difficulty contributing dramaturgical materials and ideas to help build production concepts. Valk and LeCompte's partnership in developing productions does not reflect the usual hierarchy of directors and actors or the hierarchy of directors and dramaturgs. Valk's

position within the Group enables her to be a creative collaborator with LeCompte, while simultaneously functioning as a dramaturg and a performer.

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## **VITA**

Melissa Jackson is a Master of Arts degree candidate in Theatre with an emphasis in History and Criticism at Texas State University-San Marcos. A native of Pella, Iowa, Melissa moved to Austin in 2000 and received a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Dance from the University of Texas at Austin in 2004. Melissa's research interests include experimental theatre practices and avant-garde theatre troupes such as the Wooster Group. Her work was recently published in the October/November 2007 edition of the *THE OSCHOLARS* journal, a publication dedicated to the works of Oscar Wilde. Melissa is a founding member of RAD, an experimental theatre troupe in Austin, and has been performing, writing, choreographing and directing pieces for the troupe since 2004.

This thesis was typed by Melissa E. Jackson.