

Elizabeth LeCompte, Kate Valk,
and Maria Shevtsova

Covid Conversations 3: Elizabeth LeCompte and Kate Valk

Elizabeth LeCompte co-founded The Wooster Group with like-minded pioneers in New York in 1975, leading and directing its collaborators as deaths, departures, and new arrivals have changed its composition and emphases over the decades, segueing into a world-wide uncertain present. Kate Valk joined in 1978, the last representative of The Wooster Group's foundational period, apart from LeCompte herself, who is still a key member of the company. References in this conversation are primarily to works after 2016. LeCompte briefly remarks on the importance of *Since I Can Remember* – one of the Group's ongoing works in progress in 2021 – as an archival project that draws on Valk's memory of how *Nayatt School* was made during her formative years. Having become, since then, a quintessential Wooster Group performer, Valk extended her artistic skills to stage direction, undertaking, most recently, *The B-Side* (2017). Both the initiative and idea for the piece came from performer Eric Berryman, who had brought Valk the collection of blues, songs, spirituals, and preachings on the 1965 LP made from the research of scholar folklorist Bruce Chapman. Berryman had been inspired to approach Valk because of her exclusive use of unadulterated historical recordings in *Early Shaker Spirituals* (2014), her directorial debut. The main work in rehearsal during 2020 and which was still locked down by the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of this conversation is *The Mother*, a Wooster Group variant of Brecht's dramatized version of Gorky's novel, directed by LeCompte. LeCompte discusses the current situation, emphasizing the increased vulnerability of independent artists and small-scale theatre, while giving a glimpse of the disadvantages for such groupings built into the North American system of project funding. The Wooster Group is a salient example of small-scale theatre that, despite continually precarious conditions, which the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated, has achieved its creative goals and has defined its place in the exploratory avant-garde flourishing vigorously in the 1960s and 1970s. This particular avant-garde, LeCompte believes, has seen various important developments over the years but might well now be counting its last days. The conversation here presented was recorded on 31 October 2020, transcribed by Kunsang Kelden, and edited by Maria Shevtsova, Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.

Key terms: The Wooster Group, Brecht, Gorky, avant-garde, fundraising, immersion, layering.

Maria Shevtsova *It's tremendous to see you again, Liz and Katie! It's been for ever!*

Elizabeth LeCompte Yeah, it's been a while. How long's it been? It's really good to see you.

Kate Valk It's great!

I didn't see you when you came to London with The Town Hall Affair (2017) [Barbican, June 2018, Figures 1 and 2] because I was out of town, checking sources for a book I had a deadline on, and I was overwhelmed with teaching when you took A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique)

to Paris [November 2019]. So I couldn't hop over to the Centre Pompidou to catch you, as I would normally have done; and, there you were, with Kantor following Grotowski. [The reference here is to The Wooster Group Poor Theater (2004), inspired by Grotowski as well as William Forsythe, and to Kantor as the central creative reference for A Pink Chair (2018).] In fact, thinking about it – the last time would have been when I interviewed you both about Troilus and Cressida, which you made with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012 [NTQ 115 (2013)]. Before that was our public discussion, in a conference context in Poland, of The Wooster Group Hamlet (2006), which you



Figure 1. *The Town Hall Affair* (2017). Left to right on the stage: Scott Shepherd, Ari Fliakos, and Greg Mehrten; on screen: Jacqueline Ceballos, Germaine Greer, Norman Mailer, and Diane Trilling. Photo: Hervé Veronese and courtesy of The Wooster Group.

performed at the 2009 Gdansk Shakespeare Festival run by my friend Jerzy Limon [NTQ 114 (2013)].

That seems a long time ago, and those were different times – nothing like this pandemic that is blocking our meeting physically face to face. I’m going to ask you what, these days, I am asking everyone who works in the theatre, and that is: How did you react when you first heard that this virus was spreading into New York City? What were your feelings, what were you thinking? What did you do?

Valk Well, you know, we barely had time to assess any of that. We were right in the throes of rehearsing our new production of Brecht’s *The Mother*, so it was very difficult to make the decision to suspend group rehearsals at the theatre. We were in the thick of it – it was very difficult to make a decision like that.

It was the governor’s decision to shut theatres down, wasn’t it?

Valk We suspended even before the governor shut the state down on 22 March [2020]; we stopped at the beginning of the week, like the 16th or the 17th.

Much like us here in the UK: we stopped on the 23rd.

Valk There wasn’t a playbook [for *The Mother*], you know, so it was pretty stressful. [A reference to The Wooster Group’s process of devising a production rather than working on a pre-existing script.] One member of our company tested positive. Fortunately, it was over a weekend, and he didn’t come in on that Monday and we suspended on Tuesday. We were just lucky that we weren’t exposed. So, you know, it *was* stressful. At first everybody thought, ‘Oh, OK, we’re just going to shut down for two weeks, and then I’m sure it’ll be under control.’



Figure 2. *The Town Hall Affair* (2017): Kate Valk. Photo: Zbigniew Bzymek and courtesy of The Wooster Group.

LeCompte I didn't think it was gonna be under control.

Valk Well, no, I know *you* didn't, but the mayor and our governor did.

LeCompte Exactly. They were saying it would take two weeks, and we went along with that. It was pretty obvious to us, or to me, at least, that it was going to be much longer. The earliest would have been early June. That became obvious as we moved along. By April, it became obvious that, if we did get back, we wouldn't be full on. We couldn't do it in a full way.

Valk Then we had to start meeting with the company on Zoom to figure out what to do. So, like everybody else, we had to jump to that platform just to stay in touch. Only Liz and I live in walking distance from the theatre. Everybody else was suddenly 'sheltering in place' – that's the term they used here, which I thought was very interesting. And I think Liz

and I sort of represented two parts of a whole where I got incredibly stressed out, while Liz was feeling – (*to LeCompte*) you can speak for yourself – a kind of reprieve of not having to do an international opening as soon we were slated to do it.

Now tell me about that, I'm interested. How did the reprieve manifest itself? What were you thinking, Liz – was it 'Oh, thank God'?

LeCompte I was free, because we had a deadline. We've been working more with deadlines lately because we only get funding if we have a project. They want to fund the project, but they won't fund the company.

Valk That, coupled with how we have to send our freight to Europe nine weeks in advance. It wasn't like this before. It's so far in advance now! It's getting more and more and more in advance, so we were gonna have to finish rehearsing . . .

LeCompte . . . in two weeks after that.

Valk Eight, nine weeks. We had two weeks left before we had to ship stuff to Vienna. So we were right up against it. We were going to premiere it [*The Mother*] at the Vienna Festival. We were really up against it, so it was like a speedball, you know, where you take coke and heroin at the same time! And you're going up and down, and up and down, and up and down. I mean, not that I've ever done that . . .

LeCompte That's you, though. I was like . . . I felt like I was in a fabulous dream. I just felt wonderful. I knew then that I had time to make the piece.

Valk But didn't you feel at the same time, you know, people are dying . . . ?

LeCompte No. I don't have that kind of empathy. If *you* were dying, I would be worried!

Valk Anyway, when we realized it was going to be longer than two weeks . . . it was going to be the whole summer, we had to face emergency fundraising. So we went into overdrive and used all the time. We were working full time, the whole time. People always said to me, 'Oh, how are you? Where did you go? I figured you were out in the country, left the city,' whatever it was. We went into overdrive for fundraising, and, to keep ourselves sane, we started working on a new project remotely with a couple of actors.

I'm going to ask about that in a minute, but before I do: Is this when you started showing some of your previous works online? Doing a fundraiser? Because I noticed your fundraising drive when I got your new bulletin – and I always read it, so I'm always up to speed with what you're doing – and I seem to remember a notice about the fundraising on your site with your notifications of which productions could be seen. But I couldn't see much of it really – only one or two – because I was in overdrive myself, teaching day and night online, supervising students' theses, marking

essays, pastoral care on the phone, and getting exhausted. It's exhausting, that damned Zoom. I really hated how it sapped my energy.

Valk Did you find that you were working, like, a third again as much?

Yes, I did, and so did my colleagues. OK, I always work hard. I mean, I have been doing twelve-to-fourteen-hour days for as long as I can remember. But now I was doing eighteen-hour days and more. I was just on my knees, plus I was editing NTQ on my own because, tragically, my co-editor died and I had to bring this journal out by myself. No one could really help. Everyone was too busy, all exhausted by Zoom and other such platforms; and people were so tired that I had to be really careful about whom I asked to review articles so that I did not overload them. I'm really thankful to these referees the world over. And then the production team at Cambridge University Press was having its own Covid-generated problems. On top of that, a couple of really good scholars and thoughtful, kind people whom I asked to co-edit with me said, 'No thanks, the job is too hard. I've got enough to do in this crisis, and I'm barely coping.' So I just did it on my own. The result of all this pressure was that I couldn't see what you were showing. I just couldn't. I had seen many of them live, but I wanted to see them online to see how they felt differently.

Valk I was just wondering which one you caught.

I caught The B-Side (2017), which was terrific. [Eric Berryman, the initiator of this production, together with Kate Valk use quotation marks to indicate they are borrowing the historically racist language of the title on the vinyl album made from 1964 recordings in prison, which include Black work-songs said to have originated during slavery. Thus their full title is The B-Side: 'Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons', A Record Album Interpretation (Figures 3 and 4).] I also caught The Room [2016, after Harold Pinter] – terrific, too. These two were completely new to me. I caught the tail end of Brace Up!, which was not new, and I had seen it, but I was struck by how utterly brilliant it was.



Figure 3. *The B-Side* (2017): Eric Berryman. Photo: Bruce Jackson and courtesy of The Wooster Group.



Figure 4. *The B-Side* (2017). Left to right: Eric Berryman, Jasper McGruder, and Philip Moore. Photo: Teddy Wolf and courtesy of The Wooster Group.

LeCompte *Brace Up!* was early on [1991 and 2003].

Yes, a very early piece. It's odd, you sit there late into the night and you think, 'How could I have missed all that?' You know, time became eternal – days merged into night, days merged into one long stretch. And then I had family and friends to worry about and support; friends far away to speak with. Then in the summer, people thought that maybe I'd gone off to the country or flown out somewhere safer than Britain, and I thought, 'Are they crazy?' First of all, was there anywhere 'safe'? But I was locked up, marking essays, summer resits, fails, correcting PhD chapters, electronic supervisions, and helping Masters students write their dissertations. And there was always the journal. I didn't stop working. It was just nutty. At one point, I thought, 'I could die tomorrow. Why am I working like this'? Did this ever cross your mind, either of you?

Valk I wanted to keep the business going. I wanted to keep the company going. I wanted to keep the pilot light on, so no, I never questioned why.

LeCompte No, it wasn't that. Maria was asking, 'Did you ever feel like you could die tomorrow?'

Valk I feel that way every day.

LeCompte Yeah, we feel that way every day. I'm constantly thinking I could die tomorrow. In fact, I could die any minute!

Oh, we're not going to say that. They say you can't wish things like that upon yourself. But, you know, I do have close friends sick in hospital. I do have someone who died of Covid. And I thought, 'Well, it could be me, too.'

Let's go back to your online shows. I presume that the work online would have helped with the fundraising. Did it?

Valk I think so, yeah, and Liz and I started working with a young writer. We started sending out press releases about it because we wanted people to know we were alive

and kicking, and everybody was making content available [on the internet]. That's what it was all about because people had so much time to watch stuff, and I think the press releases really helped with our viewership.

That's fantastic. The fundraising was, I presume, to keep the company alive, but your basic everyday costs were OK? The fact that you actually own the Performing Garage would have been an advantage, wouldn't it? You didn't have to pay rent.

Valk Well, we still pay maintenance to a co-op. We don't own it outright. What we pay has, in itself, tripled in the last ten years. It's an artist co-op. We used to have a tax exemption, I think twenty years ago, at the beginning. And now the real-estate values in Soho, where we are, are getting up-zone. The real-estate values have just skyrocketed. So the co-op is paying a lot in taxes, and, of course, we have to pay more. That comes out of everybody's maintenance. We're with three residential buildings and one of the original Fluxus houses – Fluxus house number three. It's a very interesting history of how artists were able to manufacture in these lofts and make them residences as well. In our case, we share with three residential buildings, which all used to be owned by artists, but, of course, over the years that's been changing. Now they're owned mostly by finance people, I would say.

Liz, the house that you live in – is that part of the co-op arrangement?

LeCompte It's part of another co-op. Its maintenance has also gone up – amazingly. So we are a little up against it, too. That's been the most difficult thing – the change in the amount we have to pay just to live.

Valk And it's super interesting because Soho is going through another identity. There's a lot of energy in Soho now, oddly enough, coming after the looting of Soho during the George Floyd protests. In the first week of the protests here in New York, after the killing of George Floyd, there were two

nights of looting. And so, in Soho, anybody who could leave, left. I think Liz is the only person in her building. They boarded up all the storefronts. The theatre didn't get hit because we don't have luxury goods, or even a glass storefront. When all the stores were boarded up, they engaged young artists to paint on the plywood, and it became a destination. People wanted to come to Soho and take photographs – young, Black New Yorkers, you know, I would say in their late teens, early twenties. It became a destination. So, oddly enough, Soho is getting yet another identity.

LeCompte It began again in a whole new way.

How would you define this other identity? How is it, typically?

Valk It's a tourist attraction, and it's a gathering place for young people of colour. They don't own the lofts, they don't own the building.

LeCompte They feel they have a place here that's safe . . . because the traffic is very low, and because there's no storefront owners saying, 'Get out of here, you can't smoke your pot here.'

Valk And it still has the aura of being, 'Oh, artists live here.' So you also have young people who want to identify with the positive part of the protest movement and the arts.

LeCompte If I ask them, 'Oh, what are you doing here? What do you do?' – because they're outside my co-op – they say, 'Oh, he's a director, film director, this person is a producer.' They're all in their late teens, early twenties. It's wonderful.

Valk Hopefully, that energy will pervade the area even after the pandemic, and we certainly are thinking about the future of the Garage [The Wooster Group's theatre] in these terms too.

What are you thinking about the future of the Garage?

Valk We want to keep it just as inclusive as it has been, but even more so. We had a partnership with a resource, a place called The Door, which is a very active arts programme for at-risk LGBTQ youth of colour. We had a partnership with them that was growing because they have everything except a theatre. We were growing two programmes with them. We certainly want to expand that once the pandemic is over.

Do you want to expand that as a collaboration with them?

Valk It already is.

I mean artistically, as something that you're going to be working on together?

Valk No, I think we see it more as making space, as making space for another art group as we define our time differently. Actually, we, The Wooster Group, thought that downsizing a little bit was something that had to happen, even before the pandemic. We don't have a development director or technical director [any more].

LeCompte Yeah, Kate and I basically do all the fundraising now.

What about Cynthia [Hedstrom]? Hasn't she been helping with the fundraising?

LeCompte Well, yes, but Cynthia has been mainly out in the country. She had a heart operation this summer, in the middle of the pandemic.

Oh. God, poor thing, it would have been terrifying – and for you. Give her my love. I've been writing to her, but I didn't realize she'd had a heart problem, and she didn't say anything about it.

When did you start working again properly? You said you had remote rehearsals. How did they operate? Were they for The Mother, which you're currently rehearsing?

Valk No, it was for something that existed already in the theatre space. It would have been going to Zoom for that. We began a new project that didn't live anywhere. It didn't live in the theatre space so it was something that was for the small screen.

Well, hang on a second. You've got me muddled. When you say you were doing remote rehearsals, they were for something new, for something especially for Zoom?

LeCompte Yes. Well, it was a . . . what do you call that . . . ?

Valk A commission.

LeCompte Yes, it was a commission from Hauser & Wirth, a gallery here in New York.

And what was the work? Did you give it a name?

Valk Well, Hauser & Wirth, the gallery, were opening a new building on 22nd Street. They asked us to do a performance that would be the culmination of their opening week. The whole art show that they were organizing the opening around was work that had some reference to – or the curators thought it had to have something to do with – this book called *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* by Daniel Paul Schreber. I'm sure you've heard of it. It's like the most important tract because it's an elaborate, a very detailed account from 1903 of somebody's paranoid schizophrenia.

Valk Schreber was a German Supreme Court judge.

LeCompte The only reason anybody knows about it is because Freud picked it up. He writes a lot about it.

Valk And so did every other psychoanalyst after that.

How did you manage it on Zoom? I mean, was it more talking than doing? More physical movement?

LeCompte Well, every day, just before we would work with Ari [Fliakos] and the other two women, we would watch – I would watch – our Governor Cuomo, who would give a talk about what was happening.

Valk He did a press conference every day.

LeCompte Yes, it was with his specialists and the press there, and it was televised. So I would take them and, when we worked with Ari, we would feed that into [what he was doing]. He would work on the text from this Schreber book by listening to Cuomo and how he was delivering it. I didn't know how else to join what was so important for us to something we were working on that was so far away and [had happened] so long ago. So I just mashed up two ideas next to each other, and it seems that it worked really well.

It's the way that you always layer and juxtapose different materials, like all the films that you use and that you play off, and all other kinds of material that you use – reading matter, pictures, music: 'texts' is your word for them. How long did this last? I didn't see it being advertised online. Could I have watched it?

LeCompte No, we just worked online.

Valk We recorded everything, but we were developing this style for the small screen.

LeCompte Well, you would probably need a small screen. (*To Valk*) Do you want to talk about that – the book, the audiobooks?

Valk Well, Ari Fliakos is an audiobook narrator. He's a reader. He makes extra money, and that's how he supports himself.

I was going to ask you how many people in the company make their living doing other jobs. Ari is one of them.

Valk Ari is one of them, and he's very good at it. We said to the Hauser & Wirth people that we were gonna approach it like we were

making an audiobook, and they loved the idea . . .

LeCompte But that it was gonna be an audio-video book.

It's a great idea. Do you think you can do that with a whole series of new shows, or little short shows, that won't take all that much time and effort out of you?

Valk I don't think we usually think, 'Oh, this means this is how we can make a living.' We just do the work that's right there in front of us and hope that somebody else will support us for those great ideas.

You take a long time to do a show, at least a year for every show, as I recall.

Valk Of course, Hauser & Wirth cancelled the opening of their new building and gave us one-third of the commission, and I think that's all we'll ever see from them. We were working in good faith that the commissioning money would come through. But it was great work and as soon as we finish *The Mother*, we'll return to it.

LeCompte Yeah.

Valk It's a very interesting book. I mean, at first, you're like, 'What does this have to do with anything?' But the connection Liz made with the press conference about an illness and this guy's report of his own illness worked together very well. If you tried, if any actor tried – and believe me some actors have tried – to inhabit Daniel Paul Schreber, it would be just God-awful. Right? You just miss some of the words.

Liz, I want to get you talking a bit more because you're always the quiet one between the three of us. So I am going to prod you. Yeah, I know, I know you don't like it, but I'm going to prod you. Did you in some way connect this illness – it's a psychological illness, it's paranoid schizophrenia – to the Covid universal illness? Was it connected

in your mind some way, unconsciously or consciously?

LeCompte Definitely unconscious.

Can you tell me how?

LeCompte How what?

How it might have been an unconscious link.

LeCompte It's still unconscious.

Clever, clever. OK, it's still there, but you'll have to pull it out, I think, at least for the moment.

LeCompte I will, but you'll see it; you won't hear it from me. No, seriously – I got slowly involved by learning about this Schreber character's father, who apparently was a very, very important . . . what do you call that?

Valk Pedagogue.

LeCompte Pedagogue about children, and how you brought up children in Germany and Austria in the 1800s. Apparently, he was very influential and he was also extremely eccentric. He had ways of dealing with children that were . . . that we would consider, what do you call 'not masochistic' – the opposite?

Valk Sadistic.

LeCompte Sadistic ways of repressing impulses from children in order to make them perform correctly in society. And so, with other people whom I was reading then, I liked to trace that in the German character. I'm always interested to see what the fuck happened with the Germans in the 1930s. Now it is far away, but it's history for me. History has always been interesting and I'm always looking back to find out how things began. What was the seed of certain kinds of ways of life in America? I'm always trying to figure out why Maine doesn't have much Covid, and Wyoming, which has about

the same amount of winter and the same population, has it overwhelmingly. I have to trace back to where our relatives were, who came over, who settled where. This is very important for us because we are all immigrants and so many of the people from the Midwest are German immigrants. One of my German parents is a German immigrant, a German-Jewish immigrant. I've always been interested in that, and the project hooked up that way. Now, how that's going to come out [in the work] or whether it's going to be there – I don't know, because we're really at the beginning of the piece.

How you hook it up is fascinating. I keep thinking that what is happening to us with this virus is happening ecologically through the damages done to the planet, the water, the air we breathe, and the way we treat and slaughter animals – sea creatures too; that this is all interlinked in some way in this crisis. How we are going to get out of it, humanity and the planet, is the big question.

*Other factors are also interlinked. Your reference to the 1930s reminds me that I wanted to ask what had prompted you to go to a 1930s Brecht piece called *The Mother*. He wrote the play in 1930–31 with three collaborators and directed it in Berlin in 1932. This work was based on Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel *The Mother*. I wonder why you went to Brecht's version [and not straight to Gorky].*

LeCompte I can't remember. I can't remember.

Valk Why *The Mother*? We had to apply for a grant and, like Liz said earlier, there is no general operating support in the granting world. There are one or two institutions that will support us but all the public money, all the city, state and federal money for the arts, is project-oriented. So we had to come up with a project and I don't know why Liz thought of Brecht's *The Mother*, but I think she was only thinking of a good role for me!

LeCompte I thought of Brecht because nobody's been doing Brecht. We went on

the internet and went down all the Brecht plays. I saw *The Mother* and I thought, 'OK.' I thought there were one or two people in it, and it turned out that there were twenty-six – and we only have five performers.

Valk We had to let two go because of the pandemic. So now we're doing it with even fewer performers.

LeCompte And that takes a lot of problem solving, which I love.

*You do. You told me that you were a problem solver when we had our big discussion for my *Directors / Directing: Conversations on Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) in 2004 or 2005 – somewhere around then.*

LeCompte There you are! I am totally in my element every time a horrible problem comes up, and it takes a couple of minutes before I go, 'A-ha, what about this?' It doesn't always work, but it keeps me very active.

Yes, it keeps the brain ticking. All fun and jokes aside, though, what happened to the two you had to let go? Have they got jobs somewhere else?

LeCompte Well, they weren't full-time members of the company. They were engaged specifically for this project, and they had other means. We kept company members on.

Valk We got a small business loan from the government, on the second round, which helped us to keep people on salary through the summer. We did have to furlough half the company for five weeks, though.

*Oh God. By the way, how many technical people have you got in the company? I ask because I was looking at your programme for *A Pink Chair* and thought you had more technicians and production people listed than performers, which rattled me.*



Figure 5. *The Mother* (rehearsal, 2020): Elizabeth LeCompte. Photo: Michaela Murphy and courtesy of The Wooster Group.

LeCompte No, we have two. We have no money so now we're down to two – one who came yesterday – and a part-time production manager and a part-time producer. So we've actually been working with one technical person, and that's a problem to solve!

Well, since I was puzzled about technicians, let's talk just a little more about A Pink Chair in terms of money before we go back to The Mother. I believe it was the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw that helped you financially to do the Kantor tribute, if I can call it that.

LeCompte Well, we were lucky because they gave us the money before everything that is happening in Poland now started. [The reference here is to anti-government protests, especially against proposed new

anti-abortion laws.] We actually got the finance for that piece four years ago, I think, when we had other projects going, as well. The money was for a piece on Kantor. That was what they wanted.

You have a kind of back-to-back, haven't you? Grotowski for Poor Theater, and now Kantor, which makes for an interesting kind of time-separated couple.

OK, so let's get back to Brecht and *The Mother* (Figures 5 and 6). I think it's true what you said, that people are not working on Brecht right now, which seems kind of daft because, if there was any time since Brecht's when Brecht might be really appropriate, it is now. What I mean by 'now' are the heights of neoliberal capitalism, and you've got that lovely man called Trump running your show.

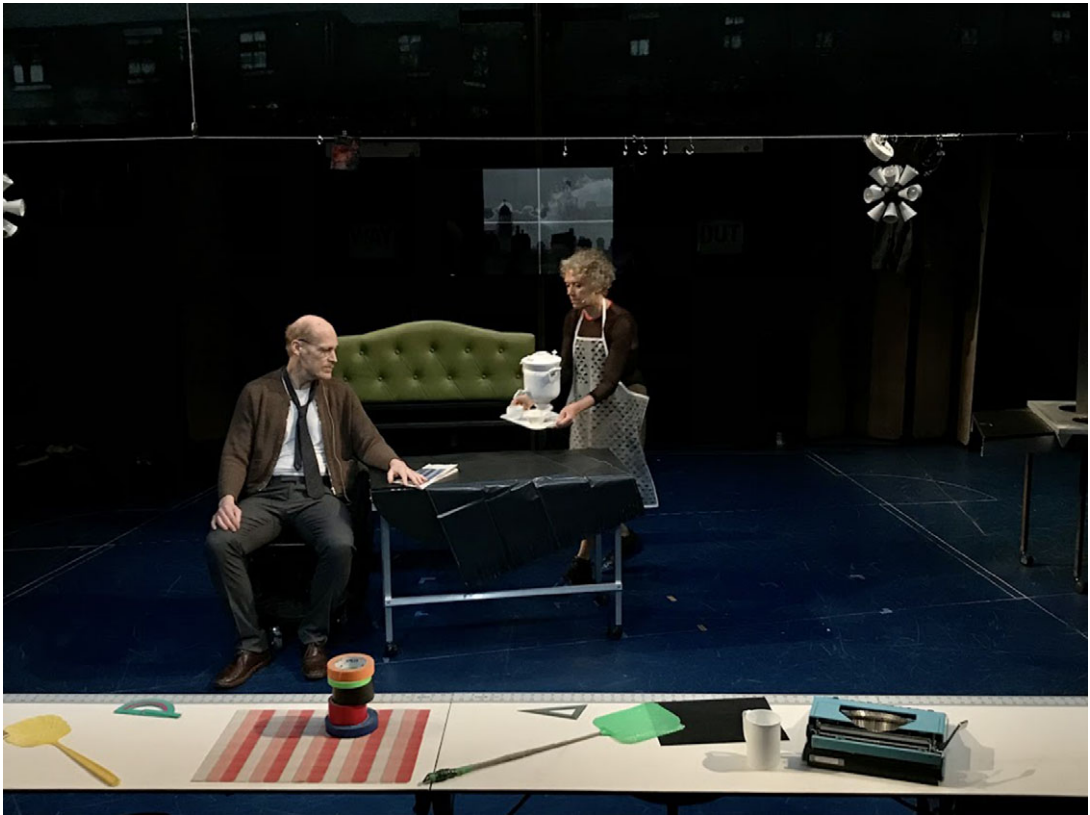


Figure 6. *The Mother* (rehearsal, 2020): Jim Fletcher and Kate Valk. Photo: Michaela Murphy and courtesy of The Wooster Group.

LeCompte I don't think he's running the show so much! I'm not sure what he's doing.

Valk He *is* the show. He *is* the show.

LeCompte Yeah, he's not running it. He *is* the show. Other people are running it, behind him.

Valk The people in the Senate. The Congress.

Brecht might be very relevant, in that context, don't you think?

LeCompte Well, I don't know. That's what I'm trying to find out.

What I wanted to kind of push you towards, maybe unfairly, is the question of whether this Trump-plus period has politicized you more, and that's why you started to think about Brecht?

LeCompte No, the answer is no, because we chose the Brecht about three or four years ago. I bring whatever is happening at the time to the piece that I'm working on, and it's not necessarily didactic. I try to figure out what the writer is saying and how it relates to me; and how to make people listen in a new way, as though it's not an old piece.

Valk Yeah, how to make people listen and not do a piece the way it's been done – not do a museum piece. You're looking for this style that liberates the text from the past style, and that's not always easy.

No, it's probably the hardest. What is attention-catching is how you have spoken of this as liberating the text from its past style. However, once you are liberating this text from what seems to have been, let's say, an established didactic style of

directing and performing Brecht, you probably are thinking that this bit is like now, like something that is happening today.

Valk By the time we get to that point, there's no separation. What you said – 'this bit is like now' – infers a separation between you and the text. I think the way Liz works is to get rid of that separation. We are the text. I think what we do oftentimes is go right to the way it was done, go right to the relic and just get in and find our way through. I don't think it's a process of rejection. I think it's a process of immersion and identifying with the way it's done . . .

LeCompte The way it was done originally.

Valk . . . And see how that's not us.

LeCompte And how it is – where it comes together. I don't think, when we're working, that I've got to get something that's us. I just have to get, like, Brecht. I have to get something that people can listen to and is enjoyable.

Valk It's a learning play, it's a *Lehrstück*. As a learning play you have to teach and entertain at the same time.

Well, I wasn't talking either about rejection or forced comparison, but simply about the recognition that might occur in the process of working. Then there's content – subject matter – which can spark recognition. There's a specific content in The Mother.

LeCompte Yes, but here's the problem with a lot of Brecht plays and with other people's plays that have a long history. Brecht rewrote it, and he wrote it with several people at the very beginning. He rewrote it at least three times. And he always tried to adjust it to what the situation was in Europe at the time. So yes, we do some adjusting to what the situation is in America at the time. But we're just copying *his* model for that. How he did that.

Fine, I get that you might be copying a model, but there's a theme in The Mother that's very important for Brecht and has resonance beyond Brecht.

LeCompte and Valk What is it?

It is political consciousness, and it was important for every time he reworked his text.

Valk Well, that's the whole story! It's the illiterate sixty-year-old woman who gets involved in the movement, in the struggle, because she didn't want her son to get arrested. And she doesn't ever turn back. She just keeps getting more involved.

That's right. But it is very much a journey of political awakening, isn't it?

Valk Definitely.

Right at the beginning, she doesn't want her son to work with these left-wing political people. Then she herself becomes associated with them and discovers what they are struggling for. Political awakening is a constant theme for Brecht and it remains a constant in every variation of The Mother that he did.

Valk Did you ever read the novel by Gorky?

Of course, and Gorky emphasizes how she learns to read, and becomes politically active. I don't know what you think about it, but I think it's a fantastic work.

Valk Oh, it's fabulous. It reminds me of single-shooter videos, meaning that the character of the mother in the Gorky novel is the point of view that you see all these characters from because of her being simple or illiterate – all the different kinds of people that are involved in the revolution. I just think it's fascinating. It's so cinematic – so much psychology, so much atmosphere. And then to see what Brecht distilled from it is very interesting.

How would you put that into words? What would you say he distilled?

LeCompte I would say that he had this incredible chicken, and he boiled it down. And then he picked out the bones and he cleaned off the bones and he put the bones back together again.

Valk Beautiful.

Yes, neatly put. I agree that it is cinematic in scope, but it is very close-up on detail in a finely attuned observation of how people grow and change. Well, you know that Gorky, at the time he wrote it, was connected to Lenin personally, as well as to the whole Bolshevik movement. Much of what he absorbs in this novel is from his own personal experience as a homeless man, an orphan who crossed Russia on foot, learning about social injustice as he went. If we're talking about Lehrstücke, here is a man who learns a lot – and he does it directly. So I'm just wondering whether that's part of what you two, as actor and director, are layering in together, with your technicians' own layering with whatever technology they might use.

Valk (to LeCompte) Are you layering in the Gorky at all?

LeCompte We'll see. I think I am, but in a new way.

I'd really like to see what this new way is. Will you tell me now in two words, or are you going to keep it a secret until I see it?

LeCompte No, I'm keeping it a secret. People will go, 'Oh she can't do that!' But I can, and I am going to.

Good. Is this whole new journey of yours with The Mother making you think differently about how you integrate elements? Let's put it this way: you work with technology as an integral part of your composition. It's not something added on, but part of your language. Would that be a right way to put it? Is this new journey with Brecht and Gorky, and whoever else you're going to layer in, making you think differently about your outlook on the world

and your theatre language, which is filled with different technological means, including TVs, monitors, cameras, films, earphones, voice recordings, tape fast-forwards, electronic jump-cuts – you name it!

LeCompte Hmm, not really, although I definitely am thinking that I'm right on the cusp of the end of a certain kind of theatre experience. If I were twenty years younger, I would have been in television or film. That would have been my choice – or a painter – but not theatre. I got into theatre because there was a small revival. It's like, you know, when somebody's dying and suddenly one day 'She just looked at me and her eyes were so clear and she got up and she danced, and I thought, she's getting better.' And the next day, she dies.

You know that story about the last energy that there was in the theatre in the 1960s and 1970s here in America, but also in Poland and other places. We are now on the downside of that energy; this kind of theatre is dying. We are only going on because we are so fecund with the work; we've had so much time to develop [and get] such expertise and a good feeling for how to keep a company together; and to how to make work that attracts people who come to us to work, when they could get work that pays a lot more. But we're a dying art. So I feel very free.

Sometimes I used to feel that I had to add things that made it more like normal theatre. They weren't giving me money from film, but they were giving me money from theatre, so I had to do things in a certain theatrical way. So I took a track around for a while, which was fascinating. I mean, I don't regret any of it. But now I feel I'm back to where I started and I don't owe anything to anybody.

It's going to be very hard for small theatres to make enough money in the economy that will be the same once we come back [after Covid] and even probably more so. Small artists who were individual in the world and made money by selling CDs – you can't do that any more because it's all free. Why would anybody want to buy their CDs any more? So that's going to be gone. A small base of artists

who work independently of a larger system is almost gone [already].

I don't have a bad feeling about that because I never really attached myself all that much to theatre, and I really enjoy film and video just as much as theatre, or more than theatre. It's just that I don't see us [The Wooster Group] as something that people should try to copy. I'd say, 'No, get off into the commercial world, or marry somebody with money.'

So you think that you have a finite kind of life as a small theatre group, before we come to the end, during or after Covid, of whatever it is that is coming to an end?

LeCompte Oh yes, because we have such a history. We have a life, and we are experts now because of a lot of different people in the company who gave their lives to it. Unfortunately, we are not treated as experts because [if we had been,] people might have followed us and might have done what we do. But we have not been rewarded for being experts. And that's a problem for people. Some young person who looks and sees that we're only making \$45,000 a year, and that we can't stay in New York [on that amount], is not going to follow [us].

Yeah, it's really tough. There is, however, another reward – the reward of having great achievements, of having been a beacon in the history of the theatre, which you are; and the rewards of having become stellar examples of commitment, honesty, and artistic integrity.

LeCompte Well, if I really thought about that, then I might become bitter. But I'm not bitter, and I don't think about it.

Valk I don't think about that either. It's funny. Also, it's very different in the theatre – people can't ever see the work again; it's live as it's meant to be seen when you see it.

LeCompte So we have nothing that proves its value.

But people who have seen it remember. Some of them, like me, write about live theatre, and they leave an archive behind for remembrance. You might find what I am about to say peculiar, but I also see this conversation as an archive for the future, so that the next generations who have not seen you can know who you are in the broad frame of the theatre – and perhaps of a kind of theatre that they may never know live; and also to help those who have seen your work to remember. There is such a thing as memory.

LeCompte That's what *A Pink Chair* was all about!

Valk Yeah, that's all great, but not when we're constantly scrambling, trying to raise enough money to finish the three things we would like to finish. The biggest one is *The Mother*. Then there's the Daniel Paul Schreber piece, and then another small piece in the works – *Untitled Toast Project* – with the young man, Eric Berryman, who was the centre of *The B-Side* [accompanied by and dependent upon Jasper McGruder and Philip Moore]. The big Wooster Group piece is *The Mother* – that's the most important thing. You know – we'll be happy if we can make it through the next . . .

LeCompte . . . nine months. Katie's doing a new piece as well.

Valk. It has one performer. We are giving personal money to make it happen. I haven't raised money for it yet.

I'm certainly not trying to downplay how tough it has been for you by referring to your achievements, but I don't think that their moral side – what can I call it? Their moral-spiritual-inspiring side? – can be shunted out of history.

Valk Well I hope it shows on our faces because, maybe then, when we walk out on the stage, people can sense that and we don't have to 'act' it. Maybe you'll be able to come to Vienna. If all things are possible, we should be opening *The Mother* in the last week of May at the Vienna Festival.

LeCompte I think the Vienna Festival is doing OK, but will they bring us, in such dire straits?

Valk The problem is, will they be able to pay for us to quarantine for two weeks?

LeCompte That's what I'm saying.

Valk Are Americans even going to be even allowed to travel to Europe?

I know that some festivals are organizing online events. I hear that the Paris Autumn Festival is planning to do that. The theatres are closed. I received notification from the Paris Opera two days ago that they were closing down again – this, after opening ticket sales for the coming new season.

Valk In Brussels . . . Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker said that they had closed down her company as well.

That's right, and they're closing the theatres down again in Germany. They're closing down the Schaubühne again after a brief try at distanced seating. Speaking of which – I know that Thomas Ostermeier is a great fan of The Wooster Group; he really does genuinely admire what you've achieved. Now there's an example of the moral-spiritual core as well as a spin-off of good work – work of integrity, no bluff – that I was talking about just now!

LeCompte Yes, I wish he could bring us out. It would be great to perform there.

Yes, but he's forced to close. I don't know that the European situation is necessarily going to look any better by May. Still, if you are going, I'll do my best to go, but I'd have to be quarantined too. The situation is really catastrophic. Who could have imagined this to happen on such a scale in our lifetime?

LeCompte Well, that's what's so interesting: there *were* a lot of people who did imagine it. There were a whole lot of people in the government, it turns out, who had ideas about how this was going to happen. It just

never got out into the press. And then, when Trump came in, he closed that whole area of science down. Obama had set up a whole agency just about pandemics.

Valk People saw this coming.

LeCompte We've just been learning about this in the last three months.

Valk One of the first things Trump did was to dismantle everything Obama had set up. One of Obama's big things was the assembly, or whatever he called the organization of scientists who were tracking and studying pandemics . . .

LeCompte . . . and making plans on how to control a pandemic. There were MERS and SARS and in Africa – Ebola in Africa. It was happening all over. But it hadn't come to the States.

Valk We're taking Tuesday off from rehearsal because two young women in the company are working at the polls on election day.

What happens at those polls and elections is going to affect everybody. It's not just an issue concerning the USA. I can't bear to think about.

LeCompte Nobody can, but everybody is.

Given the drift of our conversation on ends and endings, we probably should call it quits, but before we close down: I notice you are archiving, that you are thinking like me at the moment – archiving. I'm archiving about you for future generations, but you are archiving yourselves, aren't you, and I think you started doing this around 2018?

LeCompte Yes, *Since I Can Remember* [in progress] is an archival piece about the way we work. I wanted to go back and look at how we had originally made a piece called *Nayatt School* with Spalding Gray: it was his first monologue, actually. And we have nothing – no film or video of the piece because it

was made in 1977/78. There are little pieces of video that somebody came in and did, so I thought of putting them together and saying that you have to imagine what happened. I'll recreate the piece with people who are standing in for the people who were originally in the piece. Katie would lead us through, saying what was happening. She would take the Spalding role and lead us through how he made his monologue. Ari would take over Ron Vawter's part and Scott Shepherd would take over Spalding's part; we had a video of some parts of it with the children who were in it. I just re-cast it with people from the company, and we talked through it as an archival project. Katie takes us through her memory: she was there.

Valk Right, that's when I came to the group. I start talking about the time that overlapped with Spalding. It's kind of my personal history of coming to the Group inserted into Spalding's opening monologue, which was about his record collection and how he came to the theatre, and how he made *Nayatt School*. Then we recreate from T. S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, which Liz used in *Nayatt School* with children, Ron, Spalding, and Libby Howes and – hard to explain – we insert ourselves in that too. So it's a lot of talking about what happened in *Nayatt School*.

LeCompte At the same time, the layering is what's happening with us now. I named it *Since I Can Remember* because that's the only way we could do it. Katie talks about whatever she can remember, and I put in whatever I can remember. We videotaped the performance and did it for two weeks, I guess, basically for an invited audience. We videotaped those shows, and I sent one of them out to the T. S. Eliot estate, when I was asking them for rights. They wrote back saying, 'Yes, you can have the rights to do this,' and, not only that, they sent me the script for *Sweeney Agonistes*, saying, 'Please do this!'

It's so hard to do *Since I Can Remember*. I'd love to do it live, but the problem is that we can't perform it because of the pandemic.

Listen, I'm not complaining. I know we are very lucky because we have a history and are now experts, so I know we can continue. I'm just saying that it takes a long time to become an expert. And no one can take this kind of time any more. We have a history of work and have technique in us that cannot be gotten through a couple of pieces when you're young, which is all that people can do now. They can do two or three pieces, they get a good review somewhere, and they go off to TV because they can't make a living in the theatre. They don't become experts in the theatre. But I am an expert, and I will work until I die, and so will Kate.

I see young people who could make it in the theatre, but it's so much more important now to have money than it was when we were coming up, when it was fine to be poor. It's not any more. It's a shame thing for people now if they're not making money. That's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just the way it is. I was lucky to come up when money was not the most important thing.

It's the kind of thing that so many Black artists had to deal with. You see what Black painters were doing during that time on nothing: they were able to keep going and make beautiful work. It's just that the theatre needs a lot of people. There'll be a lot more art, but it won't be this kind of theatre, it won't be experimental art form. There'll be plenty of big shows, musicals, all that kind of thing.

Or, alongside the big musicals, there might be loads of online stuff – Zoom theatre.

LeCompte Absolutely, I think that's true. There are so many people who really go to the theatre because they want to see people live. A lot of people who are so upset about what's happening to theatre say they just crave seeing live people on the stage. So we'll see what happens with these people. There's already a lot of one-man shows, you know, and there'll be plenty of those. There'll be plenty of theatre. It's just gonna be very big and very commercial. I'm just postulating here. Who knows, who knows. Maybe everybody will suddenly want to make just

\$45,000 a year when they are seventy-eight and will really want to make experimental artwork. That's very possible.

We don't know. We just don't know. It's like those lines in The Three Sisters which you work off in Brace Up!: 'If only we knew, if only we knew.' Liz, that might be where we end it. Thank you, and you, Kate, so very much, and take care of yourselves.

LeCompte Perfect ending, one of my favourite lines, and they're my favourite characters. So thanks a lot. This was great, very pleasant. I had a great time and, you take care of yourself.

Coda

The editor is thrilled to report that in mid-April 2021 The Wooster Group received confirmation from the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) that it was opening its doors to the public. Kate Valk wrote in a personal email: 'It will be incredible to perform for an audience for the first time!' – a sentiment that would be echoed by performers and all other theatre people across the world. Performances of *The Mother*, discussed in the above Conversation, were for restricted numbers, but with an extended number of performances from 8 to 17 June. Well done, Vienna! And well done, The Wooster Group, for not giving up! Fabulous news for us all!