

FIELD OF MARS REVISITED:
THE OPERA-INSTALLATION-PERFORMANCE OF GALE GATES ET AL.

By

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Field of Mars Revisited: The Opera-Installation-Performance of Gale Gates et al.

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Field of Mars Revisited focuses on defunct site-specific performance-opera-installation company, Gale Gates et al. The company garnered a high level of notable reviews and funding over its lifetime, such as but not limited to: *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, *The National Endowment for the Arts*, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Gale Gates operated throughout New York City, internationally, as well as from its 40,000 square foot warehouse home in DUMBO (Directly Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) from approximately 1995 to 2001. The company was known for its large scale and spatially experimental productions, and was often inspired by great literary works and historical moments, such as *The Odyssey*, *The Inferno*, the invention of the camera, and the burning of Rome. This dissertation employs descriptive and analytical methodology, and is composed of historical research, production archives, and primary source interviews. Chapters are divided into 1) a description of the trajectory of the avant-garde leading up to the political/social/artistic climate of the period in which the company formed, 2-4) the formative years of the company and major works, 5-7) a discussion on the intersection of the visual arts, opera, and theoretical frameworks critical to the understanding of Gale Gates et al. and 8) a discussion of the company and its 21st century counterparts.

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	ix
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Need for Study	8
Literature Review.....	10
Methodology.....	12
Chapters and Organization	16
Final Note.....	19
2. THE TRAJECTORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE: SETTING THE TABLE FOR GALE GATES.....	21
Defining the Avant-Garde and Symbolist and Expressionist Movements.....	23
Riots, Chance and Dreams: Futurism, Dada-Surrealism & Antonin Artaud...32	
The Emergence of the American Avant-Garde.....	39
3. GALE GATES FORMATION AND EARLY WORKS.....	67
Early Works: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thailand, Japan and the Financial District.....	68
The DUMBO Warehouse.....	87
4. LANDING ON THE MAP: <i>FIELD OF MARS</i> AND <i>TILLY LOSCH</i>	106
<i>Field of Mars</i> Foundation and Dramaturgy.....	109
Details and Description.....	113
Critical Response.....	122
<i>Tilly Losch</i> : Inspiration, Details and Description.....	127
<i>Christina's World</i>	131
Critical Response.....	133

5. SPECTACLE, DANCE, TEXT AND THE CLASSICS: <i>1839</i> (1999) AND <i>SO LONG AGO I CAN'T REMEMBER</i> (2001).....	138
<i>1839</i> Dramaturgy.....	139
Critical and Company Response.....	146
<i>So Long Ago I Can't Remember: A Divine Comedy</i> Dramaturgy.....	152
Text and Dance.....	161
Critical Response.....	165
<i>Looking Forward</i>	170
6. ENGENDERING THE ARTS: THE VISUAL ARTS MODEL, THE EMERGING CURATOR AND SONIC VENTURE SERIES, AND COMPANY FESTIVITIES.....	173
Engendering the Arts.....	175
Roots, Resident Model and Design..	184
Company Series, Festivities and Closure.....	191
7. ASPIRING TO MUSIC: GALE GATES ET AL, THE WILSONIAN OPERA, AND CRITICAL RESPONSE.....	211
Wagner, Wilson and <i>Einstein on the Beach</i>	214
Critical Response.....	229
Aspiring to Music: GALE GATES and the Operatic Framework.....	234
The Counts-Diebes Model.....	237
8. LANDSCAPE THEATRE, THE EMANCIPATED SPECTATOR, AND <i>SLEEP NO MORE</i>	246
Landscape Theatre and the Sculptural Dramaturgy of GALE GATES et al.....	248
The Emancipated Spectator, Punchdrunk and GALE GATES et al.....	260

9. POST-GALE GATES AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE: ACCINOSCO, THE WOOSTER GROUP, AND PIG IRON THEATRE COMPANY.....	273
Gale Gates Contemporaries and Major Twenty-first Century Ensembles..	274
Cynthia Hopkins	276
The Wooster Group.....	283
Pig Iron Theatre Company.....	288
The Arts and Sustainability for the Twenty-first Century.....	297
10. CONCLUSION: “ <i>This Has Been A Very American</i> ”: Gale Gates Et Al. and Avant-Garde Theatre of the Early Twenty-First Century.....	304
Findings: GAle GAtes et al and the American Avant-Garde.....	310
WORKS CITED.....	316

List of Illustrations:

Figure 1:	GAlE GAtes et al. <i>90 degrees from the Equinox</i> . Archival Photo.	page 73
Figure 2:	DUMBO’S industrial past. This building sits adjacent to GAlE GAtes’ former warehouse. Photography: Sulaiha Bittar	89
Figure 3:	DUMBO, 2012. Photo.	90
Figure 4:	Staircase inside GAlE GAtes’ former entrance and gallery. Photo 2012.	92
Figure 5:	Stairs and columns inside GAlE GAtes’ former gallery and entrance. Photo.	93
Figure 6:	Scenic view of Manhattan from DUMBO. Photographer Sulaiha Bittar.	94
Figure 7:	Scenic view of Manhattan and bridge from window of Smack Mellon Studios, located near GAlE GAtes’ former warehouse. Photographer Sulaiha Bittar.	95
Figure 8:	Powerhouse Books, now located in GAlE GAtes’ former entrance and gallery space.	104
Figure 9:	Artist Craig McPherson. Courtesy of the Artist. <i>Field-of-Mars-Mezzo W</i> .	115
Figure 10:	GAlE GAtes et al. Archival photo. <i>Field of Mars</i> Living Room scene. Actors left to right, Beth Kurkjian, Anika Barkan, Ben Busch.	117
Figure 11:	Photo courtesy of Beth Kurkjian. <i>Field of Mars</i> . GAlE GAtes et al. Photo featuring Kurkjian, Ben Busch and Cynthia Hopkins	118
Figure 12:	<i>Field of Mars</i> . Archive Still. Living Room Scene. Kurkjian, Busch and Hopkins.	120
Figure 13:	Artist Craig McPherson. <i>The-Poet’s-Eye</i> . Image courtesy of the artist.	125
Figure 14:	Untitled (Tilly Losch) by Joseph Cornell, c. 1935. Construction and collage. 10 x 9¼x 2⅛ inches. Robert Lehrman Collection, Washington D.C.. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York. Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, DC	128
Figure 15:	GAlE GAtes et al. <i>Tilly Losch</i> . Photo courtesy of Beth Kurkjian, featured.	134
Figure 16:	The figure of Cornell’s <i>Tilly Losch</i> seen floating against the sky of <i>Christina’s World</i> . Archive still.	135
Figure 17:	GAlE GAtes et al. <i>1839</i> . Archival Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler.	141
Figure 18:	Rehearsal for <i>1839</i> . Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler	142

Figure 19:	GAle GAtes et al. <i>1839</i> . Kate Moran (featured). Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler.	147
Figure 20:	<i>1839</i> archival photo	149
Figure 21:	<i>1839</i> archival photo courtesy of Manju Shandler. Armadillo reveal.	151
Figure 22:	Pope Pious performed by Josh Stark. Archival photo. GAle GAtes et al. <i>So Long Ago I Can't Remember</i> .	157
Figure 23:	Craig McPherson. <i>Rehearsal</i> . Courtesy of the Artist.	169
Figure 24:	<i>Looking Forward</i> . Archive Photo. Artist Michael Counts.	171
Figure 25:	Photo of Michael Anderson, during the era of GAle GAtes courtesy of artist	172
Figure 26:	Artist Michael Anderson. "the attack of the 50' three graces." 6' x 15'. 2012 international street poster collage, vintage playboy centerfolds, album cover, postcard.	178
Figure 27:	Artist Tom Fruin. Image: <i>The Garden Shed</i> . Courtesy of the Artist.	182
Figure 28:	Artist Tom Fruin. Image: <i>Water Tower</i> . Courtesy of the Artist.	183
Figure 29:	Photo of resident artists' studio, courtesy of Michael Anderson	187
Figure 30:	Photo of artist build studio. Set pieces for <i>1839</i> shown here. Photo courtesy of Michael Anderson.	190
Figure 31:	Michael Anderson. Abstract Billboard, GAle GAtes et al. 2001. Photo courtesy of the artist.	192
Figure 32:	Emerging Curator Series. <i>Size Matters</i> . Courtesy of Michael Anderson	194
Figure 33:	According to the project summary, Mandle, in her first indoor multidisciplinary production, created several performance installations with innovative costumes, movement, and sound design within the project space of GAle GAtes' forty thousand square foot industrial warehouse (2001)	197
Figure 34:	<i>Poet's Eye</i> . Artist Craig McPherson. Image courtesy of the Artist.	199
Figure 35:	Emerging Curator Series. <i>Size Matters</i> . Courtesy of Michael Anderson.	200
Figure 36:	Helga Davis and Kate Moran perform in the 2012 <i>Einstein on the Beach</i> revival, "Knee Play 2." © Lucie Jansch 2012	220
Figure 37:	The inner pyrotechnics of the 2012 <i>Einstein on the Beach</i> "Spaceship." © Lesley Leslie-Spinks 2012	223

Figure 38:	A young boy (Jasper Newell) stands suspended in the first act, “Train.” © Lucie Jansch 2012	224
Figure 39:	<i>Einstein on the Beach</i> 2012, “Trial.” © Lucie Jansch 2012	228
Figure 40:	<i>Moses in Eygpt.</i> New York City Opera. Director Michael Counts. Photo Courtesy of John Wyszniwski. Photography by Carol Rosegg. 24	243
Figure 41:	<i>Moses in Eygpt.</i> New York City Opera. Director Michael Counts. Photo Courtesy of John Wyszniwski. Photography by Carol Rosegg.	245
Figure 42:	Sample of Counts’ miniature box sculpture	257
Figure 43:	<i>Must Don’t Whip ‘Um</i> text & music: Cynthia Hopkins; set, video, & production design: Jeff Sugg & Jim Findlay; lights: Jason Boyd; sound: Jim Dawson with Jamie McElhinney; costumes: Tara Webb; choreography: Cynthia Hopkins, with help from Diane Madden, Annie B Parson, and Jordana Che Toback; directorial consultation: DJ Mendel and Brooke O’Harra	278
Figure 44:	Jeff Sugg design for Moisés Kaufman’s <i>33 Variations</i> Broadway 2009. La Jolla Playhouse 2008. Arena Stage (D.C.) 2007. sets: Derek McLane; lights: David Lander; costumes: Janice Pytel sound: Andres Pluess; wigs: Chuck LaPointe	282
Figure 45:	Actor James Sugg in Pig Iron Theatre Company’s <i>Chekhov Lizardbrain</i>	291
Figure 46:	Pig Iron Theatre Company Media Photo for <i>Twelfth Night</i>	294

Chapter One: Introduction

Field of Mars Revisited

Gale Gates et al. was a major opera-installation-performance company that operated throughout New York City, internationally, and out of their 40,000 square foot warehouse home in DUMBO (Directly Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), Brooklyn, from approximately 1995 to 2001.¹ While the company garnered a high level of notable reviews and funding over its lifetime, its recognition was largely limited to the New York avant-garde circles of the late 90's. This was due to both the remote geography and site-specific nature of company work, as well as its largely experimental form.² However, Gale Gates' visual and sonic arts driven model, together with the large scale vision of artistic director Michael Counts, centers it as an important artifact of the twentieth century experimental theatre landscape. In my dissertation, I ask, "*Who was Gale Gates and how was their work important to the American avant-garde theatre?*"³

The company itself consisted of a small number of core members, some of whom entered the company in its later and more established years, and many of whom have gone on to major international recognition. Company co-founders, artistic director Michael Counts and choreographer/actress Michelle Stern, met through mutual liaison and actor/scholar John

¹ While the formal name of the company is "GAle GAtes et al.," it will be alternately referred to by its formal name or simply "GAle GAtes" over the course of the dissertation.

² Site-specific theatre is work created to be specifically performed for a singular playing space or location, and adapts to the unique architectural or geographical details of the space, and may or may not overtly address any historical or particular significance of that playing space. See Chapter I for a more in-depth discussion.

³ Avant-garde is a complex term originally designated as military terminology for the front of the guard, and has come to be associated with art and art movements working deliberately outside of the mainstream, with a primary emphasis on original form. See Chapter I for a more in-depth discussion and definition (Berghaus 35).

Oglevee during Counts early site-specific experiments in Prague, and soon after created their first piece on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1995. Following this success, they formally created the company. Throughout the company lifetime and according to various members, Counts spearheaded company works in the conception, writing, design and direction of the large scale productions. The name GAle GAtes was inspired by Count's grandmother, whose support was foundational to his love and pursuit of the arts:

She was a brilliant woman. Spoke eight languages. Extremely cultured. But it was her relationship to paintings that was my introduction to the visual arts as a child. She inspired me with this idea that at the most fundamental level the idea of making art is giving a gift. A celebration. It should elevate us. Even if it can be dark and cerebral, it's still this idea of putting your hand out, this "let me show you something beautiful and challenging." The core tenants of what is my aesthetic and what I think about art and my relationship with it is derived from my relationship with her, so naming the company after her was a very logical thing to do. What she thought art was, was going to be ever foundational to what the company did. (Counts 19 September 2012)

Visual artists Tom Fruin, Michael Anderson, lighting designer Jason Boyd and designer Jeff Sugg were also integral to company production, as well as resident composer Joseph Diebes, who created complete audio landscapes for each production, with the exception of *Tilly Losch*, as well as neighboring designer/director Jim Findlay. Actors Anika Barkan, Brian Bickerstaff, Cynthia Hopkins, Beth Kurkjian, Kate Moran and Josh Stark functioned as core ensemble actors, and worked closely with a large cast of guest performers over the course of the company trajectory, such as Peter Jacobs, who formerly worked with director Reza Abdoh, and Tom

Walker of the Living Theatre.⁴ Many of these performers and contributing artists have since launched their artistic careers on nationally-recognized levels, and continue to work with mega-companies and directors such as but not limited to: The Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson.

GAle GAtes et al. received grants from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the New York Asian Cultural Council early in its career, allowing for site-specific work in the financial district, as well as Butoh training and production work at Min Tanaka's Body Weather Farm in Japan. In 1996, the company was given the 40,000 square ground floor of a remote warehouse in the then hazardous area of DUMBO, Brooklyn, through the generosity and vision of development family, the Walentas. In exchange for the free rent, the company was to transform the then unpopulated and crime-infested area of DUMBO into a cultural beacon, which they accomplished by housing not only their own productions, but also by hosting various exhibits, festivities and artistic events. While the company created many works over the duration of their lifespan, productions *Field of Mars*, *Tilly Losch, 1839*, and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember* signify GAle GAtes most monumental works before its closing in 2003.

The company housed two resident artists, Fruin and Anderson, who together with Sugg, as well as puppeteer Manju Shandler, would help execute Count's visions through design and mechanical engineering. This was in exchange for free studio space which allowed the artists room to grow their own signature aesthetic. Production dramaturgy and direction was developed by Michael Counts, who melded the personal, the historical and classical in abstract visually-driven works. These productions were animated by the total sound-score of composer Joseph

⁴ The Living Theatre is an American theatre company and icon. The company was founded in 1947 by Judith Malina and Julien Beck and has traveled extensively worldwide. See Chapter Two for more details on the Living Theatre and the work of Reza Abdoh.

Diebes and the physical vocabulary of the trained acting ensemble. The physical playing space of the DUMBO warehouse was reinvented for each production, allowing for a promenade audience experience unique to each show, where spectators were often invited to walk through the multi-focus installation environment created by Counts and company. For those productions borrowing the proscenium and seated audience structure, the company played with the spatial dynamics of the warehouse through the use of multiple false walls, turn-tables and wheeled sets, which were in turn animated by Diebes' sound score and Counts' imagery.

The effect was in essence a lyrical and immersive experience, described by composer Joseph Diebes as a "360 Sensorium" (1 March 2012), which in turn speaks to philosopher Susanne Langer's definition of art as "an expressive form created for our perception through sense or imagination, and what it expresses is human feeling." Langer defines feeling itself as to be taken in the broadest sense, "meaning everything that can be felt, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-ones of a conscious human life" (15). According to their mission statement, GAle GAtes was a performance company dedicated to fully engaging the spectator through the visual, textual and sonic elements, and to challenging the diverse relationships between performers, audience, and site, thereby exploring Langer's definition of art through multiple vehicles. Their interdisciplinary productions borrowed from dance, music, painting, sculpture, literature and theatre. GAle GAtes' mission was to expand the definition of performance through highly imagistic and non-linear multi-disciplinary performance. The company created site-specific and spectacle-based promenade theatre, with a commitment to challenging audience expectation and merging the sculptural and performing arts. In line with GAle GAtes' mission to "[create] a new dynamic ... of theatre, visual art and new music," the company fostered

breakthrough artists through two programs: the Emerging Curator Series and the Sonic Adventure Series, which dually helped guide a new generation of professional artists into being.

GAle GAtes was known for its large scale and spatially experimental productions, and was often inspired by great literary works and historical moments, such as *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, the invention of the camera, and the burning of Rome. It served as a cultural beacon in the remote terrain of DUMBO, Brooklyn in the late 90's and signified new ventures in art and performance. The company, however, remains largely unknown, as it was physically tied to its locale and the site-specific nature of its company mission.

Because company work was largely abstract and visually-driven, GAle GAtes et al. were often found difficult to classify. Critic Peter Marks from *The New York Times*, for example, described the company as “an adventurous troupe with one foot in the world of post-modern art and the other in downtown performance,” later noting that the company “[did] not lend itself easily to categorization” (*Carnival*).⁵ Conversely, in his review, “Drama on the Move” in *Art in America* journal, critic and art historian Douglas Davis described company productions as “a sprawling work ...brilliantly imploded, at once by its acting and technology,” and wrote that “the era of extended artist’s theater is upon us” (67-9) as a response to their work. According to Counts himself:

Some people wanted my work to be something that it wasn't. They wanted it to be visually beautifully and sublime and complicated and immersive and experiential; and to

⁵ In his book, *American Avant-Garde: A History*, scholar Arnold Aronson defines the downtown aesthetic as “a subgenre typified by an edgy, glossy hip style with elements of the grotesque and perhaps a slightly jaded, distanced, ironic attitude or point of view” (207).

tell a nice story. That just wasn't interesting to me My approach is I'm proposing something, I'm exploring something. I'm throwing out questions.⁶ (19 September 2012)

GAle GAtes functioned under an aesthetic driven by the visual arts and strong foundation avant-garde theatre history, as opposed to dramaturgical cohesive narrative, which was troubling to some.

According to scholar Dabney Townsend, in his book: *Aesthetics, Classic Readings from the Western Tradition*, aesthetics can be described as the human experiences and feelings produced in response to art and beauty. Aesthetics is considered a modern term, and entered philosophical vocabulary during the 18th century as a means of articulating these roles. As a field, its subject matter includes the arts, the range of our sensitive responses to our world, and the values that we place on both (Intro vii). The fundamental tenet of 20th century aesthetics is that it is in the domain of personal experience and innately subjective (345). Aesthetic feeling is compared to an ideal state of fused intellect and feeling and is essentially understood as a pleasant emotion (348-51).⁷ It is also described as giving the reader/viewer a sense of immediacy that allows one to feel fully present in the moment; this seems to suggest that the aesthetic experience is one of total engrossment, and that its "pleasant feeling" is related to that of fascination (347). Townsend describes aesthetics as a "quality of experience" that is arrived at when the world is experienced "without theoretical bias," suggesting that the immersive quality of aesthetic experience allows spectator to forego ego in a fusion with the artistic experience itself (346).

⁶ According to Dabney Townsend, the sublime can be defined as the experience of awe and greatness brought on by what is observed (370).

⁷ Townsend calls this "ideal mind."

The aesthetics of GAle GAtes' works, led by the vision of Michael Counts, was largely abstract in its lack of narrative. This open and suggestive aesthetic is also characteristic of the avant-garde, one of whose key characteristics includes the primary activation of the spectator, so that the audience functions as "co-producer" in lieu of objective experience, and who must "resynthesize the fragmented reality exhibited in the artwork through an active engagement with its form and content" (Berghaus 45). Rather than providing an over-arching chronological story that would unfold over the course of production, GAle GAtes' work explored content imagistically and thematically, and would allow for multiple audience perspectives to emerge, not unlike the experience of the museum or gallery-goer. According to performer Beth Kurkjian, the dynamic of audience to production was also meta-based, explaining that production aesthetic would ask spectators to cultivate their own meaning, and in doing so reflect on the personal significance of his or her interpretation, thereby providing room for self-discovery. According to Langer, subjectivity is a critical aspect of the art experience and may lead to self-knowledge, which she defines as "insight into all phase of life and mind [which] spring from artistic imagination [and which] is the cognitive value of the arts" (71). Writing on the fluidity of emotion and its relationship to subjectivity, she notes that:

The ways we are moved are as various as the lights in a forest; and they may intersect, sometimes without canceling each other, take shape and dissolve, conflict, explode into passion or be transfigured. All the inseparable elements of subjective reality compose what we call the "inward life" of human beings. (22)

The ambiguity embedded in GAle GAtes' works was, however, arguably problematic for those seeking a literary backbone or traditional dramatic conflict.

The company closed for various reasons, one of which was not lack of following, but lack of sustainability. Despite the rising financial success of GALE GATES, such as its two month run of *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, the administrative responsibility of keeping the space fully functioning, as well as the reality of personal financial struggle became overwhelming to many. Indeed, the story of GALE GATES is as much an ode to the ethos of hard work as it is to artistic integrity. The end result of company closure, whatever the varied reasons, is a lack of permeating recognition, which is an issue this dissertation seeks to rectify.

Need For Study

A lacuna exists in scholarship as pertains to company contribution to the late twentieth century avant-garde theatre landscape. The company garnered notable reviews and funding over its lifetime, such as but not limited to: *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Greenwell Foundation and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. However, company work remains largely unknown by artists outside of the 1990's New York decade in which the work was formed. This is due to the specialized geography of company work and its inability to tour its site-specific productions, as well as the minimal coverage the company received outside of its loyal sphere.

While the company originally performed internationally, the company's major productions were site-specific in nature, which does not typically allow for national tours. The spatial energy and geographic or architectural details of a site-specific playing space typically cannot be replicated. For this reason, that being the technical incapacity of a site-specific group

to tour its productions, GAle GAtes predominately drew local New York audiences as opposed to garnering a global one, whose growth may in turn have attracted more media exposure.⁸ Further, GAle GAtes' warehouse home and the dramatic experiments allowed within that space were equally inimitable. The technical needs and funding of a tour would have been potentially astronomical, and the environmental production layouts were particular to the large warehouse playing space. Among the idiosyncratic elements of the warehouse from which Counts devised his work were numerous columns made of reinforced concrete, a ramp, and two enormous rooms, one of which was 120 feet by 80 feet. Some of the set designs constructed for the particular dimensions of the space included steel bridges, false prosceniums, and a lake. Thus, in addition to the high technological demands of GAle GAtes' productions, each performance was tailored to the specific dimensions of the playing space itself. This intricate site-specific component made tours impossible, and in effect reduced company exposure to prospective audience, sponsors, critics and academics on both a national and international scale.

Additionally, the elusive genre of the company complicated the process of documentation. The theatre critics' aim is to largely inform the reading audience as to production expectations, as opposed to classification. Without the ability to classify a work of art, a critic is unable to define his or her audience, which in effect defies the process of the art review. Company grant writer Kit Baker noted that what Michael Counts was after was "to create a total work of art. It's not theatre, it's not dance. The critics couldn't pigeonhole us" (27 February 2012). Conversely, academics approaching the company did so primarily through the lens of the Theatre of Images, namely, through the work of directors Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Reza Abdoh. These reviewers focused on contextualizing the company through the

⁸ *The New York Times* predominantly reviewed the work of GAle GAtes, as did *Time Out*, *The Village Voice*, local Brooklyn newspapers, and art journals *Art in America* and *Art Forum*.

legacy of these modern auteur directors, as opposed to analyzing the individuation of GALE GATES' contributions.

In collective effect, the company did not have the opportunity to blossom into national recognition before its fold, and any lingering significance it played to the artists and audience who came in its contact has been blurred by time. Despite the significance of its artistic impact and notable funding and reviews, the company's work remains uncharted in the academic theatre landscape. There has been no comprehensive or chronological overview of the company, nor cohesive assessment of its work as a whole. Rather, the company work survives in fragmented memories, anecdotes, scratchy VHS recordings and fading periodicals. This company merits study because of its unique model and bold and visionary form.

Literature Review

A number of keystone texts allowing for the contextualization and unpacking of GALE GATES from a historical lens are: Arnold Aronson's *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, which is an exploration of the avant-garde American landscape; and Gunter Berghaus' *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde*, which also serves as an essential book for understanding the historical trajectory, definition and implications of the avant-garde. Roselee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* is a helpful, comprehensive look at the trajectory of the avant-garde through the lens of performance art, while Bonnie Marranca's eloquent *Theatre of Images* allows for a vivid understanding of the New York experimental theatre of the 1970's and the particular exploration of the visual, sonic and performance worlds through the Theatre of Images framework. Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical*

Introduction also explores experimental performance history, while Richard Kostelanetz's set of interviews in *The Theatre of Mixed-Means* addresses fluctuations and experiments in the New York theatre of the 1960's.

The work of Robert Wilson and Reza Abdoh are essential to help contextualize Counts' vision from a more immediate historical and dramaturgical lens. Select examples of literature to be used towards the study include but are not limited to *Robert Wilson: The Theater of Images*, with interviews and editorial by John Rockwell and published by the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, as well as *Robert Wilson*, edited by Franco Quadri, Franco Bertoni and Robert Sears, and a most recent publication, *Robert Wilson*, by Margery Safir. *Reza Abdoh*, edited by Daniel Mufson as part of the "Art + Performance" book series by editors Gautam Dasgupta and Bonnie Marranta, traces the work and career of this artist through various essays and criticisms. Michael Rush's *Italicized Monsters and Beached Whales* is perhaps the most vivid and detailed written account of a GALE GATES' production from an academic lens, and is helpful in unpacking *1839*, as is art historian and critic Douglas Davis' *Drama on the Move* in his analysis of *Field of Mars*.

From a theoretical lens, the writings of Wagner, primarily essays, "Music of the Future" and "Art and Revolution" will be utilized in response to GALE GATES' mission of the total art or "Gesamtkunstwerk," as well as Marvin Carlson's *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, which uses models from architecture to show how a theatre building and its location within a city reflect society's attitudes and concerns and in turn reflects GALE GATES' unique setting. Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* is important to this study for his discussion on the subversion of the text and privileging of performance space and mise en scene and its theoretical influence on GALE GATES. Three texts related to the notion of landscape theatre, a Gertrude Stein concept for the theatre, which according to Dasgupta inspired Counts

himself, are: Stein's 1935 lecture, "Plays;" Una Chaudhari and Elinor Fuch's volume, *Land/Scape/Theory*; and philosopher Jacques Ranciere's lecture and writing on his notion of the emancipated spectator. Finally, Susanne K. Langer's *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* also allows a deepened introductory understanding of the role of aesthetics in art.

Methodology

This dissertation employs descriptive and analytical methodology, and utilizes historical research, production archives, and primary source interviews. Primary research will include interviews with key company collaborators, audience members, supporting theatre company and established scholars. Among these individuals are co-founders Michael Counts and Michelle Stern, integral design and visual-arts members Tom Fruin, Michael Anderson and Jeff Sugg; composer Joseph Diebes, performers Brian Bickerstaff, Kate Moran and Tom Walker, as well as *PAJ* co-founder and Counts' personal mentor, Gautam Dasgupta, and other company members or visiting artists. Scholars Bonnie Marranca and Marvin Carlson, as well as Brooklyn Academy of Art executive producer Joseph Melillo generously agreed to share statements or engage in interviews regarding GALE GATES. These collective interviews will help provide insight into the development of the company, its mission production detail, and relevant anecdotes. Michael Anderson, Joseph Diebes, Tom Fruin, Manju Shandler, Craig McPherson and Beth Kurkjian have generously provided archival footage, paintings, photographs and recordings. Various company members have also shared archival photos from their current success, such as but not limited to: designer Jeff Sugg, sculptural artist Tom Fruin, and performer Cynthia Hopkins.

Personal interviews, embodied experience, critical response and archival video and images were employed in the gathering of information. Through this methodology, I've attempted to piece together as cohesive an image as possible of these productions through the haze of my and others' memory, wherein the dreamscape quality of Gale Gates has been altered and reshaped according to personal recollection, thereby entering yet another stage of surrealism. I myself attended two Gale Gates' productions, those being *wine-blue-open-water* and *Field of Mars* as well as a BAM gala event hosted at the space during my time as a New York University undergraduate. Although I was saturated in a similar aesthetic of physically-driven non-linear works during my studies at the Experimental Theatre Wing, as well as in the edgy East Village theatre of the 1990's, I had not previously, nor since, encountered work of Gale Gates' scale and sensorial-drive. While precise details of my experiences may have blurred over time, nearly two decades later I entered this study with the innate certainty that Gale Gates' work and presence was important to the trajectory of the American avant-garde, which extensive interviews and archival research validate.

Gathering material towards this study proved challenging. Gale Gates' work predominantly emerged pre-digital age, and the abrupt company close led to the loss of many of their archives. The library which I was directed to was no longer in possession of company program notes, and I was told the only two video files in existence were initially stored as dance archives in the Lincoln Center Library before (after some apparent confusion) being transferred to the theatre division. The personal difficulty encountered by members at time of company close led to the loss of those archives that were made and stored. According to various members, a documentary maker filmed both the rehearsal and final production of *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, later "disappearing down the rabbit hole" (Counts 19 September 2012), leaving raw

footage with one of the actors who was unable to share it with me for this study. It is thanks to Michael Anderson, Beth Kurkjian, Manju Shandler and others that I have been able to access what little archival footage is extant.

It seems appropriate that the last of the company's major works was titled *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, as this seemed a gracious refrain from many company members struggling to locate details of the abstract precious work taken place over a decade ago. Other members also felt opposed to narrative discussion of the company work, while other entities, such as the Lincoln Center Library inadvertently hampered this study through hardline policies, such as that the two archival PR videos of company work could under no circumstance be copied for union reasons, and which I was permitted only one viewing of each video in a policy so stringent that (as verbally expressed to me) would only be allowed once over the course of my lifetime. If not for Michael Anderson, who was able to share a number of archives and a dossier of program notes and documents committed to the Emerging Curator and Sonic Series, I would have little hard archival evidence to demonstrate the potency of company work.

It is not only production work that I have attempted to detail over the course of this study, but also the tremendous collaborative effort and visionary quality of Counts' theatrical makings, and namely the spirit of ensemble artistic gusto and process. Over the course of the study, a revelation occurred: GAle GAtes was in many ways as much a movement and representation of an idealized and romantic spirit of the arts and artistic commune as it was a theatrical force. To this, the documentation of process and product are embedded in my methodology, and I have done my utmost to optimally present the work and its context.

My research was partially funded by the University of Colorado at Boulder Graduate School Beverly Sears Dissertation grant, which allowed me to travel to New York for the purpose of revisiting the DUMBO warehouse space, since transformed into a parking lot, Sovereign Bank and Powerhouse Books, as well as to the Lincoln Center Library for the study of rare company footage. This funding also allowed me the viewing and subsequent writing on two significant avant-garde productions, those being the 2012 revival of Robert Wilson's landmark opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, and British company Punchdrunk's commercial hit, *Sleep No More*.

In a personal interview, director Michael Counts described a vital section of his artistic life as "bracketed" by Robert Wilson's landmark opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (19 September 2012). Counts' early work was also largely influenced by Wilson before finding his own signature style, and he was at times pegged as a Theatre of Images director. Former GALE Gates' core actress Kate Moran performed in the female lead role originally created by Lucinda Childs in the 2012 production revival. For these reasons, part of my historical research entails a production study of that revival. *Sleep, No More*, an immersive dance-theatre experience arrived after GALE Gates, and parallels its focus on the subversion of language and spatial dynamics, as it is performed in a 100,000 square foot playing space.

From a historical and theoretical lens, I hope to situate GALE Gates in the landscape of the avant-garde through an extensive examination of its trajectory and definition, as well as the more immediate cultural atmosphere of the American avant-garde in the early 90's and its foundational role in the emergence of GALE Gates.

Chapters and Organization

The dissertation is divided into *Chapter Two: Setting the Table*, which is a descriptive chapter detailing the emergence of the avant-garde and its definition. It is a study of 20th century movements and innovators whose contribution to the performing arts landscape laid a foundation for GALE GATES' work to emerge. The following Chapter, *GAle GATES' Formation and Early Works* establishes the key players of the company; including its founders, core company members and associative designers, and the development of the company from a three person installation-performance troupe into that of a large ensemble working in the 40,000 square foot Brooklyn warehouse, given to them in a sign of generous patronage by the Walentas family development team. This chapter documents the initial meeting of the founders in Prague, Czechoslovakia, their continued site-specific work, and transition into permanent indoor staging and relevant works. This chapter also documents the perseverance and financial struggles of company members during the early years.

Chapter Four: Landing on the Map details the company's first two major works while in residence at the DUMBO space. These works are *Field of Mars*, inspired by Tacitus' account of the burning of Rome; *Tilly Losch*, titled after Joseph Cornell's shadow box sculpture of the famous Balanchine ballerina. *Chapter Five: Reconfiguring the Classics:* is a discussion of the company's final two major works, *1839* (1999) named after the year of the invention of the camera; and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember (2001)*, a re-imagining of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* through the vehicle of a large scale opera-installation performance.

Chapter Six: Engendering the Arts: The Visual Arts Model, The Emerging Curator and Sonic Venture Series, and Company Festivities as its name suggests, details the essential

contribution of the visual arts world in the making of GAle GAtes' productions and reputation. Over time, the company became equally engaged in both the theatrical and contemporary art world through its use of highly charged visually-driven works, which often referenced both contemporary and classical painting and sculptures in its set design and imagery. Although Counts acted as primary artistic director in the conception and direction of the works, the company also consisted of artists whose visual sensibilities and labor-intensive efforts were integral to production success. GAle GAtes also became known as a leading force in the emerging arts world through its fostering of new voices in its *Emerging Artist* curator series and other exhibits, conceived by Brooklyn Academy of Music Executive Director, Joseph Melillo, who served as a major supporter and influence in company development. This chapter also address the close of the company due to a complex variety of reasons, primarily that of financial support; as well as the ongoing success of members in the respective worlds of theatre, opera and visual arts.

Chapter Seven: GAle GAtes as Opera looks at opera as a helpful framework for appreciating GAle GAtes' work. Wagner's influential concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is explored, with a focus on the groundbreaking work of Robert Wilson, his immediate influence on Counts, and a specific look at the landmark work, *Einstein on the Beach*. Critical reception of experimentation in American opera and the avant-garde theatre is also discussed, as well as the fundamental compositions of GAle GAtes resident composer Joseph Diebes.

Chapter Eight: Landscape Theatre and the Immersive Aesthetic, Gertrude Stein's concept of "landscape theatre" through her 1935 lecture "Plays" will be addressed, as well as its immediate relevancy to GAle GAtes, with a primary focus on Counts' use of miniature box sculptures as a dramaturgical tool and GAle GAtes resident composer Joseph Diebes' concept of

music as sonic weather. Additionally, *Sleep No More* will be explored in its use of the immersive production frame, similar to landscape theatre. The theoretical means of analyzing such work from audience perspective, specifically that of French philosopher Jacques Ranciere's concept of the emancipated spectator, is studied.

The final chapter, *Chapter Nine: Contemporaries and Continuing Innovators* is a study of those experimental theatre companies and key individuals who formed around the time of GALE GATES' inception and whose continued work overlapped with Counts and company. Those specific companies to be addressed are the Wooster Group, who worked closely with select GALE GATES' members, such as Stern, Anderson, Fruin, Sugg and others, over the course of company trajectory and its close. The Wooster Group continues to have an international following and has created a presence in the experimental arts world and its legacy, continued work and overlap with GALE GATES members will be addressed. Pig Iron Theatre Company, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is acknowledged as one of the most critical experimental theatre companies today. Company work has been lauded by periodicals and peer-reviewed journals, including extensive coverage in *American Theatre Magazine*, *Theatre Journal*, *The Drama Review*, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and has garnered significant awards, grants and recognition from institutions such as but not limited to The Pew Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and a 2010 USA Knight Fellowship, as well as various awards in theatre excellence from New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere. Pig Iron was founded in 1995, the same year as GALE GATES trio Counts, Stern and Ogelevee sparked the company, and various members collaborated over the trajectory of both companies and past GALE GATES' close. Former GALE GATES member Cynthia Hopkins is considered a premier

experimental performer of the 21st century and her work and continued collaboration with other former GAle GAtes members in her Accinosco band will be discussed.

In conclusion, the objective of this study is to document the work and contribution of now defunct site-specific opera-installation-performance company, GAle GAtes et al., in response to the question, “*Who was GAle GAtes and how was their work important to the American avant-garde theatre?*” The methodology used in response to this inquiry is descriptive and analytical, with a focus on primary source material and supporting documentation relating to archival material and critical analysis. Company close, characteristics, and the 21st century experimental performance landscape will be included in this study. GAle GAtes et al. signified the development of a non-narrative theatre, highly pictorial and visceral in performance style, whose warehouse space, conjunct with the dynamic vision of artistic director Michael Counts and the devoted talent of its members, allowed for the development of its work. As BAM executive director Joseph Melillo notes in an interview, the company “was ahead of its time” and ultimately collapsed due to economic factors and the inability of company to tour. A need for study thus exists in the documentation of this prodigious group and their essential contribution to the New York performance landscape of the late 20th century, as they would otherwise fall into obscurity.

Final Note

In the following pages, I have done my best to acknowledge and credit those individuals who seemed to have made the greatest impact through years of commitment to and moral and artistic support of GAle GAtes as well as those companies most intrinsically related to its history or

collaborative structure. I acknowledge the omission of any related artist or individual is not a reflection of his or her work, but is rather based on the wealth of people, histories and select information allotted to me. It seems to me that in the context of GAle GAtes' near decade run, and the myriad of people that crossed its path, it is possible that many people touched by or who touched the company directly may not be included as part of this study. While I recognize that my own subjectivity logically informs my writing, that the exclusion of any one artist, company or individual is again not reflective of the American avant-garde, or its past or future manifestations. Rather, I here attempt in the most comprehensive and respectful means possible to acknowledge those who made the most immediate impact on the subject of my study based on the information made available to me.

Chapter Two

The Trajectory of the Avant-Garde: Setting the Table For GALE GAtes

The modern avant-garde is a complex genre of art with historical roots spanning the twentieth century. Generally speaking, the avant-garde privileges form over content, oftentimes incorporating fragmentation of style as a response to a disintegrating world view, championing originality and the subversion of dominant ideologies over tradition. “The avant-garde was a product of the romantic sensibility,” writes scholar Arnold Aronson in *The American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*:

It grew in part out of a belief in a utopian future arrived at through a spiritual quest led by those inspired individuals who forged new paths or tore down the old structures of society. (205)

The major movements associated with the European avant-garde are Symbolism, which spoke to a theatre of poetic mood in a thrust away from two dimensional staging towards a theatre of mood; Futurism, which prized technical innovation, speed and provocation; the Dadaists and Surrealists whose use of chance practice and interest in the subconscious and the dream are often paired;⁹ the theories of visionary Antonin Artaud who called for a radical reconceptualization of performance as a reaction to naturalism; Expressionism, with a focus on emotional pathos, the body and atmosphere; and the Bauhaus which was not so much a movement but a school concerned with visual and architectural innovation, run by artist/designer Oskar Schlemmer.

⁹ According to Anderson, “chance” describes a method of composition while “indeterminacy” describes the accidental results (33). Cage, for example, used dice or coin flips to eliminate deliberate compositional input.

During World War II, the Nazi invasion of Europe led to the expulsion of many of these avant-garde artists, who fled to America and New York. According to Aronson:

America was the land of the quest, the search for innocence and the ideal in opposite to the corruption and decay of the old world a land of endless bounty and ever-receding frontiers. In such a land, hope was eternally renewable by simply picking up and starting over Out of this ... vision of the idyllic paradise came the frontier spirit, in which outcasts could be transformed into rugged and intrepid individuals – the explorer searching for new horizons, seeking and forging his own path In a peculiar way, then, “Americanism” and “avant-gardism” were one and the same Avant-garde as a metaphor was unnecessary in a land where the folk heroes were a true avant-garde. (12)

Among the many significant practitioners and movements of the American avant-garde are John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham and visual artist Robert Rauschenberg; the evolution of the “happenings” movement which are credited to Cage’s former student, artist Allen Kaprow; and the development of visual arts experimentation in performance, such as “Mixed-Means Theatre,” environmental and site-specific exploration, performance art, technology, and The Theatre of Images.

The following chapter is an exploration of the avant-garde, beginning with its etymological roots and a brief but comprehensive trace of its trajectory through the 20th century, concluding with New York City in 1995, the year Gale Gates’ company founders met for the first time. While the American theatre has a rich legacy of theatre pioneers, such as but not limited to: The Living Theatre, En Garde Arts, Mabou Mines, The Performance Group, The Open Theatre, The Wooster Group and many others, this study seeks to streamline its content to

those companies and individuals who shared a more immediate impact on GALE GATES and the vision of artistic director Michael Counts. To this end, those elements relating to experiments in scenic exploration, multi-focus environment, and image-driven works will be primarily addressed, with a focus on the Symbolist movement, Futurism, Dada/Surrealism, the writing of Antonin Artaud, Bauhaus, the “happenings” movement and John Cage, “mixed-means theatre,” “the Theatre of Images,” and seminal directors Robert Wilson and Reza Abdoh, as well as a brief history of environmental and site-specific theatre.¹⁰ In many respects, GALE GATES was not only indebted to this rich trajectory, but embodied and possibly furthered many of the theories and aesthetic concerns provided by its historical antecedents. Counts and company’s commitment to the dreamlike image, the unification of the arts in performance, the artistic spirit of its collective, and to the re-creation of space, spectacle-driven and mise en scene are visible in the works and writings of precursors such as the surrealists, the writings of Richard Wagner, the experiments of the Bauhaus and 1960’s and 70’s New York atmosphere, and the theories of Antonin Artaud, among many others. In the following chapter, the development of the avant-garde itself is studied.

Defining The Avant-Garde and The Symbolist and Expressionist Movements

According to scholar Gunter Berghaus, the avant-garde emerged in the 19th century parallel to the advent of modernity (35), which he defines as a historical and social condition that

¹⁰ While the listed influences on the American avant-garde and GALE GATES in particular are not exhaustive, further discussion of important but peripheral works, individuals and companies lies outside the scope of this study.

emerged in the 16th century and reached a peak with the Industrial Revolution (24).¹¹ He traces the meaning of the avant-garde back to the Middle Ages as a military term designated to describe the advance of an army. The transition of the word avant-garde from the military and into the artistic realm occurred around the Renaissance period, and next came to be formally associated with utopic, forward-thinking philosophies during the time of the French Revolution (35). According to Berghaus, the army metaphor appealed to those artists and scholars seeking a radical break from the status quo in the advancement of civilization:

Originally a military term, [the avant-garde] came to be applied to political and aesthetic domains, where it denotes a practice of assaulting [tradition] ... [and] promotes creativity as part of a wider cultural-political revolution [Avant-garde artists] aim at absolute originality in their creations. They operate in uncharted terrain with genuinely novel means of expression, creating works of art that are substantially and significantly different from the average production of their time, and are initially appreciated by only a small number of connoisseurs. (35)

Berghaus describes the avant-garde artist as the intuitive individual who perceives impending shifts in society, and who forges a terrain for such innovations, thereby promoting “radical change before others see a need for it [in a] visionary role” (39-40). In this way, modernism and the avant-garde can be argued to have social or political ramifications, even if evident in subversive form alone.

¹¹ The historical and intricate facets of modernism and post-modernism lie outside the scope of this study. However, for further study, see Vermouth and Gross. Note that Berghaus distinguishes Modernism from Modernity as “an artistic response to the crisis of modernity around 1900 and an attempt to break away from Realist methods Many of these [artists] ...expressed their disquiet about the alienating aspects of mass society and technological innovation” (24).

Scholar James Rockwell notes that “the theatrical innovations of the last 100 years might best be visualized as falling into two camps: the visionary–mystical, and the naturalistic–sociological” (*Stage Works* 10). The notion of the visionary-mystical movement is descended from the work of composer and theorist Richard Wagner and surfaces in the dreamy works of Symbolist artists Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig, as well as the Surrealist movements (10).¹² Symbolism spanned the nineteenth century and the designation “symbolist” first took hold in 1886 (Kirby *Total Art* xviii); its dominant characteristic was the correspondence of the arts and the various senses, with a particular stress on synesthesia.¹³ According to scholar Robert Stearns, Symbolist works depicted: “a shadowy, mysterious vision of the world. Leaving much to the imagination, symbolist content ... attempted to illustrate [an]isolation and void felt by many” (44). For E.T. Kirby, Symbolist dramatist and poet Maurice Maeterlinck's early dramas were “presided over by silence, by the presence of the ‘overwhelming influence of the thing that has not been spoken’” (Introduction xxii).

Appia is considered to have revolutionized the theatrical form through his innovation in light and his stress on the use of three-dimensionality in performance, his supreme intuition being the recognition that “light can play upon our emotions as music does” (40). He considered painted two-dimensional settings to be one of the causes of disunity in the theatre and recommended they be replaced with three-dimensional structures to compliment the three-dimensionality of the actor in space: such as with ramps, platforms and steps, which he gave further shape to through his atmospheric lighting (Brockett 440). Appia is also known to have described lighting as the soul of the theatre in his belief that lighting should be in service of the

¹² See Chapter V for more comprehensive writing on Wagner.

¹³ Synesthesia “indicates the involuntary transference of representation from one sense to the other, as in seeing the colors of sounds or experiencing the taste of colors” (Kirby *Total Art* xix).

three-dimensional setting and music itself (Beachman 5). For him, lighting provided radiance, ambiance and nuance in line with the subtleties of Impressionism and thus stage lighting became “the supreme painter” (Roose 66).¹⁴ His extensive lighting plot was considered extraordinarily experimental and progressive for the stage craft of his day. Appia also privileged the role of the actor and his designs sought to compliment the physical body through three-dimensional stage setting.

In 1909, Appia and close collaborator Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, founder of the Eurhythmics dance, created a small settlement and artistic community called Hellerau, on the outskirts of Dresden. It was Appia’s belief that the new theatre needed a new theatrical architecture which would work to abolish the distinction between spectator and performer. To this end, Appia designed a great open hall which would enclose both performers and audience with no barrier or obstacle between them. The orchestra and its lights were also hidden from view. Thus he eliminated the proscenium arch and raised stage, using a completely open performance area (Beachman 7). Appia worked to further his philosophy of lights for the theater. The entire hall at Hellerau became a vision “lit by thousands of lights, installed behind translucent linen that had been dipped in Cedar ...and covered all the walls and ceilings of the building.” The space “literally glowed” (Beachman 7).

Appia and designer Gordon Craig met for the first time at the international Theatre exposition at Zürich in 1914. As Craig knew no French and Appia did not speak English, Jean Mercier reported that the two communicated “by drawing pictures and designs on the restaurant tablecloth during lunch” (Rogers 21). A friendship was established, and in 1918, Appia wrote a

¹⁴ Impressionism is an arts movement from the 19th century with a primary focus on light as well as frequently nature: the resultant effect of this movement was that of a serene image or sensory experience

letter to Craig in which he describes his vision for the theater. He specifically described his vision of The Hall as a "kind of cathedral of the future, which reunites in a vast free and changeable space" (qtd. in Beachman 9). Sometime later in 1919, Appia completed a text entitled, *The Work of Living Arts*, which centered on the resistance of a contemporary audience towards actively entering into the imaginative world of drama. He writes that "the separation between the stage and auditorium has become a painful barbarity" (Appia 87) and suggests "the usual arrangement of space in our theatres should slowly evolve towards a more liberal conception of dramatic art" in the formation of this Futuristic Hall. Appia was a visionary, and despite a controversial reputation for his work, by the 1920's Appia's stance on three-dimensional scenery, expressive light, and atmospheric staging became more widely received.

Gordon Craig was an actor, designer, director and theoretician. He was born into the theatre as the son of famous actress Dame Ellen Terry and studied under Sir Henry Irving, whom he greatly admired. Craig was also famously celebrated for his talents as an actor, having performed the role of Hamlet numerous times, including twice in his twenties at the Moscow Art Theatre (Gerould 392).

While Craig had been immersed in performance since childhood, he also shared a long term fascination with stage design and technique. For example, at age eight he repeatedly snuck into the backstage of the Lyceum Theatre to see the backstage preparation for the image of "a ghost rising up in blue light" (391). According to scholar James Roose-Evans, Craig's designs were initially influenced by "articles and lectures of Hubert von Herkomer who had a school and theatre in Hertfordshire [who] used the effects of misty glens, sunrises, moonlit scenes, waterfall by the use of gauzes and electric light as well as side lighting" to create the mood-theatre Craig ultimately worked towards (63). Craig's writings largely point to a rejection of the

theatre of his day, and a specific disregard for realism and melodramatic acting styles. He shared Wagner and Appia's vision for a radically suggestive theatre, and was considered a "prophet and a leader in the movement against realism" (Roose 57). "Let our common sense be left in the cloakroom with our umbrellas and hats. We need here our finer senses only," he is known to have said (qtd. in Roose 62).

Craig sought a visually-driven and atmospheric theatre, famously writing that "art arrives only by design" (Craig 393); he also advocated for the unified vision of the stage director and the figure of the uber-marionette in place of the melodramatic actors of his day.¹⁵ However, while Craig was considered to be inventive and charismatic, many of his visions failed due to the lack of advanced technology during his era. In his 1911 direction of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), Craig attempted to implement receding and moving screens out of metal, but after sequential failures, was forced to complete the screens with timber and canvas. According to MAT director and great acting teacher, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Craig in fact had "no idea how those 'terrible and dangerous walls' were to be operated" (Roose 60).

The production took two years of preparation, and Stanislavsky rehearsed the stage hands' operation of the screens exhaustively. However, as the audience entered opening night, "the screens began to topple sideways ... [falling] one after another like a house of cards collapsing, the whole set crashed to the stage." Rather than achieving the lyrical movement Craig had envisioned, "the curtains had to be closed for every scene change" (Roose 61). Craig's *Hamlet* was otherwise moody and evocative, populated by "towering screens, mysterious

¹⁵ The complete theories of Craig lie outside the scope of this study. In essence, Craig was rebelling against the largely emotion-driven and melodramatic naturalistic performances of his day. Craig was not opposed to the human actor, which is a misconception, but rather sought a cool and precise form of acting through his writings on the marionette: this is a performance aesthetic that some critics suggest is embodied in the work of director Robert Wilson.

corners, passages, deep shadows, shafts of moonlight, the passing of sentries” (65). For the Court scenes, the figures of the King and Queen sat on elevated thrones, dressed in regal gold. From each of their shoulders an enormous gold cloak stretched over the entire stage. It had holes from which the courtiers’ heads peaked out, and the scene was so dimly lit that the gold glimmered against the surrounding darkness (65). Craig’s many works and theories have made him a significant influence in contemporary theatre. His notion of the director as the unifying force in production, his call for a new theatre based on mood and atmospheric design, and his belief in the dignity of the performer, which translated for him into the figure of the uber-marionette, collectively anticipated formalized shifts in late 20th century theatre, such as in the work of Robert Wilson and the development of the auteur director.

Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of the most important directors of the 20th century, had an early affinity with the Symbolists, and too advocated for a theatre of suggestion. “In the theater the spectators’ imagination is able to supply that which is left unsaid,” he writes in his 1906 essay, “The Theatre of Naturalism and the Theatre of Mood” (qtd. in Collins 312).¹⁶ Meyerhold suggested that the dramatic experience should reveal little, thereby allowing the spectator to discover and formulate any hidden meaning or suggestion within the text or staging, thereby arguing for the art of abstraction over naturalistic stage design. In his writing, Meyerhold also refers to a conversation overheard between the playwright Anton Chekhov and the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, where the playwright described cutting out a nose from a portrait in substitution of a real one as an analogy for the danger of the literal in the theatre. Meyerhold’s belief in the imagination, and moreover thirst for imaginative works on the part of the theatre-

¹⁶ Note that sentiment is later echoed by Artaud, almost word for word when he writes that “today, as yesterday, the public is greedy for mystery” (75).

goer, is perhaps the most important concept of the 20th century avant-garde because of its advocacy of the spectator.

Meyerhold's own productions were rich in playfulness, invention and physicality. He was influential in his creation of the bio-mechanics acting training and advocacy for the imagination of the people, and his direction of Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* and Fernand Crommelyneck's *The Magnificent Cuckold* are historical landmarks. The set for *The Magnificent Cuckold*, for example, consisted of two parallel platforms, connected by stairs and ramps, a slide and revolving doors, as well as wheels and a construction similar to a windmill (Worrall 20). To inhabit the world of the set:

Required a fearless agility with which children naturally approach the constructed world of the playground, or that awareness which the average man living in the 20th century needs to bring to bear on crossing a busy street in safety. (Worrall 21)

Meyerhold's integration of biomechanics into this production allowed for a dynamic architectural experience, where the individual figure fit into "the literal framework like an organic part" (23). According to Russian theatre scholar Marc Slonim: "Whatever Meyerhold did, it was daring and significant" (196). In his 1926 direction of *The Inspector General*, Meyerhold transformed the play through remarkable staging. The director famously populated the final scene (written to depict a stunned town), by replacing living actors with a tableaux of "painted clay mannequins, arranged in a mute scene of distress and astonishment" (253).

In his 1913 essay, "The Fairground Booth," Meyerhold advocated for "the spirit of cabaret, variety and fairground performance [which can provide] a conciseness, profundity, clarity and vigor" (qtd in Carlson *Performance* 95). Meyerhold was a visionary and a

progressive. According to Slonim, Meyerhold's "ultimate objective was the merging of cinema, radio, circus, music hall, sport and comedy into a super-show which would express the urban age of technological progress" (258).

Tragically, however, in 1940 Meyerhold was captured, tortured and killed by Stalin's fascist Soviet government. The progress that he championed in his works and society was considered dangerously transgressive. Meyerhold's legacy is not only due to his genuine innovation in the craft, but also because of his dynamic theories and writing. His figure has been inscribed by history as a testament to the power of the theatre, and the avant-garde in particular, as a force towards social change. By encouraging creativity and imaginative/intellectual ownership on the part of the people through both his writings and work, Meyerhold helped spark the cultivation of a citizenry whose independent thinking became subsequently at odds with a dictatorship that sought to censor thought. In this way, his message of imaginative freedom and a pursuit of the *joi de vivre* signifies the inherent political aspect of the avant-garde; the avant-garde is essential for a healthy society because it encourages utopic thinking and questions the status quo.

Expressionist theatre, according to Berghaus, emerged in the early 1900's, largely heralded by German artists. Playwrights August Strindberg and Frank Wedekind (as well as arguably George Buchner) reveal the first traces of Expressionist drama, although the "heyday of Expressionist theatre" occurred throughout the postwar years through 1924 (57). Similar to other movements of the avant-garde, Expressionism sought to reveal the underpinnings of a bourgeois society in "[condemnation] of the world of appearances" (57) through a fascination in the primeval human impulse. Indeed, "strength of feeling and pathos of expression" were its tenants. Performance style could be described as "irregular, eerie, and bizarre" (59), relying on

the actor and playwright's ability to convey "a deeply felt inner [spiritual] truth" manifesting in strong physical and grotesque performance choices (63). Stage sets themselves were suggestive of the protagonist's inner life, often atmospheric if not nightmarish in design, with a focus on abstraction and distortion (88). The performing body and physical expression were also stylistically integral due in part to the influence of experimentation in German dance among leading choreographers such as Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman.

In summary, while the avant-garde has its historical roots in military terminology, the avant-garde in the arts came to symbolize those cutting edge artists working against the grain. The Symbolist movement and the specific practice of designers Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig paved the way towards a more atmospheric and mood-driven theatre in the privileging of light, three-dimensionality, and precision of form. Vsevolod Meyerhold was a seminal director of the 20th century who was persecuted and killed for his art and beliefs: his legacy continues in both reverence to his groundbreaking work and as a symbol of the avant-garde's vital importance towards a progressive and free-thinking society. The Expressionists, though not blatantly political in nature, questioned man's place in society and the cosmos, with a focus on man's feeling and subsequent emotional pathos by oppressive society.¹⁷

Riots, Chance and Dreams: Futurism, Dada-Surrealism and Antonin Artaud

The Italian Futurists are in large part considered to have spearheaded the avant-garde movement of the 20th century through the vision and charge of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,

¹⁷ Note also those companies and movements within the avant-garde that were blatantly political in mission and nature, such as The Living Theatre, Living Newspapers which originated in Russia and were later utilized as part of the Federal Theatre Project in America, as well as the work of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator.

which lay in stark contrast to the moody lyricism of the Symbolists. In 1909, Marinetti published his first manifesto, which defined their mission as the disruption of public complacency, thereby embodying the artistic reverberations of Marinetti's hero, French playwright and eccentric Alfred Jarry whose 1896 piece, *Ubu Roi* brought the Parisian public to unprecedented uproar.¹⁸ While Jarry introduced a playfully boyish (albeit) obscene theatre in the satirical figure of Ubu, the Futurists reveled in the continued spirit of public disruption. "Arrests, convictions, a day or two in jail and free publicity in the next days followed many [Futurist] evenings. But this was precisely the effect they aimed for," writes Goldberg (16). In his manifesto "On the Pleasure of Being Booed," Marinetti suggested various tricks for instigating an audience, such as double booking the auditorium, coating the seats with glue, or sprinkling black pepper, as well as encouraging performers to do whatever came to mind while performing (16).

While the Futurists prized those elements relating to technology and speed, going so far as to glorify war, they also helped mold future experimentation in performance in various ways,

¹⁸ *Ubu Roi* is a play based on Jarry's early puppeteering experiments and essentially tells the story of Ubu, a satirical figure based on various Shakespearean plays dealing with blood-lust and ambition, who is ultimately crowned and killed. The play is vulgar and comical in nature, and references the toilet throughout as a primary metaphor. Modern poet William Butler Yeats was in attendance opening night of the 1908 *Ubu Roi* revival, and is famously quoted as saying, "What more is possible? After us the savage G-d" in response to Jarry's masterpiece, which is centered around the satirical character of Ubu. In the first night performance: "Gemier, [the actor performing the role of Ubu] swollen and commanding in his pear-shaped costume ... stepped forward to speak the opening line – a single word. He had not known how to interpret the role until it was suggested he imitate the author's own voice and jerky stylized gestures. ... In a voice like a hammer, Gemier produced an obscenity which Jarry had appropriated to himself by adding one letter. 'Merdre,' Gemier said. 'Shite.' It was 15 minutes before the house could be silenced. The [word] had done its work; the house was pandemonium..... Finally, Gemier improvised a jig and sprawled out on the prompter's box. His diversion restored enough order to allow the action to proceed to the next 'merdre' when the audience took over once more" (qtd. in Shattuck 207-8).

effectively launching a new paradigm of performance with no historical underpinnings. The Variety Theatre, for example, typically lacked story line and was the ideal model of Futurism in its mission to “incessantly invent new elements of astonishment” (Goldberg 17) through a parade of various works. Futurists also experimented with sound in what they termed “Noise Music” as well as with marionettes ranging from the miniscule to life-sized. As part of their mission, the Futurists were also concerned with the integration of figures and scenery (24), and often collapsed famous texts or naturalistic scenes in a style of theatre they termed “Synthetic Theatre,” which they defined as the compression of innumerable situations into a few minutes (26). In her book, *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present*, scholar Roselee Goldberg shares the following anecdote wherein in the Futurist piece *Negative Act*, a man enters the stage: he is “busy, preoccupied ... and walks furiously. Taking off his overcoat he notices the audience. ‘I have absolutely nothing to tell you. Bring down the curtain!’” he shouts (26).

The Synthetic Theatre condemned realism in the search for such compact and imaginative works. In *They’re Coming* (1915), the props themselves become characters. A butler figure announces “they’re coming;” at which point the furniture is rearranged and lit by moonlight while terrified servants huddle in a corner, “trembling with evident agony while the chairs leave the room” (27). Futurists advocated for mystery, and preferred leaving unexplained narrative gaps in their work. “Simultaneity” was also a cornerstone of the Futurist aesthetic, employing multi-focus environments wherein multiple unrelated actions occurred simultaneously on the stage (28). Image as performance was also employed by the Futurists, such as that of a dog walking across the stage, or a theatre immersed in darkness (29).

Dadaism and Surrealism, which emerged out of Zurich and France are considered closely tied, although historical and aesthetic distinctions exist between the two movements. At heart,

the basic tenets of both movements were chance, simultaneity and surprise (96). Dadaist activities began at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916, and its founders were the entertainer Emmy Hennings and her future husband Hugo Ball (Goldberg 50). According to Goldberg, Wagner's theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the unification of all the arts in the formation of large-scale productions, influenced Ball (54)¹⁹ as well as Marinetti. According to scholar Arnold Aronson, "Wagner laid the groundwork for the avant-garde, with its sense of forward-lookingness, rejection of tradition and the past, and an urgent need for change" (14). The name "dada" itself was coined by Ball which he found in a German-French dictionary. He immediately responded to the multiple meanings available to the sound, as it inferred a double "yes" in Romanian and Russian, and "rocking horse" in French, and which Ball described as "a sign of foolish naïveté, joy in procreation and preoccupation with the baby carriage" among Germans (62). The Dadaists were thereby playing with the plasticity of sound and the abandonment of meaning. This chance practice notably marked many of the dada performances and cabarets, and created a historical stepping stone for future innovators involved in chance methodology.

The Surrealist Movement was led by French writer Andre Breton, who carried a belief in the dormant knowledge of the subconscious as a primary artistic resource and source of inspiration. In 1919, Breton became fascinated by psychologist Freud's theories on the subconscious, which influenced this ideology and the surrealist fascination with fantasy. The symbolist use of suggestion through "suspension of plot and logical structure . . . [also became] fertile ground for the surrealists" (Stearns 51) in their exploration of the subconscious.

¹⁹ See Chapter V on GALE GAtes, the Wilsonian Opera and Critical Response for a more in-depth look at Wagner.

The Surrealist Manifesto was published in 1925 by the Bureau of Surrealist Research and carried forth Andre Breton's notion of "automatism" in which "an attempt is made to express, either verbally, in writing, or in any other manner, the true functioning of thoughts... [through] the higher reality of ... the dream" (qtd. in Goldberg 89). To this end, the Surrealists work carried a deeply dreamlike aesthetic and sense of logic. Another trademark of the surrealist aesthetic was not only its dreamy strangeness and tangential elements, but also its integration of the various performing art forms and a seemingly revived interest in language, if not content itself (95).²⁰ Perhaps most recognized among the surrealists are its painters: most notably Salvador Dali, Renee Magritte, as well as Max Ernst. In essence, their work was typically characterized as a dreamy procession of juxtaposed and unlikely images and the subjectivity of the spectator.

Surrealistic Antonin Artaud was a French poet, actor, director and is perhaps most famous for his theories for the stage as he called for a radical reconfiguration of the traditional performance model. Artaud was also involved with cinema, and became involved with the surrealists in 1925, two years later founding the Theatre Alfred Jarry. According to Gerould, Artaud loathed the naturalistic theatre of his day, and "either refused to attend or went with a bottle of red wine and a chunk of salami and ate ostentatiously in the front row" (434). Artaud's work *The Theatre and Its Double* was published in 1938, and speaks to his concept of the Theatre of Cruelty which calls for epic scale, the reinvention of a new language of movement and symbol, spectacle, and the rediscovery of space in performance. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty did not call for the

²⁰ Among the Surrealists many works included Roger Gilbert-Lecomte's *The Odyssey of Ulyseus the Palimped* (1924) which "defied all performance possibilities by inserting into the script long passages 'to be read silently'" (Goldberg 90). In *Le Peintre* (1922), a painter paints a child's face red then the child's mother's face and finally his own, ultimately abandoning the stage, each character in tears (90). In Antonin Artaud's brief 350 word play, *Le Jet de Sang* ("The Jet of Blood"), cinematic images flow as "a hurricane separates two lovers; then two stars crash into each other" (96).

actualization of violence or blood-shed, but rather advocated for a truthful realization on the part of the theatre-goer, as opposed to entertainment-based escapism. Although suffering from schizophrenia throughout his life, he is considered a great visionary of the experimental theatre.

Artaud's main argument against the theatre was what he considered a submission to realism in the notion that "poetry had abandoned the theatre" qtd in (Gerould 441) and he wrote that "it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of theatre to the text" (qtd. in Bentley 55). Artaud suggested an embodied and resonant communication that would be able to affect the spectator through a conglomeration of sound and sensorial "spatially dynamic" experience. "It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams" (59), he wrote. Artaud was calling for a theatre of spectacle to invert the traditional focus on text and chronological story-telling in a passionate view that the visceral experience would transcend the poetic experience of language. For Artaud, the contemporary theatre was limiting and voyeuristic in content, essentially converting the public into "Peeping Toms" (Gerould 435). His feelings were that the theatre, like speech, needed to be set free of convention. In his vision of the new theatre and its stress on the *mise en scene*, Artaud appropriated the language of painting:

As in the canvasses of certain painters of the past – objects themselves begin to speak. Light, instead of decorating, assumes the quality of actual language, and the stage effects, all humming with significations, take on an order, reveal patterns. (qtd in Gerould 442)

Spatial reconfiguration was an important element of Artaud's vision. He called for the immersion of the audience into the physical world of the play. According to scholar James Roose, "in place of the poetry of language [Artaud] was proposing a poetry of space" (89).

Artaud foresaw a theatre of many planes and visual/aural stimuli, writing that “the action will unfold, will extend its trajectory from level to level, point to point; paroxysms will suddenly burst forth, will flare up like fires in different spots” (qtd in Bentley 62). Artaud, similar to Appia and Craig, was calling for a revolution of the naturalistic theatre model, where spatial dimension and the *mise en scene*, as well as the vocabulary of movement, would be privileged over domestic drama narrative and conventional design. While Appia and Craig were seeking a mood-driven theatre, Artaud was more concerned with the visceral nature of the arts, and sought to cultivate a sensory-based experience through dynamic exploration.

In summary, the avant-garde emerged in parallel with the modernist movement, sharing a subversive ideology and mutual concern in the forging new aesthetics. To this end, the rambunctious and perverse works of Alfred Jarry and the Futurist movement led the vanguard, whose melding of life and art and dreamscape works, as well as elements of chance were more formally integrated in the works of the Dada and Surrealist movements. Actor, director and visionary Antonin Artaud’s dissatisfaction with the naturalistic contemporary theatre of its day led to visionary writing. While the complete theories of Artaud lie outside this study, such as his foundational interest in the Balinese theatre, mystical underpinnings and the purging role of violence: his call for the privileging of the body in space and gestural movement, the collective sensorial language of the *mise en scene* over that of dialogue and story, and particularly his vision of the physically immersed audience in a “poetry of space” eloquently articulates and anticipates the aesthetics of the experimental theatre of the 20th century.

The Emergence of the American Avant-Garde

According to scholar Arnold Aronson, a bold spirit of experimentation emerged in the American theatre of the 1950's. This spirit was one of iconoclasm and rebellion against the mainstream commercial system, and opposed traditional dramatic structure, "radically [altering] the aesthetic and organizational basis upon which performance was created" (3). The traditional structure that the avant-garde rebelled against was that of the Aristotelian model, and the privileging of plot and sequential narrative. However:

Because the traditional theatre provided little in the way of precedent, this new theatre drew heavily upon iconoclastic movements within the plastic arts, with the result that traditional barriers between theatre, dance, music, and art began to crumble. (Aronson 3)

The reference points within the 1950's avant-garde were "other forms of art, the creative process of the artist, and the theatrical experience itself" (5). While early 21st experimental theatre continues a legacy of hybrid arts in production, it is perhaps the focus on image that provides the greatest through-line within the American avant-garde.

American theatre, and primarily avant-garde preoccupation with image, is possibly linked to the emergence of the cinema. In 1905, the first movie theatre opened in America, and only four years later the nation had garnered over 8,000. Film audience also grew to dramatic proportions. The earliest films, termed "penny arcades," could only allow one viewer at a time; by 1914, however, films attracted hundreds of spectators per showing. The Strand Theatre in New York even housed a whopping 3,300 seats (Brockett 458). As cinema, television and subsequently advertisement evolved, the role of image expanded so as to inform cultural values and identity in novel ways.

According to scholar Oscar Brockett, it was not until around 1915 that the United States became more aware of the artistic innovation taking place in Europe (489). Brockett explains that the rise of little theatres, such as the Provincetown Players, made its greatest contribution by preparing audiences for new works and production methods. The Provincetown Players relocated from Massachusetts to New York in 1916. While its earlier focus had been on American playwrights, in 1923 the group split into two branches. The newer branch, led by playwright Eugene O’Neil, designer Robert Edmund Jones and producer Kenneth Macgowan, produced foreign and non-commercial works, and served an important role “as an experimental theatre for both new plays and for new production techniques” (Brockett 491). Many European artists fled to America during World War I, furthering American exposure to innovations happening across the globe. “Continental influence continued to be felt in the 1920’s through a series of visitors” such as the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) between 1923-4 and Max Reinhardt’s series of directed works in 1927-8. Between 1923 and 1930 arguably the most important advancement in American acting was produced, when MAT actors Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya came to head the American Theatre Laboratory. The Stanislavsky system was taught by these two master teachers: among their many students were Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman, who launched The Group Theatre in 1931.

The Bauhaus movement was also influential to the development of the avant-garde in America. The Bauhaus School was founded and developed in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 by Oskar Schlemmer as an interdisciplinary arts conservatory. According to Goldberg, the Bauhaus mission involved “achieving a synthesis of art and technology” (98) and was primarily concerned with spatial investigation and mechanical innovation in an echo of the former Futurists. Much of the work was marked by a strong visual component, often incorporating bold colors and

geometric lines and shapes. Master teacher, painter and dramatist Lothar Schreyer held early workshops at the school which emphasized his experience with expressionist theater. His workshops with students expressed emotionally charged language as well as melodramatic gesture, which was ultimately at odds with the Bauhaus investigation of pure form (97-8). In time the Bauhaus became associated with the collaborative model and the visually-driven fusion of mechanics and art. Borrowing from the Futurists, the Bauhaus sought to end the elitist status of art by making “the functional artistic and the artistic functional” thereby blending the utilitarian and aesthetic (Brockett 469). The Bauhaus also pioneered experimentation in theatre architecture, such as by artist Walter Gropius’s 1927 “total theatre” which he designed for Erwin Piscator. While its staging was never realized, Gropius’s “total theatre” sought to accommodate the arena, thrust and proscenium, and included rolling wagons and twelve columns on which projection screens could be mounted. According to the designer, he wished to place the audience in the midst of the playing space so as to heighten their experience (Brockett 469).

However, the artistic energy and original thinking of the school was at odds with the fascist Nazi regime, and various Bauhaus teachers fled to America. Among those teachers, Josef Albers relocated to the U.S. and recruited former Bauhaus colleague Xanti Schawinsky to his new vocation at Black Mountain College, which slowly gained the vibe of experimentation and excellence associated with the Bauhaus. “Despite the lack of explicit manifesto or public declaration of its ends, the small community slowly acquired a reputation as an interdisciplinary educational hideout” (Goldberg 121). Black Mountain College played a pivotal role in the development of the American avant-garde. Schawinsky, for example, introduced courses based on the fundamentals of space, form and color in curriculum based “visual theater” (Goldberg 122) which became an important facet for the American avant-garde.

After a decade of collaboration, experimental composer John Cage and dance/choreographer Merce Cunningham joined the school in 1948. By this time, Cage had already delivered his manifesto on sound called *The Future of Music*, proposing the idea of that "wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise ... whether the sound of a truck at 50 mi./h rate, rain, or static between radio stations" (qtd in Goldberg 123); a concept which would inform his later works, most notably *4' 33"* (1952) wherein a pianist sat silently before a piano for over four minutes, creating a frame in which the spontaneous sounds of the world informed the audience concert experience. In 1952, Cage and Cunningham returned to Black Mountain and created a historically influential performance in collaboration with artist Robert Rauschenberg, in which a series of poetically unrelated events unfolded before the audience in random sequences.²¹ Spectators sat in a square arena holding white cups beneath the white paintings, while "'whistles blew, a baby screamed and coffee was served by four boys dressed in white.'" According to Cage, the evening was a success and one which he described as "an anarchic event, purposeless in that we didn't know what was going to happen" (qtd. in Goldberg 127) in an echo of the Futurist commitment to the unknown half a century before.

This commitment to the open frame and chance practice was epitomized in the work of Cage's student, artist Allen Kaprow, who is credited with sparking the happenings movement in his 1959 piece, *18 happenings in Six Parts* at the Reuben gallery in New York. The term "happening" is considered to have arrived out of this event in order to "indicate a spontaneous event something that 'just happens to happen'" (Goldberg 130) and can be defined as improvised and unscripted events, lack the traditional theatrical conventions of time, place and character, and

²¹ Robert Rauschenberg was a painter best known for collages that "exhibited a preference for sub-elegant 'found' materials and an ability to integrate disparate elements" (Kostelanetz 78).

fusion of performer and audience. According to Kaprow, the use of the word was essentially happenstance, which he explains as having decided to use:

Because it was a neutral word that avoided reference to art. Then the press and some of the artist took up the word, and it became the name of the kind of work. Then, I tried, along with other artists...to get rid of the word. They didn't want to be associated with it, and I didn't blame them. We failed, and now everything under the sun is called a "happening." (qtd in Goldberg 111)

During the 1960's, scholar Richard Kostelanetz observed continued merges in the visual arts and performance worlds, incorporating musical, textual, dance and spatial experimentation, which he deemed the "theatre of mixed-means." His book of the same name consists of discussion on the development of this theatre, its attributes and humanistic functions, and interviews with the experimental artists of his day. Kostelanetz directly addresses the argument of critics opposed to a more visual or sensorial theatre, writing:

The conservative charge I most often hear states that the new theater rejects both reason and feeling and that it therefore exhibits, as the critic John Simon asserts, "total dehumanization" [that] in abandoning language the new theater eschews the central characteristic that separates man from the animals; and without speech, literate man lacks his most convenient medium for channeling his capacities for reason and feeling..... However ... a definition of human essence based on speech is ludicrously limited; for reason and emotion are not necessarily expressed in words. Reason is often revealed... in action; many of us often realize how we can most effectively do something only after we moved to do it. Also, in expressing our deepest feelings, many of us are mute, if not

paralyzed; and indicatively, in some of the most moving and resonant theatrical pieces of recent years [in works such as Beckett and Ionesco] the language is, by conventional standards, inexpressive. (277)

A common thread in the development of the theatre of mixed-means, according to Kostelanetz, is an evolving interest in the role of live space among artists and a desire to go against tradition and specifically outside of the pictorial frame, which he also pairs with composers, writing that “if the new theatre grows out of the desire of painters and sculptors to stretch their art into time, so it also extends from the concern of certain composers [to fill space]” (18). To this end, aural sculpture was an important feature of the theatre of mixed-means. In Claus Oldenberg’s 1966 production of *Massage*, for example:

The sound, highly amplified, produced an effect something like that of a battlefield, creating a great deal of expectation about when the next sound would come. You had an almost visual picture of some kind of the sound; if you could recognize the sound as a typewriter, you would imagine that a man was typing. It produced a sense of a large-scale. I knew it was a typewriter, and I think most people did. One reviewer referred to it as a giant typewriter, which suggested that I was using sound to represent a sculptural object – a visually giant typewriter – I’d previously made. It fascinates me that he felt I was evoking through sound a giant image (qtd. in Kostelanetz 18).

Another important performer/composer of the mixed-means era was La Monte Young.²² In 1960, he held a performance at Berkeley in which he created a composition consisted of freeing a jar full of butterflies as a means of highlighting the musicality of the sound of their

²² Note that GAle GAtes resident composer Joseph Diebes studied under La Monte (1 March 2012).

wings, "however inaudible" (Kostelanetz 183). The score of his famous composition #7 consisted of an open fifth cord followed by the handwritten instructions: "to be held for a long time." At a New York concert some years later, he set fire to violin as part of his tenant that "a person should listen to what he ordinarily just looks at, or look at things he would ordinarily just hear" (192).

Throughout his book, Kostelanetz also refers to the "theatre of mixed-means" as the new theatre or painter's theatre in response to its radical use of image, highlighting its basic function to "demand of the spectator ... a perceptual readjustment" (23). In Ken Dewey's *city scale* (1963) for example, the audience met at one end of the city and was led through various streets as events unfolded through their night promenade, finalizing in a cinema as the sun came up the next day (Goldberg 137). In another example of mixed-means theatre, in Ken Dewey and Terry Reiley's *Sames* (1965) the short phrases "I" and "That's not me" were repeated in exchange as a chorus of six brides graced the stage, while film was projected upon the theatre's ceiling and walls." (7)

In his conclusion to *The Theatre of Mixed-Means*, Richard Kostelanetz suggests that the function of the mixed-media theatre is to expand perception, even describing it as pedagogical: "The theatre of mixed means offers an education; and even the most bookish of us critics (let me include myself) can only, before the new theater, be humbled by our perceptual illiteracy" (288), he writes. Kostelanetz also calls for the cultivation of new spectatorship in the omni-attentive audience member. "To treat a mixed means piece as existing within any of the standard categories is to miss its essentially hybrid quality," he writes. Rather, it required the sensitivity of the polyilliterate spectator, who is "responsive to dance, speech, sound, image, setting and space, as well as overarching thematic statements" (276). Kostelanetz here echoes the

sentiment of Surrealist Marcel Duchamp who wrote that “the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” (qtd. in Aronson 25).

Experiments in spatial reconfiguration also flourished in the 1960’s and 70’s, although such exploration was by no means new to theatre. Environmental theatre essentially describes a production wherein the setting surrounds the spectators, so as to integrate audience into the playing space itself. Site-specific theatre, which could be considered a subset of environmental work, is inseparable from the architectural detail of its playing space. In site-specific theatre, the performance space creates the singular context “in which the performance is intelligible” (Pearson 23). In other words, site-specific theatre typically arrives after the discovery and acquirement of a location or building structure: the work manifests as a response to those details unique to the space, be they architectural and historical. “Performance may reveal, make manifest, celebrate, confront, or criticize site or location, and its history [or function], ” (111) writes Pearson, while also allowing for the creation of new architecture within the space .

The notion of “palimpsest” or “writing over writing over writing” (136) is an important concept to consider when approaching site-specific theatre. Palimpsest occurs in the overlap of site history, its contemporary function, and the meaning evoked or “written over” in production, allowing for a multi-layered appreciation. Site-specific theatre can also be argued as the iconic embodiment of the avant-garde in its completely original manifestation; further, the space and its related performance cannot be replicated and thus commodified or subjected to commercial demands. Site-specific theatre often only allow for a small number of audience members, furthering an elite and obscure patronage. This in turn speaks to an identity outside the mainstream.

While spatial investigation was a point of significant exploration in 1960's and 70's Western theatre, environmental theatre is not a new theatre phenomena, but rests on centuries of spatial experimentation. Medieval theatre, for example, implicated the spectator through theatre-in-the-round and processional structure. Cathedral spaces were often employed for religious drama, while cemeteries and burial grounds were sites for staging passion and resurrection plays. The marketplace was favored site of medieval performance as Carlson writes, it "could be seen as a symbol of the stage upon which Everyman played his role" (*Places* 17).

Many religious processions began at the city gates in a winding journey towards the city cathedral in a symbolic approach to the spiritual center (20). Carlson quotes historian and literary critic Lewis Mumford's observation that these processions united the city's inhabitants, so that "even the torturous windings of the Medieval streets contributed ... by affording those in the procession glimpses of other participants so they became spectators as well" (19). In this way, citizens became integrated into both the geographical and mystical context, "becoming active participants in the cosmic drama." According to scholar Eckhard Simon, the 1979 University of Toronto staging of passion play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, signified the ideal demonstration of medieval theatre-in-the-round. He quotes critics Theresa Coletti and Kathleen Ashley in writing that:

There was no "perfect" position, no "eye of G-d" from which all events and relationships could be seen in a proper perspective; one could only have a human and limited perspective. The resulting multiplicity of actions and experiences might have fragmented the drama. Instead, it produced a dynamic and organic whole ... in the highly charged iconographic world." (143)

In the 1920's and 30's, director Max Reinhardt astonished audiences through inventive and transformational settings. In 1920, he staged the medieval drama *Everyman* in front of the great cathedral in Salzburg, "using surrounding streets and church towers as auxiliary performance spaces" (Carlson *Places* 28). SPEAKER In 1924, Reinhardt converted an entire theatre interior into a vast Gothic cathedral setting (197) and during the 1930's famously presented Shakespeare's dramas in settings reflective of the plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged in actual woodlands, and a Venetian *Merchant of Venice* which incorporated gondolas and "a picturesque house which according to Reinhardt's research, had actually been the dwelling of a Jewish merchant in the sixteenth century" (Carlson *Places* 28).

Russian director Nikolai Pavlovich Okhlopov experimented with staging throughout all of his productions, and often incorporated multiple stages for a montage effect, with original music composition to underline the atmosphere of the play (Roose 92). In his 1930's production of *The Flood*, for example, he converted the interior of his Moscow theatre into a hillside where audience sat among the actors as if soldiers too encamped on the field (Carlson *Places* 197). In Andre van Gyseghem's *The Theatre in Soviet Russia* (1943), he shares a vivid account of the production:

The doors are opened from within and we flood through them into-- what? Babel. A theatre more full of sound than was the crowded foyer. Women shrilling across at one another – babies crying – men shouting orders – lovers quarreling—a group of men singing to a harmonica. The savory smell of cooking assails our nostrils as we stagger dazedly into this hub-bub, looking for our seats. Seats, did I say? We can't see any seats – we're looking the wrong way, surely? Pardon, Madame, was that your child I stepped on? There are some seats – but a rocky promontory has first to be navigated; we dodge

under the nozzle of a gun that is being cleaned by a young man singing lustily as he polishes, only to find our heads entangled, as we come up, with a mass of washing hanging out to dry. (qtd in Roose 94)

Polish Director Jerzy Grotowski staged radical pieces at his Laboratory Theatre during the 1960's, such as converting the space into a mental asylum in *Kordian*, with beds for actor and audience, while the audience of *Dr. Faustus* were seated at a long banquet table.

In 1968, director/scholar Richard Schechner published *6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre*, which loosely defines environmental theatre as that in which the entire space is used for both performance and audience, and describes the nature of the space itself is either transformed or a "found." The environmental theatre experience is also marked by non-hierarchical production elements wherein text is no longer the driving element (as it is in traditional theatre) and may in fact be discarded all together (Aronson 98). The Performance Group's production of *Dionysus in '69*, directed by Schechner exemplified these ideas. The production took place at the Performance Garage in Soho and an environment of wooden platforms and towers were created. Audience were invited to sit anywhere in the space and actors moved between the narrative of Euripides's play and personal improvised speeches. Nudity and eroticism were employed, and the loss of traditional boundaries and principles of audience behavior also led to the exploitation of various cast members; in one instance the actor performing Prometheus was even kidnapped by a mischievous gang of college students (Aronson 100).

In the 1988 production, *You-The City* audience were individually escorted through Manhattan in over a dozen intimate performance encounters. Spectators were shepherded into cars, given advice in elevators, given strange tasks such as filling out philosophically-oriented

forms, threatened and entangled in quarrels with imaginary lovers. The result was that the audience member became situated as the centerpiece of a fluid performance located throughout New York city (Carr 160). In another instance of environmental theatre and personalized audience journey, in the 1980's North American tour of *Tamara* audience were invited to follow any of the play's characters through ten rooms designed to represent a country villa (Carlson *Places* 197).

Directors are not alone in their investigation of space, which is also an evident site of interest among playwrights, such as Giselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners* (1992), where audience are essentially taken on a tour of a series of torture chambers, or Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) which uses untraditional staging as a metaphor for women's entrapment by domesticity and gender stereotype.

Media imagery and cinema that overlap with live performance were important to the experimental theatre of the 1960's forward. Use of projections and multi-media were utilized as far back as in the original epic theatre productions of director Erwin Piscator in 1920's and 30's Germany, where as Oscar Brockett writes, he "used film sequences, cartoons, treadmills, segmented settings, and other devices" (468). Epic theatre has more prominently become associated with Piscator's student, Bertolt Brecht, who went into exile in 1933 in the further development of his works and methods.²³ Robert Whitman's piece, *Prune Flat* (1965) was one of the earliest experimentations concerning projections onto live bodies and the mirroring of live and recorded imagery (Goldberg 137). During John Jesurun's work, *Deep Sleep* (1985) various

²³ The characteristics of epic theatre largely lie outside the scope of this study, but as a vital theatre art form developed by Piscator or Brecht, it is important to identify its main characteristics as including a mix of dramatic and narrative techniques, alienation, and separation of episodes through song, narrative or captions so as to keep the audience intellectually aware and to actively mentally participate in the progression of the drama. The work had a political aspect in that "Brecht hoped to lead the audience to relate what they saw on the stage to socioeconomic conditions outside the theatre" (Brockett 469).

characters were drawn into the two-dimensional world of the film, until only one figure was left to tend to the projector (Goldberg 195) and in his other work, *White Water* (1986), a montage of live and "talking head" performers surrounded the audience in over twenty monitors and stations, engaging in an intense debate over "illusion and reality" (Goldberg 195). The Wooster Group, in their complex integration of space, technology, anecdote and deconstructed text has come to represent iconic American theatre/media experimentation. The late director Reza Abdoh also constructed complex multi-media experiences for many of his audiences. As scholar Arnold Aronson notes:

Although the scientific revolution and the avant-garde may have begun in Europe, the twentieth century was ... the American century because of the peculiar American affinity for technology. America was the land of radio, television, movies, automobiles, airplanes, skyscrapers, superhighways, supermarkets, neon lights ... atomic weapons, rockets, computers, and rock n' roll. It was a land where at least through the 1960's, technology was promoted by the government and commercial enterprise like a panacea, a means towards a better life, a virtual utopia. History had value only insofar as it created a mythology that reinforced the inevitable destiny of America as the technological champion of the world. To live in the USA was to be avant-garde. (41)

Performance art peaked around the 1970's and 80's, much of which was in response to Duchamp's notion of "conceptual art" which lay largely in opposition to media. Conceptual art dealt with issues of temporality, space and the body as material, reducing if not eradicating all together the possibility of commodification. Performance art was thus concerned with immediacy and "the real," often privileging the physicality of performance in task-driven or bodily-oriented exercise over language. In essence, artists began moving outside of the pictorial

frame into live environments, typically referencing autobiographical material and the immediacy of the body over text, which over the 90's saw a return to language and in a popular form of solo storytelling known as solo performance. Over time, artists such as Marina Abramovic, Chris Burns, and Karen Finley were associated as pioneers of the form. Roselee Goldberg's book, *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* supplies the most comprehensive text available in tracing performance art's historical roots and many facets.²⁴

Another critical and visually-driven performance form of the American avant-garde is the Theatre of Images, a genre of theatre formally recognized by scholar Bonnie Marranca in her book of the same name in 1977. Marranca's scholarship arose out of a desire to create critical language for the new quality of art and imagination toward making theatre that she became witness to in the 1970's:

There was real support and encouragement of experimentation in the arts at the national and local levels It was still possible to see John Cage and Merce Cunningham at frequent performances, and the Judson Dancers who started the Grand Union, there were early Philip Glass concerts, when all of his audience in the world could fit into the Idea warehouse on a Sunday afternoon [In] Soho, Trisha Brown's company was dancing on the rooftops of landmark buildings Meredith Monk and Douglas Dunn gave performances in their own lofts ... and elsewhere Kenneth King presented his techno-philosophical-scientific multi-media dances.... Hybrids of art, music, video and performance packed the local clubs and bars. (160-1)

²⁴ Marvin Carlson's *Performance: An Introduction* also shares a comprehensive and insightful view of the development of performance art, although it seems to not be primary focus of the book.

Marranca describes the pioneers in the Theatre of Images as having “[re-thought] the nature of theatre, representation and spectatorship” and puts forward the idea that the Theatre of Images, as its name suggests, puts primary focus on the visual and aural elements, as opposed to traditional linear narration, so that:

The painterly and sculptural qualities of performance are stressed, transforming the theater into a spatially-dominated one activated by sense impressions.... The Theatre of Images is timeless, abstract and presentational. (xii)

In other words, The Theatre of Images works similar to a dream; it navigates the audience member through a labyrinth of images and music which collectively work to favor spectacle over story, albeit through formal structure and the aesthetic difference of the frame. Thus as performance artists developed works involving live time, the theatre of images practitioners relegated their work to the cooler aesthetic the framed device provides. “I hated the theatre in the 60’s,” observed director Robert Wilson, an iconic director of the theatre of images form: “I was formalistic. I used the proscenium arch. My theatre was interior, and I treated the audience with courtesy” (qtd. in Aronson 108).

Marranca describes the key elements of the Theatre of Images as: being free of linear time and narrative; the utilization of tableau as the chief unit of composition; integration of aural sculpture and static imagery; discordant use of language, and the potential for advanced technology. The aesthetic distance of the framed static image arrests the spectator, “stopping and expanding time” in what Marranca terms “image-time” (xiii). Time is thereby experienced as duration rather than chronologically clocked, so that “the stillness of tableau suspends time, causing the eye to focus on an image, and slow down the process of input” (xiv). For Wilson:

One of the things I never liked in the theater, when I first came to New York, was if there was never any time to think. Everything was so speeded up. It was never natural, and there was no element of choice – you had to see what the playwright and actor wanted you to see. It seemed important to me for the audience to have a more interesting experience than that. (qtd. in Tomkins 54)

Wilson himself has said that in his work “we are not dealing with slow motion, but with natural time” stating, “I use the natural time that helps the sun to set, a cloud to change, a day to dawn” (qtd. in Quadri 12). In *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, for example, a tortoise took over an hour to make its way across the stage, while in *CIVIL WarS*, a soldier character spent the entire duration of the production crossing the performance space (Mitter 188). In the space of arrested time, audiences are as Tomkins notes, “invited to think –to fall into a trance-like state of mind in which the imagination can run free” (55). According to Marranca, the significance of the Theatre of Images is its expansion of the audience’s perceptive qualities as the work “agitates for radical, alternative modes of perception” (xii). The Theatre of Images functions by promoting a new syntax of dramaturgy in the “creation of ... a visual grammar ‘written’ in sophisticated perceptual codes [wherein] to break these codes is to enter the refined, sensual worlds [of this] theatre” (xv), further suggesting (as has largely come to pass) that this new “image-movement-music-technology” dramaturgy is “the future of performance” (164).

Wilson is an American experimental theatre director of colossal stature and has come to be known as the iconic Theatre of Images director. As a person, Wilson is described by Tomkins as having “an odd mixture of diffidence and authority, gentleness and power” (71).²⁵ His

²⁵ See Chapter V on the Wilsonian Opera and Einstein on the Beach for more information on Wilson and his influence on and relationship with GALE GATES

inventiveness, striking imagery and non-traditional dramaturgy have marked him as a major force. Among his many original works, *Einstein on the Beach* and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* are perhaps the most well-documented and known. Other works include *King of Spain* (1969), *Deafman Glance* (1970), and *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973). Wilson has toured internationally in the creation or revival of original work, such as *Death, Destruction & Detroit* (1979) and *Death, Destruction & Detroit II* (1987), as well as in the remounting of *Einstein on the Beach* in 1984, 1992 and 2012, among others. In his later stage of directing, Wilson increasingly turned towards opera and literary works, such as *The Magic Flute* (1991), *The Black Rider* (1991), *Madame Butterfly* (1993), *Woyzeck* (2000), *The Ring Cycle* (2005), *Threepenny Opera* (2007), *Happy Days* (2008) and *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2009). The extent and degree of global recognition of Wilson's productions are too numerous to mention here alone.

Scholar Robert Stearns suggests that of all the art movements, "Surrealism is the most sympathetic to Wilson's independent art... [It] allows for surprise and is above all a philosophy of images" (Stearns 53). Surrealist artist Louis Aragon's called Wilson "the future that we predicted" (qtd. Rockwell 17) in his "Open letter to Andre Breton:"

I have never seen anything so beautiful in all the world since I was born Wilson's spectacle is not at all Surrealist ... but it is what others such as ourselves, of whom Surrealism was born, have dreamed would emerge after us, beyond us. (qtd. in Stearns 53)

Wilson's works have been described as overwhelming for "the sheer beauty of his theatrical visions, the dreamy righteousness of the action, [and] the hypnotic blend of nonlinear disjunction and deeper coherence" (*Stage Works* 10). It has even been suggested by scholars Shomit Mitter

and Maria Shevtsova that he influenced the twentieth century performance landscape so profoundly “that productions less cryptic, less singularly enigmatic, seem like relics of a previous age” (190).

Wilson’s three major dramaturgical areas of concern are: “the manipulation of time, the construction of visionary images and the fracturing of verbal language” (Carlson *Critical Introduction* 89). Movement seems to take the place of plot in Wilson’s theatre, and his background as an architect allows him to regard the stage as not a flat space, but as Stears writes, “[a sculpture] to be composed” (37). Language is displaced and performance is instead structured around the movement of bodies in space (Mitter 185). The pyrotechnic spectacle of the Wilsonian theatre cannot singularly be expressed in the language of words; but utilizes musicality, collage, dimension, the visual and the kinetic, as primary modes of communication. “As his works are largely nonverbal, they require no translation. Through an internally defined language of visual and aural patterns, he is able to communicate,” writes Stearns (36). To this end, form overtakes content in the Wilson Theatre of Images. Wilson himself has said that when making a play, he begins with form, even before subject matter. “I start with a visual structure, and in the form I know the content. The form tells me what to do” (Holmberg 84).

Wilson approaches language with a non-hierarchical attitude, presenting it with the same import as movement or light – the sense of the words themselves have minor importance in the context of their musicality and dreamscape setting. Myth is also central to Wilson’s dramaturgy. He employs the biblical and the culturally emblematic, creating a tapestry of archetypal figures to populate his stage. One could be justified in describing Wilson's dramaturgical concern as vast, ranging from monumental figures to nature itself. In describing *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, for example, scholar Calvin Tomkins notes that “interpretations” come “almost

too readily” in a list of deep impressions: “primitive innocence and decadent civilization. Man could draw from his animal nature while Freud looks on. Plato's cave and the shadow of images” (Tomkins 68). Throughout all his work, Wilson deals with epic topics such as civilization, cosmic order, justice, ecology, imperialism and the atom bomb.

In addition to Wilson, directors Richard Foreman and Reza Abdo have also come to represent seminal Theatre of Images practitioners in America.²⁶ Foreman is considered an avant-garde theatre pioneer. He is a playwright and founder of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre which operated out of St. Marks Church in the East Village before its close. Many of Foreman’s plays have been published, although “to read them outside the context of performance is to miss a crucial element.... These are pieces of total theatre” (Aronson 133). Foreman studied at Brown and Yale, but ultimately was dissatisfied with conventional drama. Foreman did not have a political agenda, but as Aronson notes, “in the process of altering perceptual mechanisms, there would undoubtedly be some change in the way the spectator saw the world, and in this sense his theatre could be seen as political” (134). Unlike Wilson, Foreman did not seek to entrance his audience, but played tremendously with perspective through methods such as criss-crossing his stage with strings, employing grotesque gestures and nudity, self-referential dialogue:

I like to assume that the spectator is watching the entire set at all moments of the play, so I try to make stage pictures in which every inch of the stage dynamically participate in the moment-by-moment composition of the peak. I might carefully adjust the tiniest detail, far away from what seems to be the focus of attention in a scene, because I want to maintain the compositional tension across the entire panorama of the stage. Then the

²⁶ The Robert LePage is also considered to be a monumental Theatre of Images director, but as his work largely lies in Canada it is outside the immediate scope of this study. Note, however, his major American works such as Cirque du Soleil’s *Ka* and his staging of the Ring cycle at the Metropolitan Opera.

experience of watching one of my plays is not one of identifying with the character and attending his progression through a series of adventures, but rather savoring the multitude of composed tension in a given moment of the play, registering a moment of multiple tensions as it is usurped by another, and then another, and another, and allowing yourself to be buffeted by the kinetic sensations that result from that rapid succession of compositional moments. (Foreman 250)

Reza Abdoh, another Theatre of Images artist was an Iranian-born artist who spent most of his youth in London and Los Angeles and tragically died of AIDS in 1995 at the premature age of 32. Abdoh is considered to have ushered in a new form of theatre of images with his company, DarA Luz, borrowing from a variety of pop, classical and cultural figures, such as capoeira dance, multi-media TV, “B” films, and history with a dizzying assemblage of image and text and a lens towards sexual identity.

As an artist, immigrant and gay man, Abdoh in many respects saw himself as on the fringes of society, and according to various critics was fueled by his world-view perspective:

Part of it was being an outsider of this country, Italian-Iranian born. Reza was more like a Genet-like character. He was a juvenile delinquent. He was a gay prostitute. He was a criminal as a pre-teenager. Reza came out of a totally different background. Reza was extremely well informed, extremely well read.... For many of us, Reza was the best hope of theatre after the 1970's avant-garde. (Dasgupta 22 October 2012)

Among Reza's many works, are *Minimata* (1989), inspired by the true tragedy of a 1940's Japanese fishing village, where a factory began dumping mercury into its bay, *Father was a Peculiar Man* (1990) which crossed through four blocks of New York's meat-packing district

and was based on Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Law of Remains* (1992), *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice* (1990), *Tight White Right* (1993), *Bogeyman* (1991), and *Quotations from a Ruined City* (1994). Abdoh utilized a good deal of multi-media, and the historical or mythological basis of many of his works became a springboard of discussion towards identity politics, social equity and AIDS. For Abdoh:

Anger [works] as a cleansing agent. Not as a cleansing agent that is cathartic or purging. I mean anger as an agent that propels you into action. To write down your own rules, to make your own rules, to create your own universe. (Vaucher 44)

In this way, Abdoh's work also retained a political aspect.

The Law of Remains for example was staged in the abandoned two-story ballroom of the Hotel Diplomat in New York City. The work was divided into seven scenes scattered over two floors of the hotel, tracking the audience through a journey borrowing from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. There were no seats in *In Tight White Right*, a production which was staged on the sixth floor of a building directly opposite the Public Theatre. Rather, audiences were given cushions and were ferried throughout the space, while saturated in loud "taped collage of rock, rap, Verdi, show tunes and anything else that can be tossed in the mix for a high-decibel effect, plus live [amplified] drums" (Feingold 105). According to scholar Elinor Fuchs, *Tight Right White* "was astonishing in its vision of American racism/homophobia as a single, faceted construct handed on in every reshaped patrimony from slavery to the age of AIDS" (109). Scholar Marvin Carlson perhaps best addresses the lyrical potency of the director's work, describing it as a:

Constant mixture of text, music, movement, video, film and visual spectacle [so] disturbing, moving so rapidly as to defy analysis, even comprehension, and yet Abdoh's productions inevitably give a total impression not only of an astonishingly rich theatrical imagination but of an equally astonishing control of this complex material. (Carlson *Back to the Basics* 123)

Abdoh's work in some respects reflected America's own fragmentation, and he himself said that the environment of Los Angeles inspired him through its unpredictability. "There still remains a frontier spirit here," he says. "It's ironic, because in the pop culture world there is very much an emphasis on trend-making, whereas in the sub-pop world... there is a frontier spirit" (*Interview* 38). According to scholar Elinor Fuchs: "In every Abdoh piece I have seen, pandemonium gives way to nostalgia for a lost pastoral, and an intense longing for the spiritual" (110), while according to scholar Daniel Mufson, the structure of Abdoh's works reflected the:

Chaotic heterogeneity of the American city American in their brashness, iconoclasm and endless playfulness [his works] were nonetheless atypical of American theatre, above all in their rejection... of a world in which moral ambiguity is swept aside for the clearly defined realms of Good and Evil. (1)

For GALE GATES members, Abdoh played an inspirational role. "He was so bold," says Counts. "He was so unapologetically over the top. He would break rules and created his own [paradigm]. He create[d] a whole aesthetic, a whole universe of rules and logic, as a visual artist does" (19 September 2012). For Stern, Abdoh's performers were especially moving:

The connection I see between Reza work and GALE GATES work was Reza's work was so visceral – you wanted to tear off your clothes and get in there with them. From a

performer's perspective, and I think from any artist's perspective, it made you want to be as radical and awesome on stage as you could be. He made you want to be honest and truthful and hardcore and unafraid. I think our *mise en scene* was not as gritty as that, not nearly. Because Michael had this love for beauty and aesthetic of grandeur and fineness in certain ways. So that was really different, but that desire to have that these moments of visceral impact was something that I think everyone of the generation who watched Reza and his company wanted to tap into. That's why we do it. (1 March 2012)

Abdoh's work was significant not only for its dynamic and visionary form, but its importance to the trajectory of the American avant-garde in its affirmation of socially vital content. Historically, American avant-garde peaked in the 1980's New York subculture before experiencing a decline due to reduced funding and right-wing backlash due to its highly charged content. Historian Cynthia Carr describes the year 1988 as a turning point in the energy of the East Village arts scene, writing that "a certain fatalism prevailed" (xiii). Carr describes itself development as riding out from the 1970's punk-rock scene which then became popularized and assimilated by the mainstream, and which was followed by what she calls "schizo-culture." Carr describes it as in part emerged from nightclub energy: "Those were the days, but mostly the nights, of pointed hair and fashionable heroin Outsiders were in, and bad was good" (xv), she writes.

According to Carr, the East Village clubs were critical in the support and development of 1980's underground New York arts culture. These clubs were often run by artists and were designated for artists; they were also frequently only a short walk apart and energized the community through an atmosphere of condensed festivity and performance. The obscurity of location, content and performance hour was alienating to the traditional critic and audience, in

effect fashioning a closely-knit performance culture, and which in turn allowed for a spectacular level of playful experimentation (xvii). For Carr, however, the avant-garde subculture of New York peaked in 1985 and died that same year because of increased city code restriction and commercialism of the form. “As soon as a few climbed the ladder, thus establishing there was a ladder, it changed the perspective of those at the bottom rung The fun [then] degenerated into ambition and cynicism” (xvii), she writes.

According to *1996 Book of the Year: Events of 1995*, a decade later, theatre continued to labor “to rise above economic and artistic uncertainties, offered audiences a mix of the tried-and-true and the cautiously innovative” (Edwards 272). Broadway showcased glamorous productions and stars such as Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*; Carol Burnett in Ken Ludwig’s *Moon over Buffalo*; at age 74, and Zoe Caldwell and Uta Hagen returned to the stage in Nicholas Wright’s *Mrs. Klein* (273). The Public Theatre produced *The Tempest* with Patrick Stewart in the role of Prospero and the world premiere of August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars* was produced, while *Angels in America* continued to draw record audiences in regional performances and national tours. This was also the year OJ trial became a “media obsession” (273).

However, a shadow was also cast over the American arts landscape in 1995 due to the threatened evisceration of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) by conservative-controlled U.S. Congress. “The NEA Four,” as the scandal became known, involved the four artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller. By the 1990’s, government funding of the arts became increasingly under attack. Its peak budget in 1992, for example, was a mere \$176 million (Aronson 199). Any discussion of sexuality and homosexuality in particular was condemned by the conservative Right wing, who had in 1989 introduced legislature prohibiting such depictions. John Frohnmayer, then chairman of the National

Endowment for the Arts, over-ruled a panel of theatre experts and defunded the four as Carr writes, “scapegoat offerings to the Far Right” (xxi). In some ways, the avant-garde was given new life by the institutionalized attacks of the Right. According to former New York alternative space founder Martha Wilson:

[In the 1970’s] we got money. We got praise. The notion that experiment is good and should be supported by the culture was out and about. We had no idea the climate would change 180 degrees. I would say about the mid-80’s the avant-garde was viewed as a virus eating away at the body politic – something that needed to be stamped out if possible. Artists should be – if not killed—at least silenced. (qtd. in Carr 354).

According to Carr, while the NEA Four scandal signified the blatant war on art by the Right, the true turning point in the dissemination of the American avant-garde was in 1995, when the Newt Gingrich-led Republicans wiped out individual artist fellowships and funding for general operational support was extinguished. “Attacks on the NEA were intended to shut down the transgressive, queer, experimental work that usually emerges on the margin but eventually feeds the center” (355), writes Carr, who also suggests that the Right wing backlash ironically fortified aspects of the avant-garde, specifically that relating to sexuality and race issues. Since the decade of the NEA Four scandal the status and vitality of the avant-garde however remains in question. This is due to a large number of factors, many dealing with economic issues and sustainability.²⁷

In summary, the energy and ideas of European exiles fleeing Europe during the world wars allowed for a wave of new perspectives and approaches to art to take place in America.

²⁷ See Chapter VII and conclusion

Primary influences came from former Bauhaus mentors and teachers, whose direction at Black Mountain College helped create an atmosphere of heightened experimentation, ultimately drawing collaborators John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg. New frames involving improvisation, as well as increasing intersection among the arts and explorations in spatial dynamic paved the way for developments such as the “happenings” movement, and mixed-means theatre. Technology was another tool for experimentation throughout the avant-garde and an important site for considering the tension between live and recorded practice. Performance art was another vital form of expression that emerged during the mid-late twentieth century. These avant-garde practices were informed by the surreal artist Marcel Duchamp’s notion of “conceptual art” and increasingly turned towards autobiographical and socially relevant content, inadvertently working towards multicultural awareness and social change. During the 1970’s, scholar Bonnie Marranca’s observation of the New York art and performance world led to recognition of the Theatre of Images, a deeply surreal and image-driven production style incorporating tableaux and aural sculpture. Directors Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and the late Reza Abdo are considered iconic directors of this form. In essence, from the 60’s forward, the American avant-garde was explosive: artists worked heavily in collaboration and were interested in pushing boundaries relating to non-traditional forms of performance, with a key focus on image, marginalized culture and experience and non-narrative event. However, the support and community of art building in the 60’s and 70’s took a downward turn in the 90’s due to reduced funding of work outside the mainstream, spearheaded by the conservative Right.

In 1995, GALE GATES co-founders Michael Counts, John Oglevee and Michelle Stern met and the spark for the company was created. Over their near decade of collaboration together and with the remarkable ensemble of visual, sonic and artists they gathered, GALE GATES further

contributed to the landscape of the American avant-garde. The company forged new frontiers in the literal exploration of new geographies, both internationally and within New York, and their spirit of play, precision and visual arts driven sensibility and the site-specific immersive form contributed to a dramaturgy that in some ways was a collective manifestation of the avant-garde experimentations of the 20th century. For Michael Counts, an awareness and appreciation of this larger history informed the spirit of his own work:

I just wanted to be left alone to make my art. All my heroes did the same. They went off and did their own work and eventually the world turns to them as opposed to going inside the world. Robert Wilson is a hero. Reza Abdoh. Richard Foreman. Joseph Cornell. Cage/Cunningham. Robert Rauchenberg, Marcel Duchamp, Antonin Artaud, Gertrude Stein: these are the people I really identified with. I felt I understood what they meant, intuitively, and it helped me a long my path. They set out to make theatre that was extremely personal and unique to them. And they created a whole aesthetic, a whole universe of rules and logic, as a visual artist does. Pushing the limits. Like Jackson Pollack and Andy Warhol. To me being an artist is about working towards and ultimately creating a paradigm shift. To lead. To innovate. Those are the things that always appealed to me. (19 September 2012)

Gale Gates' work was spatially dynamic, surreal and atmospheric, and cultivated a dramaturgy dependent on the receptive and imaginative viewer in a dramaturgy reminiscent of the Surrealists, Expressionists and many others. Gale Gates' work was never directly political in nature: at the same time, the work was a response to upheavals in civilization and new ways of perceiving the world, such as the burning of Rome and the invention of the camera. "I never get

the sense Michael's work is political whatever else it may be. That is not its *raison d'être*," says Dasgupta:

There was always a dreamlike imagery in Michael's work. He's obviously taken up by surrealism, and surrealist practice. [Andre] Breton talked about Bob Wilson being the last of the surrealists, and with Michael there is that magical sense. He saw the ability to rework perception as his primary aesthetic concerns. His notion of transportation, to lead you from one state of being to another: it's absolutely critical to Michael.

I would venture that GALE GATES was therefore inherently political for the dialogue it espoused among the arts and its movement away from center: both geographically and in practice. The perceptive re-adjustment of the viewer and ownership of experience (often both kinetic and intellectual, as many GALE GATES works involved promenade) arguably landed it in the political sphere, as in this way, GALE GATES was advocating for a democratic spectrum of spectatorship and response. If the close knit artistic community of the 1980's East Village suffered economic upheaval through funding cuts, GALE GATES was in some ways a response to this lacuna. GALE GATES, together with neighboring Brooklyn companies and in large thanks to the generosity of Two Trees Management was able to convert the ground floor of its enormous warehouse into an epicenter of the arts, through ongoing exhibits, productions, and festivities. In sum: its geographical obscurity; exclusivity of its site-specific work; and the strangeness, both unsettling and magical, of its form and content, collectively spoke to a genre of theatre on the cusp. In the following section, the founding of the company, its early work and international travel, and early forays into DUMBO Brooklyn are explored.

Chapter Three

GALe GATes Formation and Early Works

Performance-installation company GALe GATes was formed in 1995 by performer-choreographer Michelle Stern, artistic director/installation artist, Michael Counts, and performer John Oglevee. As it evolved, resident artists Michael Anderson, Jason Boyd, Tom Fruin, Manju Schandler, Jeff Sugg, as well as composer Joseph Diebes, joined the company in a shared practice of design and execution of Counts' vision. These artists and their work were instrumental in the making of GALe GATes. The company drew massive talent from all areas regarding its productions and arts series, from Karen Dalzell of En Garde Arts, to Peter Jacobs and Ken Roht, who worked closely with recognized director Reza Abdoh, to actor Tom Walker of the Living Theatre and Collapsable Giraffe co-founder Jim Findlay, and core performers Brian Bickerstaff, Beth Kurkjian, Kate Moran, and Josh Stark. Developmental director Kit Baker was also instrumental in company success. The following chapter will describe the chronology and development of GALe GATes in its early years, and the story of its acquisition of the DUMBO space.

The spark for the company founding happened in Prague in 1995. After its inception, its members continued to create site-specific work overseas, as well as throughout New York City, over the course of company development. In 1997, GALe GATes was given a permanent rent-free play space in a 40,000 foot warehouse in DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Underpass) Brooklyn, under the auspices of Walentas family developers, Two Trees Management. The company was given the task of designating the desolate area into a cultural beacon through ongoing production, exhibits, parties and artistic support, and resided in the space for approximately six years before disintegrating. Says Baker, "towards the end you had really

strong artists who had really strong ideas about what they wanted to do. It was like the seven year itch. They were entering a new phase of their lives” (27 February 2012). Indeed, the closure of GAle GAtes launched the careers of various integral company members to international scope.

Early Works: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thailand, Japan and the Financial District

To start at the beginning, Stern and Oglevee formed the Teleotheater Company near the end of their Tisch studies at NYU, together with former GAle GAtes lighting designer Jason Boyd.²⁸ The ensemble then traveled to Prague for the summer to perform in various festivals. This was after a year of diligent weekly training, where members met as early as 7 am every Sunday for Grotowski drills. This visit itself was catastrophic: the space flooded and company members suffered sumac poisoning after rehearsing outdoors. Stern describes it as “one thing after another” (1 March 2012). Oglevee returned to Prague the following year, and happenstance ran into Counts, who was then creating large scale site-specific productions around the city of Prague and among its historic castles with his first company, C. & Hammermill.

Instant chemistry led Oglevee to suggest that Counts meet Stern on his return to New York. Stern recalls, “Mike was coming back to New York and John said ‘you need to go meet Michelle. You have to meet each other.’ He came over and we started talking and it was this instant thing” (1 March 2012). Counts describes the meeting with similar significance: “I met

²⁸ According to Boyd, the ending of Teleo dove-tailed the beginning of GAle GAtes, during which time Boyd began working with directors Anne Bogart and Lee Breuer. Boyd’s entry into GAle GAtes and the details of his design work are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

John and he said, *when you go back to New York you need to meet Michelle Stern*, and that was the beginning of the next 10 years of my life” (19 September 2012).

The following winter, Stern, Counts, and Oglevee embarked on creating an original work on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, entitled *The Making of a Mountain* (1995). This production echoed an earlier work Counts had created with Hammermill years before in a visually-driven piece that also took place in front of the Museum. In that initial production, actress Beth Kurkjian arrived in a taxi draped in “a bolt of yellow cloth” and as she walked up the stairs of the museum, the cloth unraveled behind her so that by the time she reached the doors, it divided the stairs in two.

Mountain however shared an entirely different aesthetic from the initial Hammermill piece and led to the official formation of the company. In this piece, the performers borrowed from Gertrude Stein’s 1936 play, *listen to me*. Stern had gotten a photo shoot permit so they could perform for several hours and Counts built tiny battery-powered lights and swept them over the steps of the Met. Stern recalls, “The piece was performed on my 25th birthday. It was pouring rain. That night we said, ‘It’s on. Let’s get serious about this’” (1 March 2012).

Mountain was important too, not only to the historical arc of the company, but also towards its foundational aesthetic commitment to site and image. According to their mission statement, GAle GAtes was committed to challenging the relationship between audience, performers, event and site through multi-disciplinary exploration, with a focus on installation. The level of boldness that marked *Mountain*, however, was in part a result of Counts’ view on the creative process. In a personal interview, Counts describes his earliest Hammermill piece as revelatory. He initiated his first theatre company after graduating from Skidmore College in

Saratoga Springs. “I gathered 50 people.” he says. “And I realized in the process of doing that -- I can do anything I want.” Counts continues by describing this “power to create” as limitless, and the elements of patience, persistence and will as critical to the development of the artist. After having this realization which he shared with his mentor, scholar Guatam Dasgupta, Counts’ personal friend, mentor and co-founder of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Dasgupta was said to reply, “Phase 1 of our education is complete.” In Counts’ next piece, he recruited 20 people and toured Prague in the creation of original theatre. “[This artistic spirit] was all sort of born of that production,” says Counts. “An audacious attitude to make something happen. We [decided] we’re just going to go.”

The adversity the company faced over the course of its career was often overcome by this sense of audacity and inventiveness. “So much creativity comes from facing adversity,” says Counts. “Now I work with technical directors at Lincoln Center or the New York City Opera, and I think often they respond with surprise that a director is so flexible and able to adapt to an issue” (19 September 2012). In addition to the financial concerns Gale Gates encountered over its seven year life span natural to any experimental or fringe work, the company faced geographic and architectural challenges through working in the DUMBO warehouse space.

Evidence of Counts’ relationship to space and play is visible in his initial career and studies at Skidmore College. Some of his early college work included an all-night affair entitled, *The Life and Times of Alice Lidell*, produced in the style of Counts’ influence, director Robert Wilson.²⁹ People were allowed to come and go at will during the progression of the image-driven work which was produced in the Skidmore black box theatre. The foundation of Counts’

²⁹ Alice Lidell is the actual person who became of Alice from Lewis Carroll’s playful book, *Alice in Wonderland*. See Chapter V for Wilson.

later work with site-specific promenade theatre is evident in early experiments, such as a labyrinth “obstacle-course” he created on the Skidmore campus quad with police duct tape.³⁰

However, a significant site of exploration for Counts was the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

For me it was the idea of arriving somewhere. Walking up to the steps of the Met and just welling up with feeling. Not only by how beautiful the façade of the building is -- the fountains, the stairs-- but where it's placed -- Fifth Avenue. What that represents to a kid who grew up on 1st Avenue. The grandeur of that building, its place in the history of New York, its place in the history of art, and knowing all that is inside: the wonder and the beauty and the depth and breadth of all that's in there. That draws something out in me. It makes me want to respond to it. To say something that's reverent and that creates a relationship with it. I wanted to create a personal relationship with that building, so it was different than a museum for me. It was a place I had been in dialogue with. Humanizing the architecture and all that it represented. There were times I would walk around the Met and would leave crying. Literally crying. I would just have to get out of the building. Because I was so overwhelmed with what I was seeing and my own feelings of absolute insignificance in the face of all that. Also this longing for the way that seeing some of these things made me feel. The relationship I had to beauty. And the relationship I had to craftsmanship. And to history. It brought up so much emotional power. It both drew me and it repelled me. And I would always go back. (19 September 2012)

Whether it be related to the historical content and resonance of the play itself, or as a deliberate technical response to the limitations of the space, company work was marked by site-specific

³⁰ Promenade theatre suggests performance structure which allows for audience to roam freely through the space.

detail. Examples of this is also found in company's later and larger forays into international locales, such as the mountaintops of Japan and remote areas of Thailand, throughout obscure areas of the New York financial district, and finally, in GAle GAtes' warehouse home in the criminally-laden area of 1990's DUMBO Brooklyn.

Soon after the Met piece, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), a non-profit organization dedicated to the support and expansion of the arts through New York City, recognized the company through a residence grant. This funding allowed GAle GAtes the entire 50th floor of a high-rise in the heart of New York's financial district to create an installation-performance. Counts and company took this opportunity to produce *90 Degrees from the Equinox? Where are We? And Where are We Going?* (1995). "I was able to get this huge, cavernous, empty, gutted office building floor to do a show, which was really the first GAle GAtes production," Counts says. "It was the field of grass piece" (19 September 2012).

This description only begins to illustrate the immensity of scale and transformational characteristic of the work. The 12 hour performance took place over the course of six days in a 65,000 square foot office floor. Counts and company transformed the business office into an immersive marsh landscape, with paths carved throughout. Tall fregmite grass was manually cut down from the Jamaica Bay wildlife refuge by Stern and collaborators, and two trailer trucks of Styrofoam sheets were donated to the company, allowing them to cover the whole area and re-plant the marsh grass. The piece itself consisted of seven performers, many with "home bases," while a more free-moving female character was able to travel throughout the space to a hybrid text of Gertrude Stein, John Cage and original and found works. The performers themselves were all highly trained actors from the Experimental Theatre Wing at NYU and Ann Bogart's SITI Company. According to Stern, the primary inspiration for the work came from an image of

a field of grass, as well as John Cage text that shares a deep connection to nature, where he “talks about mushrooming and walking through the woods and living out in the country.” (Stern 11 October 2012)

Archival photos show a man in formal wear reading from a book; he seems immersed in a synthetic landscape of grass. The field covers the entire space with no seeming break and the stalks reach up to his torso. It is clear he is in an artificial landscape, which however presents itself as more serene than alienating. The windows in front of him take up the entire wall, and flood the man and the room itself with light. While no city vista is visible, the knowledge that the scene takes place in an urban center, fifty-some floors below is heightened. There is a sense of elevation, loftiness and poetry, culminated in the soft texture of the marsh grass and overwhelming sunshine. The man himself seems statuesque, handsome, and his physical immersion in the text and nature suggests a sense of inner/outer integration reminiscent of the Romantics. Stern describes the feel of immersion in the marsh “while being in a concrete building and looking out on the financial district” as “visually intense.”



Figure 1. Gale GATES et al. *90 degrees from the Equinox*. Archival Photo.

Counts himself states that nature did not play a conscious role in his work, other than maybe “my own subconscious as a manifestation of "nature." (Counts 14 November 2012) For Stern, the use of nature was a reaction to the individual environments in which the company worked from, and that the urban setting was very attractive to her and other company members. Interestingly, many company works transformed inner city landscapes through the verbal and physical referencing of nature, creating a synthetic world more inviting than alienating for its focus on the sublime. Dasgupta considers nature integral to Counts’ aesthetic:

Michael “intervened” in the landscape, but made sure nature itself was somehow aestheticized to conform to his vision. He did this work in New York, there too intervening with his natural surroundings, such as in bisecting the stairs of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as his work in the expansive LMCC space, which he flooded with the fregemite marsh grass. So he had this relationship with nature, aestheticizing nature, or the other way around, and “naturalizing” space. This notion being able to aestheticize or theatricalize a natural landscape has always seemed to be Counts’ agenda. To me, it seemed Michael through his interventionist technique was bringing nature into a space in an aim to literally transport the spectator, from a certain spatial-time dimension to a totally other. (Dasgupta 17 October 2012)

Throughout company work, nature is referenced through company titles: *The Making of a Mountain* (1995); *To SEA, Another Mountain* (1996); *wine-blue-open-water* (1997); *To SEA, another Ocean* (1997), and on. *Field of Mars* (1997-8) references both geographical space and the destruction of nature by man-made fire, in its multi-faceted allusion to Nero’s burning of Rome, while time and again in GALE GATES productions, the proscenium is broken open as audience are invited to wander through artificial woods and landscapes. According to a 1998

Playbill review of *Field of Mars*, Counts states that the mission of GAle GAtes is to create "expansive pieces that the audiences wanders through as if they were guests in another world" (McGrath) which he accomplished through lush panoramas. "The primary metaphor of the work was elemental: the productions themselves were fire and they were air and they were ocean – performance as landscape was important to what we were doing," explains company resident composer, Joseph Diebes (1 March 2012).³¹

Soon after *90 Degrees from the Equinox*, the company shifted its attention to the international art world for continued theatrical experimentation and study. The completion of *90 Degrees* and its significant sponsorship by the LMCC imbued the company with a forward sense of confidence, ultimately leading to work with the Bangkok-Bali-Berlin Festival in Thailand. During their two months stay, the company created an original performance with the BoiSakti Dance Theatre of Indonesia and various installations throughout the city. In our interview, Stern describes this trip as an "unmitigated disaster" explaining that:

After *90 Degrees*, we went to Thailand. We brought the company, and I learned everything I should never do again in Thailand. We came with nine people. We returned with four people, maybe three. Our producer had been in the hospital for a month and a half before, so things were not organized. He asked me to organize things. I'm thinking, "I don't speak Thai, I don't know where I am, I don't know what's going on." We wound up doing weird gigs – we did one at a private animal preserve with animals rescued from poachers. A country club. Some weird expatriate places in Thailand. The work fed our site-specific mission, but we were singing for our supper basically. They told us, "if you don't do this gig, we can't feed you next week." So we said, "all right,

³¹ See Chapter VI for on Stein's "Landscape Theatre" and the 21st century immersive theatre paradigm

we'll do this gig.” And for those we would have very structured improv. Michael would do some sort of installation and we would improvise around that. I was choreographing.... People kept falling in love and running away. Our intern ran off with a Thai boy. He had turned 18 the day before, and he said “I’m leaving,” and I said, “we have to call your mother.” He basically eloped with him, but he was back in New York City one week later. The other side of the group dynamic was very tense. We were not getting along. And when we came back, it was just me and John; we were the only ones standing as actors. Everyone else had run off with their southeast Asian lovers, or were done. (1 March 2012)

Soon after returning to New York, those remaining in the company, primarily Counts, Stern and Oglevee, created another piece inspired by their work in Thailand entitled: *TO SEA, Another Mountain*. Stern describes the work as located in another empty office space, with a more core dance element. Various sculptures were placed on pedestals around the room. “It was a beautiful,” says Stern. “I loved that piece.”

The next company piece took place in Japan. In 1997, members Stern, Oglevee, Counts, and recent addition, composer Joseph Diebes, traveled to Master Teacher Min Tanaka’s Body Weather Farm in Japan for Butoh study and performance. This trip was funded by a grant from the New York Asian Cultural Council, as part of its aim to support cultural exchange through the cross-study and creative work made between the United States and Asia. “I think they were so impressed that we made our way back from Thailand in one piece, that they gave us this grant,” says Stern (1 March 2012).

The basis of the Body Weather Farm, which Tanaka founded in 1985 in a mountain village outside of Tokyo, is its approach to the relationship between the dancing body and geography. Tanaka is considered to have evolved the traditional, slow-moving form of Butoh, into a new method intended to, as according to the website, “connect dancers deeply to the space and landscape around them.... Each body is conceived as constantly changing, like the weather, in complex relationship to its surroundings.” Farming is viewed as integral to the evolution of the dance form and Tanaka’s practice. According to the Body Weather website, visiting dancers commit to hard labor in the fields, raising rice, vegetables and chickens, followed by many hours of daily dance training. As part of the mission of Body Weather, the dancing body becomes more rooted “in physical space and in meaningful connection to one's immediate environment, be it a remote span of desert or an urban cityscape” (“Projects”). To this end, the diligent Butoh work experienced by members was very much in line with company mission to integrate performer, audience and the nuance of geography, both in terms of nature and the artificial landscape of its theatrical worlds.

Performers Stern and Oglevee went through intensive months-long training, and were soon followed by Counts and Diebes. The trip culminated in a site-specific installation-performance on the side of a mountain, and the shared experience was described as instrumental in company development by various members. Diebes describes the company visit to Japan:

The trip was right at the beginning when I think we were all trying to figure out what the company was. We had a lot of ambition and a lot of pure creative energy. We went there for two or three months and it was so different. Min Tanaka Butoh, it’s not main stream Japanese culture so being on that farm was even more strange – going from New York to there. And Michael and I weren’t part of the workshop. So we would sit in front

of the coffee vending machine and talk for hours every day. We covered a lot of ground. That alone – just the conversations we had on a daily basis -- was the biggest influence to what we ended up doing in the end. And when we came back and made *wine-blue-open-water* we were very much informed by that experience over there. The visit to Japan was huge for me. (1 March 2012)

While Counts and Diebes were forming an artistic bond that was to later last almost a decade, Stern and Oglevee were immersed in intensive Butoh study. As part of their daily routine, Oglevee and Stern would wake up at sunrise to harvest vegetables and milk the goats, and would proceed to train outside until lunchtime. She says, “One place that we trained was a black stage out in the sun. Our feet would be burning. And we’d be out there till we couldn’t take it anymore. And then we’d eat lunch and we’d all harvest the vegetables and take care of the animals. And then rehearse in the evenings if we weren’t dropped dead from exhaustion.” The training itself consisted of various squats and deep knee bends, as well as dance manipulation with a partner, and coordination and jumping exercises across the room. “There was a whole lot of identifying your physical tics and getting rid of them,” she explains. “And just becoming strong and becoming small, in a sense. I must have lost 15 lbs. in two weeks. I came home skinny and bald. And dirty. Really dirty. It took weeks to get the dirt out of my hands” (1 March 2012). In terms of the training, Stern further explains:

We would do the Souko, which means very slow movement. Where you would try to move a millimeter at a time. And you would start with a larger body part but you would do it with a partner who would be telling you what to move. He would say, let’s say move your left forefinger up and you would start this process and your right elbow out and you would start this and it leads to really beautiful movement. And it was always a

matter of, slower, slower, slow it down and be more specific. Our bodies became extremely articulate. And strong. And we would do this and hike into the mountain and danced on rocks and in streams, moving in and out of the freezing water. We danced on top of a Mountain that was all sand at the top and we were slowly sliding down, while we did it. Another something we did was moving to imagery that you were focusing on, such as meditating on a tree or a leaf and then letting your body move from that. A really internal space. And it was incredible.

We were out in nature all day all the time. They told us, when you're farming you're dancing. Think about it like that. Think about constantly how you're moving and your connection to the earth. And growth and life and the sun. We were out there in the rain, the cold, whatever the weather was. You would climb up the mountain to the stage, and so when you were looking at the stage, you would see this vista as a backdrop. That was an amazing place to dance. I remember one day opening my eyes and there were all these monkeys watching us that had come out of the woods. It was wild. It was so hard. It pushed us to the edge of what I thought I could physically do. (1 March 2012)

The long-term implication of the Butoh study is varied, depending on company member perspective. Performer Anika K. Barkan, who also studied Butoh at Min Tanaka's Body Weather Farm joined the company during *Field of Mars*, is described by Stern as instrumental in leveraging that vocabulary into the work. Barkan met the company during their intensive in Japan, where she was immersed in near two years of Butoh study. She was then invited to join the company, and relocated from Japan in 1997 to New York to join them, and for some, Barkan, Oglevee and Stern's joint Butoh vocabulary informed the actor process. Core member Brian

Bickerstaff, for example, describes company rehearsals and production warm-ups as borrowing from Butoh exercises to help root the performer's awareness of self and self in space in our phone interview. While Counts himself feels that Butoh did not play an integral role in his work, a parallel seems to exist between the dreamlike landscape of GAle GAtes productions and its focus on nature via its titles and imagery, as well as the internal world of Butoh; particularly the vocabulary of Tanaka, rooted in imagination and nature, as well as a mutual interest in the relationship between geography and creative work. "Because the work was so visual based, I believe that the physical movement background was of great importance," says Barkan, who worked and trained under both Ann Bogart's SITI company and revolutionary dance/choreographer Anna Halprin. "[GAle GAtes'] roles only had vague definitions and [when] we were left alone to come up with things and activities to do, I used my background from my time with Min Tanaka very much, the visualization and image work, enriching the body with life through images and embodiment" (Barkan 6 January 2013).

At the culmination of the trip, Counts created an installation-performance on the mountain stage. The title of the piece was unusually lengthy and was called: *I Dug a Pit a Meter Six in Either Direction and Filled it Full of Sake. I Mixed in Honey and Milk and Poured It Over Barley and Pine Nuts and Rice and Onion and Fruit and Blood and Stopped* (1996). Counts recalls: "They had this amphitheater up on the side of the mountain that was a schlep to get to, you really had to go up the mountain and they had never done something at night. Joe Diebes was part of this proposal as our composer and he started making music and I started leveraging the vocabulary that those guys were developing in their study with Min and Butoh, and we invited other performers and rehearsed." He continues to describe the performance itself as dance-theatre threaded with text, music, images and events, "such as when dance-theatre

starts to bleed more into proper theater” (19 September 2012). For Counts, an essential piece of the production was the audience experience of arrival, and specifically the communal hiking up of a mountain against the sunset, and in the knowledge that the descent would occur at night.

In this work and future productions, the experience of the production did not sit safely within the confines of the actual theatre, but physically encompassed audience entry and exit. As scholar Marvin Carlson notes in his *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, “the entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning in its experience” (2). This concept of urban/rural placement and the significance of theatre architecture and immediate surroundings are intrinsic to the Michael Counts and GAle GAtes experience. In *60 Degrees from the Equinox* and *wine-blue-open-water*, for example, the site of the event, an approximate 50th floor in a business building located in the smack of the financial district, allowed for a multitude of sensations to emerge in the enrichment of the theatrical experience. GAle GAtes’ intersection of visual art installation and performance also defied expectation. Carlson himself considered GAle GAtes to be:

Very innovative and imaginative, especially of course in their use of space. At that time environmental pieces were common in the art world, but still very unusual in theatre. The creation of striking and memorable images within unconventional spaces (such as a roomful of open umbrellas) was something that you might have seen (though not often) at a place like MOMA but not in a performance venue.³²

³² Special thanks to Professor Carlson for his electronic correspondence with me in regards to the company. The umbrellas he refers to is an opening installation the company created in the DUMBO space which entailed 500 blue umbrellas and four performers. This was entitled *TO SEA, another Mountain* (1997). In our first meeting, Counts described the installation to me and noted that it was a performance with no archival documentation.

In my view of the company's work in the financial district, and specifically in my recollection of *wine-blue-open-water*, which took place in GAle GAtes' second residency with the LMCC, the innate knowledge of a performance that was for all intents and purposes suspended 500 feet within the air allowed for a dynamic surrealism to take hold, one that only furthered the whimsical quality of the production itself. The exclusivity of the experience, both spatially and temporally, heightened not so much (for me at any rate) a sense of elitism, which based on ongoing conversation with Counts and company would never have been the intention: but rather created a deepened internal state, only accentuated by the dreamlike feel of the desolate Wall Street at night. Likewise, GAle GAtes' later works in its Brooklyn home involved the audience experience in a physical journey that began far earlier than the entrance through its doors: audience experience presumably bridged the journey from bustling metropolis via subway or car, through the dark unlit streets of the then non-residential and largely dangerous DUMBO, to the company warehouse and the otherworldly experience of a GAle GAtes production. In this way, the company space served as a literal safe-house for invention and exploration. In a personal correspondence, Carlson writes:

When I went to the first GAle GAtes, it was my first visit to DUMBO, which, although it is only one subway stop out of Manhattan was then unknown territory for theatre and performance. Now it is a thriving artistic and residential area with new parks, shops, restaurants, and so on, but then you emerged from the subway and had to walk several blocks through what appeared to be an unbroken, deserted grim industrial/warehouse district. The sense of literally going to the frontiers of the New York art world was very strong.

It was however not only the physical environment of the GAlE GAtes residencies that promoted a sense of otherworldliness, but the physical reconstruction of its theatrical sets.

For example, in many productions Counts and company incorporated false prosceniums that gave way in order to allow audience to explore the physical depths of the staged space; in other instances the set would recede in spectacular backdrop. When asked about Counts' use of false proscenium, the director says:

I think it is a service to the audience to meet their expectations, to go to them where they are, and then to undermine them, to take them somewhere different. Issues I have with some avant-garde theatre are that there's this, "we're going to do what we want. And if you don't get it you're not in our club." And to me that's so elitist and so unnecessary and I've never liked that kind of approach. I've done very, very abstract work, but it's always been done with a hand out to the audience. (19 September 2012)

To this end, the temporal boundaries between the beginning of the performance and the audience entrance intersect. *Field of Mars*, for example, began through the extraordinarily gradual ariel descent of Bickerstaff's character from the ceiling into the foyer of the space, while audience stood around drinking wine and observing the waterfront backdrop. In his book, Carlson notes that "in certain experimental theatres the lobby seems to be losing its traditional function as an essentially neutral transitional space between external world and the auditorium and is becoming an antechamber to the performance space" (134) evident here in GAlE GAtes' spatial/temporal blur of spectators' sense of "real time" into that of the artificial world of the play. In this production, the audience was ultimately led and seated in a proscenium theatre space, that gave way multiple times before audience were directed to walk through its archway.

In many of his and company works, Counts physicalizes the metaphor of the journey through a literal re-creation of space over the progression of the play, creating a sense of scale and surprise through spatial reconfiguration.

In 1997, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council continued to support GAle GAtes through a new grant allowing them a similar space in the New York financial district. There the company created *wine-blue-open-water*, an installation-performance loosely inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* and formed in collaboration with playwright Ruth Margraff. Former GAle GAtes member and Obie-award winning designer Jeff Sugg recalls: "*wine-blue-open-water*. That was a beautiful show. That piece to me very much represented me falling in love with what we were doing. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced" (19 September 2012).

wine-blue-open-water was a multi-focus promenade work, utilizing rolling wagons of boats and sets, and atmospheric sound and lighting composition. Statuesque living sculptures performed Butoh from blue-lit platforms, while the audience was invited to filter through the space in individualized journeys. In this way, the audience's kinetic relationship to the space paralleled the thematic notion of travel inherent to Homer's work. This overlap of thematic content and audience promenade was furthered in later GAle GAtes productions, such as the nightclub atmosphere of Counts' 1999 work, *Field of Mars*, and the 2000 production, *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, whose maze of descending installations echoed the pilgrimage that takes place in Dante's text. To my recollection, when I saw *wine-blue-open-water* as an undergraduate at the Experimental Theatre Wing, the use of pre-recorded text in *wine-blue-open-water* gave the illusion of another presence floating and receding among the many other bodies populating the space, not unlike the fluctuating movement of water. I recall a critical moment wherein a long train whistle was cued with expanding white lights, which pulled audience

attention to another pocket of the playing space. For myself, sensations of nostalgia and adventure were evoked, as well as the physical presence of a train engine by the sound-sculpture. The text, fragmented and non-linear, consistent with GAle GAtes disinterest in chronological story, was arresting. I recall snatches of Jeannette Winterson's poetry floating through the space: the poem was a rumination on travel, transition and passion. In anticipation of later works, *wine-blue-open-water* borrowed from epic ideals rooted in literature and the classics, exploring the interlacing themes of physical journey and landscape.

Diebe's musical score for *wine-blue-open-water* was largely composed of samples he had taken from the Japan, walking through the fields with his microphone. For Diebes, Japan informed his work for this piece:

I have this very vivid memory of being in a field in Japan listening to the cicadas in the trees and one would go off there, another would go off, then two would go off together. This sort of sense of rhythmic independence. Timed independence of events was interesting to me. And that became fundamental to *wine-blue-open-water*. A lot of simultaneous things would happen. Something would just happen and blossom or burst and fall down. (1 March 2012)

Many vital company members gravitated towards the company at this time. Sugg recalls joining GAle GAtes during its installation of *wine-blue-open-water*. "Within two weeks of moving to New York I went down to the company. I talked to Michael and he showed me around and said, 'do you want to work here?' And I said, 'yeah'. He asked, 'when'? and I said 'now.'" Resident Artist Tom Fruin joined the company during this production as well. He visited Stern and Counts at their office; Anderson, a poster collage artist, had already joined the company and they

were collecting material for his upcoming exhibit, which was described as filling the office.

Fruin recalls:

They were going around in a box truck ripping down posters, which were being stored in the office. So there were piles and piles of stuff everywhere. There was Michael Counts, chain smoking the entire interview, just talking about art. I was just 21 and had literally moved there. I went the next day and started helping with the space. (27 February 2012)

Another major player of *wine-blue-open-water* was Obie-award winning performer/musician Cynthia Hopkins, who has since launched into significant fame with her ensemble company, Accinosco.³³ In an interview, Counts describes Hopkins as his “first muse” and discusses the power of the performers in the creation of the work itself:

I’m attracted to people that are attractive I don’t mean physically. I mean people that push the limits. People that are bold. People that you just want to watch on stage. People that have secrets. Cindy Hopkins was one of my first people like that, my first kind of muse. And I would just build around these people. I loved them and would fall in love with them watching them.... Michelle Stern is a powerful force and a wonderful person. Cindy Hopkins is similar and weird. They’re all different and all perfect and all troubled -- so it’s all very human. (19 September 2012)

³³ See Chapter VIII for more on Hopkins and Accinosco

The DUMBO Warehouse

Shortly after the close of *wine-blue-open-water*, which ran for eight weeks in the spring of 1997, the space was sold and the Lower Manhattan Cultural grant ran out. Various company members describe the transition as a frantic, consisting of cold calls and networking. The company and Counts in particular began to feel more oriented towards a permanent indoor playing space for the various advantages it could bring. Although Counts held an active passion for "the super ephemeral" quality of outdoor site-specific theatre, he recalled the complex challenges of month long preparations and technical install for an outdoor production, which could then be undermined by weather, a city traffic jam, or even peoples' dense schedules. "We weren't marketing geniuses at that time," he recalls, "just artists creating crazy stuff and hoping for whoever would come. But that was frustrating to me. We would work and work and work for just those two hours. Sometimes it was the most beautiful night of the summer. Sometimes not" (Counts 19 September 2012). He addressed a struggle with such technicalities and a growing interest in indoor installation, with a specific draw towards unique spaces.

In the process of evacuating from the *wine-blue-open-water* space, Counts cold-called "everyone I knew." Eventually, a friend connected him to a representative of the Walentas, the mega-successful father-son development team of Two Trees Management. At the time, the Walentas had ownership of an underdeveloped area in DUMBO Brooklyn that they were seeking to cultivate. According to Counts, at this juncture "no one knew what DUMBO was yet. And I drove out there and I met with the Walentas representative and said 'this is who we are and what we do, and we are looking for a space to plant our flag somewhere and be a cultural institution'" (19 September 2012). This meeting ultimately led to a visit from Jed Walentas himself to the Gale Gates space in 55 Water Street, and a meeting was struck.

According to Counts, years later, Jed Walentas told Counts that the company had had a “zero chance” before his meeting them. He recalls, “But it was a beautiful spring day. Jed was working with Donald Trump at the time. And he had thought about taking a walk down the financial district. And that’s when he met with me and Michelle.” Counts spontaneously set up a number of installations for the impromptu meeting. “We were actually moving out and the place was in shambles,” he says:

I rearranged the space and hid all the garbage. And I made a few pieces of art just for him, just for Jed. To understand who we were. And he said, “I can’t tell you why but something about that meeting something about who you guys are and what that space looked like I find compelling.” He gave us the space that became GAle GAtes in DUMBO. (19 September 2012).

According to Fruin, Counts and Stern “played this very cool demeanor -- “I guess this will do” when they were given a tour of the space. All the time pinching themselves.” Counts soon after led the company, then ten members, across the Brooklyn Bridge to the new “Mecca” space. Many members interviewed over the course of this study reflect positively and often with gratitude to the Walentas’ vision. As Kurkjian expressed in our interview:

What was really exciting was it felt like we were on the cusp of something. The space was so raw. The neighborhood was not even really in transition at that point. It was really exciting. We got some attention with the *New York Times* and there was a lot of euphoria, I think, around that time. (29 January 2013)



Figure 2: DUMBO’S industrial past. This building sits adjacent to GAle GAtes’ former warehouse. Photography: Sulaiha Bittar

DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), a now flourishing and prominent arts neighborhood, is located between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. The warehouse the company worked from sits almost on the water, with a spectacular view of the bridge and island of Manhattan, and is now occupied by Sovereign Bank, Powerhouse Books, and a parking lot. According to Christopher Gray’s *New York Times* article, “Streetscapes/Robert Gair, Dumbo and Brooklyn; Neighborhood's Past Incised in Its Facades,” the building itself is created in Robert Gairn style, which he defines the overall look of DUMBO in reference to its historic roots as an industrial center. Gairn was a Scottish immigrant and manufacturer from the turn of the 20th century who adopted a system of concrete buildings in the area of DUMBO, which include a stable, a clock tower, a powerhouse and a pier, all connected by a network of railway lines, underground tunnels and, at a later point, aerial bridges. Much of

the original rail system laid in the streets still survives, and most of the old railway openings into the buildings are clearly visible.



Figure 3. DUMBO, 2012. Photo 2012.

The company was given the ground floor of a large waterfront building, with approximately 1/3 of a city block to play within. The square footage was reduced from 40,000 to 30,000 square feet over the duration of the company lifespan, and was located on the corners of Washington, Main and Water streets, and a heightened sense of natural and mechanical power surrounds the site. A large brick PowerStation sits directly across from the space, and side windows look out onto the water. The company space made up of four areas on essentially three levels. The first room consisted of a main lobby 23 feet high, which overlooked the river. On the far end of that room was a balcony, which could allow one to look up into the mezzanine, which was 120 by 80 feet. Stairs led up the mezzanine or down towards the office and studios. The offices and restrooms were located on the mezzanine level, which served as a production

and exhibition space. The ramps and offices were built by the company. In Counts' view, the offices proved to be vital to company growth. "It gave us a lot of credibility when foundations would come. 'Oh, you have an office and a fax machine, you're not some kid working out of his apartment,'" he said (19 September 2012).

The space had a number of idiosyncratic qualities, such as a ramp, arches, a freight door and 3 feet of reinforced concrete columns built every 16 feet in the center. Counts recalls, "I used those columns in every way you possibly could" (19 September 2012). The company often shifted the entrance and exit per production. "It was about meeting and defying expectations," Counts says. "Part of it was changing the orientation of the space. I loved that." According to Suggs, "There's no way you would have experienced a show and said, 'Oh. That's what the floor plan of the space was.' Maybe if you were an architect and completely sober. But 99 percent of the audience was neither of those things." The enormity of space was significant. "Before the digital age I used to take cubistic photographs. To try to explain the space. It was very hard to understand how much space it was and how the space looked," says resident artist Anderson in a personal interview at his Harlem Collage Shop during the winter of 2012. "If you took only one picture you wouldn't be able to get the scale. We could ride our bikes through it" (27 February 2012).³⁴

³⁴ See Chapter Four for more detail on the architectural impact on production scale



Figure 4. Staircase inside GAle GAtes' former entrance and gallery. Photo 2012.

According to Counts, the original proposal made to the Walentas was an explicit business proposal, which was to bring value and help develop the area. It was: “you’re trying to develop this area, we can bring vitality, and we can make it culturally relevant.” GAle GAtes was tremendously successful in its fulfillment of that promise. After only six months, the company created and administrated extensive shows and exhibits to large coverage. *The New York Times* wrote a cover story in the weekend section that was about GAle GAtes and DUMBO, which described the Dumbo Arts Festival as an ambitious “coming-out party for an amenity-free zone seeking to raise its profile” (Marks *A Noirish Encalve*). GAle GAtes played a prominent role within this piece as well. “Mr. Counts and Ms. Stern relocated their company, which melds art and theater in performance pieces staged in vast indoor landscapes, to Dumbo” he writes. “Vast indoor landscapes, of course, do not come cheap, a special hardship for a company whose producer waits tables to make ends meet The troupe opted for off-the-beaten-path Dumbo” (Marks *A Noirish Encalve*). According to Counts, this was the first linkage between art and DUMBO. “The Walentas as said, after that we’d never need a space again. Had we not left after six years we’d probably still be there today.”



Figure 5. Stairs and columns inside GAle GAte’s former gallery and entrance. Photo, 2012.

The Walentas-Counts proposal, though visionary, was not isolated. According to Carlson, the relationship between the theatre and urban development is a major event of the twentieth century. In *Places of Performance*, he writes that the public association between the monumental public theatre and “elegant urban districts” in essence “has allowed modern urban developers to employ such monuments as foundations for the upgrading of surrounding areas” (92). In an example, Carlson shares the Lincoln Center area’s shift into “one of Manhattan’s most fashionable and expensive residential districts, beginning to rival even the long-established upper East Side in social status” (94) as a result of its development. The Walentas similarly sought to refine the DUMBO area through drawing talented individuals in the arts. The warehouse space they provided to GAle GAtes allowed for both the creation of a monumental theatre space in the otherwise remote area, as well as a physical beacon for the arts. GAle GAtes, among other local artists, drew an audience of multiple tastes and disciplines, which in turn provided an active interest and need for neighboring galleries and residencies.



Figure 6. Scenic view of Manhattan from DUMBO. Photographer Sulaiha Bittar.

Carlson writes that the basis of the experimental theatre audience is “a rather more specialized public often involved with or strongly interested in experimentation in the other arts as well. Thus such theatres have often tended to appear ... in areas associated with contemporary artists, their studios, and galleries” (116). Indeed, GAle GAtes’ presentation of theatre, dance, and the visual and sonic arts cultivated a sophisticated audience of various disciplines and specializations. Further, GAle GAtes’ geographic obscurity and lack of ostentatious façade not only drew a heavily avant-garde public, but worked to integrate its identity into the Brooklyn landscape. “Official invisibility has become a common feature in the new experimental theatres,” writes Carlson, and notes that its “integration into its neighborhood is signified by its assimilated façade Indeed, the absence of external signs reinforces feelings of intimacy, exclusiveness, and a focus on the internal event” (127). To this end, the Walentas’

invitation to Counts and company to form a cultural institution in the arts was successful, and allowed the DUMBO area to peak from obscurity to a place of high repute through the garnering of high-end artists and audience.



Figure 7. Scenic view of Manhattan and bridge from window of Smack Mellon Studios, located near GALE GATES' former warehouse. Photographer Sulaiha Bittar.

The core exchange between the Walentas and GALE GATES was a promise of promoting the area for future growth. At the time, the DUMBO area was relatively unpopulated and dangerous. When asked to describe the area, Counts describes it as “lawless and weird.” He says:

It was the Wild West. It was like the film *After Hours* about Soho in the early 80's. Our publicist used to tell the press, if you get there at night, run from the subway to GALE

Gates. There was lots of crime. There wasn't anything. There wasn't a Starbucks or a dry cleaner. There was a pizza deli. It was so different. No one would be there on the weekends. Now you go and it's like a mall. (19 September 2012)

Development director Kit Baker similarly described the area in colorful cinematic terms. "It was *French-Connection* territory, he says. "Nobody wanted to come here" (27 February 2012) .

Actor Tom Walker recalls being assaulted after walking home from a performance of *1839*. "It was a lonely walk in the winter. I heard something behind me. I turned around and there was this beautiful kid in a Peruvian ski hat with a two-by-four. I didn't hesitate. I ran down the street calling 'fire!'" The delinquent was later found. In our interview, Kurkjian recalls often leaving early because she lived in the separate direction of other company members, and often felt unsafe on the subway and walk home alone. "I didn't have a job when I first moved there and had a hard time finding an apartment. We would go to the F train and I would be the only one going to Brooklyn," she recalls:

And I would run, actually, particularly in the bridge between the columns. I would run, because I was scared someone would come from under the columns. I was fearful but at the same time I came from being inspired by Bogart coming to life, by the Wooster Group. I felt ownership of the company. (29 January 2013)

Writer Peter Marks 1997 *New York Times* cover of the DUMBO Arts Festival perhaps described the area best as a "moody streetscape, eternally dwarfed by the spans of two great East River bridges overhead," continuing:

It has no smoke-filled coffeehouses, no upscale galleries, no boutiques with exposed brick and refinished floors and racks of black mini-dresses. Most hours of the day, the

indifferently paved streets lined with air-conditioner repair shops and auto-body garages are as deserted....The nearest bookstore is two subway stops away. Even the neighborhood laundry is in another neighborhoodDumbo is a neighborhood that hides in plain sight. It's less than a seven-minute walk down a steep hill from the Brooklyn Heights promenade, yet many people in the Heights and other surrounding communities have never even heard of their neighbor's whimsical acronym, coined by a local artist years before New York City became Disney country It remains such a well-kept secret that the name of one of its thoroughfares, the two-and-a-half-block Main Street, seems an in-joke The rough edges of Dumbo may be most familiar to outsiders as a backdrop; its streets have been used as the setting in countless films and commercials trying for a dose of gritty urban realism. (*A Noirish Enclave*)

Baker describes the proposal between the Walentas and Counts as “fortunate timing” (27 February 2012). According to Baker, the Walentas essentially stated that in exchange for the space the company had to keep the area alive. He further describes this exchange as “perfect for Michael” because of his talents as an artist and entrepreneur. “GAle GAtes was coming up at a time when money was pretty hard to come by for what it was doing. Michael was pretty accepting of that, very smart and I think he enjoyed the game – the business of theatre; for example, getting that space in Dumbo. Which is why I think the Walentas took to him” (27 February 2012).

The initially contract was for only a year, and although the company had to pay for heat and electricity, the actual performance/studio space rental was free. In order to maintain itself as a beacon for the arts, the company hosted parties, exhibits, performances and miscellaneous events around the clock to keep the space active and of interest. “It wasn’t that there couldn’t be

dark nights,” says Counts, “but we needed to establish ourselves as a great resource for the neighborhood. To be given 40,000 square feet ... maybe some of that activity was self-imposed but we wanted to keep the space and stay on the right side of that.” Despite their ongoing work, various rumors cropped up about the transaction over the space and Gale Gate’s resources; some accounts suggested that Counts supplemented rent with his grandmother’s inheritance; others suggested that the deal was made over a dollar, while still other suggested that Counts compensated for the space through private funds. Counts recounts a particularly vicious assault from *Village Voice* critic Alisa Solomon, who carried forward the misconception that Counts was a “trust fund kid” and “dilettante.” “Really I found this particularly insulting,” he shares, “because it implied that we had an easy path to achieving in what we achieved. Because that must have been the only way we could of it. It couldn’t have be hard work, it couldn’t have been insight, or that we were smart or driven or talented. It was just easy. That we just paid for it” (19 September 2012).

Company reality could not have been further from Solomon’s portrait. A high work ethic was the keystone to company dynamic: members committed themselves fully to be making and production, despite personal and fiscal challenges. “We worked so hard. All the time,” Counts said:

A lot of people came over the years and said, how do I become a member? And I said, very simply: you show up. You work hard, you make yourself invaluable, and then we need you. That’s it. That’s the secret to becoming part of this the company. A lot of people came, were chewed up and that was that. The people that stayed, me and Michelle and Tom and Mike and the others -- it was kamikaze. It was a whole life. And we always used to joke, there’s no B plan. None of us personally/professionally had a B

plan. “This is it. This is what we’re doing.” It’s people who had that kind of spirit that came together and shared it. We used to joke about that, about people who had a lesser commitment to their art, to what they were doing. (Counts 19 September 2012)

Suggs notes: “We worked our butts off. On some level that’s why we most all of us are successful. We’re all very hard workers. That’s what you need that to survive this world” (19 September 2012).

According to the company mission statement, the spirit of Gale GAtes is found in its “hard work and youthful ambition.” This was most evident in the commitment to production its members engaged in. Individuals would typically work in the day and rehearse in the evenings. Actor Brian Bickerstaff recalls, “For two weeks during the three month *Field of Mars* rehearsal process we had 10 hour rehearsal days. I watered plants in the financial district. I’d go to work at 7 in the morning, try to get done at 11. A lot of plants may have died” (17 October 2012). A typical resident artist day may have run from 8 in the morning to work until 6 pm that night, with potential production commission in running lights or helping with miscellaneous needs. The balance between work and artistic life was challenging. Suggs recalls, “I started working at the Wooster Group Garage around ‘97 to 2001. I was working there all day and going to Gale GAtes every night. That’s crazy right there. How do you do that? But there was no other way. I wouldn’t have done anything else.”³⁵ According to Anderson, “all of us had a strong work ethic and were good at what we did. It was a great combined effort” (1 March 2012).

The company and individual members found compensation through commissioned work and art and exhibit space rentals. Nonetheless, a solid income was difficult to come by. “You

³⁵ See Chapter VIII for more on The Wooster Group. The Wooster Group is considered to be the seminal American theatre company of the leading avant-garde by various scholars and artists.

know those social security statements you get every few years? There were like three years where my official income was zero. Zero dollars,” says Counts, continuing:

And there was a point where we’d gotten this big grant and we were paying ourselves, in addition to outside work we could get by hook and crook and whatever we could beg borrow and steal, and our official income was \$12,000. It was tough. It was hand to mouth. None of us had health insurance. I remember my parents providing “catastrophe insurance” -- so they wouldn’t be bankrupt if I got cancer or hit by a car. (19 September 2012)

Artist Anderson reflects, “We were so broke. I was living on the top of the Manhattan bridge on the Manhattan side. Forget it. It was crazy. We had nothing to eat. The only thing we had was beer and the infamous box of Saki that lasted forever” (1 March 2012). A system was set up with local DUMBO eateries Tate and Brothers, who would donate all their danishes and pad thai after hours. “We would just live on that and sleep on the floor,” says Fruin in our interview (27 February 2012).

A further challenge for the company lay in the administrative and facility details. Stern, who worked in the capacities of both producer and lead actress, recalls the difficulty of performing under both roles. “As a producer,” she notes, “you’re very concerned with reviews as they drive ticket sales and funding; but as a performer, you don’t really want to focus on press. I was always in this quandary of booking press tickets and then having to clear out the knowledge that *The New York Times* was sitting in the front row” (1 March 2012). The challenge of maintaining a clean space while trying to fund operations through rentals and parties was also a difficult undertaking. According to Counts, “to clean up the space took a day. To

mop the space took three hours of hard work with a couple of people. The toilets overflowed. It got cold as hell in the winter” (19 September 2012).

The company worked with efficacy, hard work and invention, and utilized whatever resources became available. According to Anderson, for example, the company used refuse-lumber from the strike of Scorsese’s film, *Gangs of New York*, when it was shot in the area. “Other things we would make by hand,” he says. When asked about the role of unions in company work during our interview, lighting designer Boyd responded, “Back in those days we were pirates doing our thing. It was a collective of artists really and there was nobody to answer to but ourselves, and Michael sometimes” (8 February 2013). According to company development director, Kit Baker, the company created work of superior production value based on budgets “far less than their actual cash [worth]” (1 March 2013). Baker credits many variables, such as the high-level of commitment, talent and connectivity of company members. Anderson, a self-taught welder, and Fruin’s gift for discovering and salvaging vital raw materials, for example, helped with company efficacy and quality. Gale Gates’ use of existing assets, such as the physical warehouse space, as well as in-kind donations, also allowed the company to save costs. Boyd, for example, was able to persuade a stage lighting company who knew and liked his work to lend the company a new state-of-the-art intelligent and moving lights, and composer Diebes was able to acquire a donated grand piano for the warehouse space from the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The company also had excellent relationships with a number of local artists who would assist by making props, volunteer time and expertise, and on occasion reduce fees. “We would exhibit their art occasionally,” says Baker, “which we were happy to do since it kept the space open and humming. It was a happy "quid pro quo" for both sides” (Baker 6 January 2013).

Perhaps one of the greatest supporters of the company, in addition to Brooklyn Academy of Art executive producer Joe Melillo, was that of internationally established visual artist Craig McPherson, who had formerly served as a curator and lecturer for the National Endowment for the Arts and became a close associate of the company over the years:

At some point in the mid 90's I became interested in the experimental theater scene and went to two or three every month for several years. Most of these were black box houses in the East Village and the lower east side, but my wife noticed a review for a piece in DUMBO – Michael [Counts'] first big production in that space, possibly *The Field of Mars*. I organized some friends and saw it again, then contacted Michael and we met. Over the course of the next several years I became friends with Michael and most of the GAlE GAtes crew.³⁶ (26 April 2013).

Additionally, McPherson would frequently introduce friends and professional acquaintances to GAlE GAtes. For example, one evening he organized a dinner party and rented a small bus to drive his guests from Manhattan to DUMBO. “These were members of the art establishment – the publisher of *ArtForum*, the art critic at *Vogue*, a Broadway theater producer, etc. – who were well placed to spread the word about this new talent,” he says. Over the years, McPherson also invited GAlE GAtes company member to dinner parties, “mostly for the pleasure of their company, but also to introduce them to friends and collectors who might be supportive. I also tried to help by donating artwork for fundraising purposes.”

When asked about the reason behind their high level of commitment, many individuals shared Sugg's feelings when he responded, “We were in our 20's, and we weren't in Canada and

³⁶ See Chapters four and five for more detail on McPherson's relationship to the company and his artwork.

we weren't in Germany. We were in New York. GAle GAtes people weren't paid that much and those of us that were there all the time got studio space for a certain amount of labor. For me, it was 'yeah, I'm going to do that. Of course I'm going to do that. Where else am I going to do that?'" While recognition for the company grew over time, fiscal challenges remained a concern. "At the end of the day -- the reality of why it ended," said Suggs, "is that none of us were getting paid at market value and we all knew that. And people had to get work. And New York was getting a lot more expensive. It was reality" (19 September 2012).

Despite the challenges presented to the company, they fulfilled their bargain in helping transform DUMBO into a cultural institution. The area is now considered one of New York's premier art districts, and is populated with upscale shops, residencies, and eateries. Counts recalls the sensation of "being on the leading edge of right place, right time" during the neighborhood's transition (19 September 2012). The warehouse given to GAle GAtes by the Walentas allowed for Counts and company members to move forward with a unique opera-installation-performance mission through the creation of multiple works, and the company's revolving focus on the visual, theatrical and sonic arenas, together with the work and energies of other premier avant-garde companies working in the area, helped further DUMBO's reputation as a posh and eclectic artist residency. According to freelance director/designer and GAle GAtes collaborator Jim Findlay, "No one knew DUMBO was going to become the Upper West Side. The developers said they wanted it to be that, but we didn't think it could happen and certainly not so fast" (4 January 2013).



Figure 8. Powerhouse Books, now located in GALE GATES' former entrance and gallery space.

In summary, company members' idealism, talent and die-hard commitment to the arts helped GALE GATES grow into an important voice in the experimental theatre and visual art scene of 1990's New York. This was a joint effort by company members and neighboring artisans, led by the vision of artistic director Michael Counts. Company development took place overseas, throughout the Manhattan financial district, and finally in the then-budding development of DUMBO Brooklyn. The savvy and intense work ethic of individual members, as well as the faith and patronage of significant institutions and foundations helped lead company towards success.

The following two chapters will be devoted to the four major production works: *Field of Mars* (1997-8); *Tilly Losch* (1998-9); *1839* (1999) and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember* (2000). These productions received controversial reviews from journals such as *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*, among others. Peter Marks wrote in *The New York Times* for example, that Counts was a “mad genius” in his review of *Field of Mars, (Carnival for the Senses)* while *TimeOut* critic Erik Jackson described *Tilly Losch* as “rendering the seemingly ordinary extraordinary” in the “beautifully modulated unveilings” of production imagery (*Tilly Losch*). For company co-founder Stern:

Some of these critics -- if they don't have a narrative to tell them when to feel this way, or that they should feel this way, or here is what we're telling you about what we feel about this -- they don't know how to respond to that. In this day and age critics are more used to seeing work that is not narrative and have an understanding that there can still be an emotional capacity. [Back then] there was a disconnect. (1 March 2012)

In addition to company production, GALE GATES was also known for the creation of the Emerging Curator Series, which together with innumerable parties, celebrations and performances, launched not only GALE GATES members, but large numbers of performance/visual artists into a global recognition. “Michael was always dreaming up these things that were really fascinating, really outside of the box, and that were ahead of his time,” says Baker (1 March 2012). Indeed, GALE GATES' dreamlike promenade theatre marks it as a vital contributor to the evolving experimental performance landscape, to be discussed further in the following chapter.

“We were interested in spectacle and we were interested in blowing people away. We were interested in seduction. We were interested in the Wagnerian sense of Gesamtkunstwerk. How immersive and huge and spellbinding can you make an experience for a group of people? A 360 technological immersion. It was a euphoric experiential sensorium” ~Joseph Diebes, (1 March 2012)

Chapter Four

Landing on the Map: *Field of Mars* and *Tilly Losch*

In winter 1998, installation /performance company GAle GAtes et al. produced its first major work in its 40,000 square foot DUMBO warehouse: a promenade installation-performance entitled *Field of Mars*. This production was followed by three other large scale works over the duration of the company’s time in the space: *Tilly Losch*, which was inspired by the surrealist artist Joseph Cornell’s piece of the same name, which melded images from mid-twentieth century Americana in the portrait of a world in flux; *1839*, named after the year of the invention of the camera and which explored issues of maturation through the lens of the Oedipus tale, and finally, *So Long Ago I Can’t Remember: A Divine Comedy*, which re-imagined Dante’s *Inferno* through an installation-performance tour throughout the space. Each production was spearheaded by the direction and vision of artistic director Michael Counts and was executed by a talented and committed ensemble of resident and associate artists and performers.

In addition to innumerable events hosted over their six year residency, such as parties, exhibits, and various performance and visual art workshops, the company, through the direction

of Counts, spearheaded multiple installations and productions. Some examples of these are *Oh... A Fifty-Year Dart* (1997), a three month long and five-part performance sponsored in part by the LMCC, and which took place throughout New York City, such as in Grand Central Station, the SoHo Arts Festival and the Tunnel nightclub. *Departure* (1996) and *Ark* (1996) were two installations respectively produced for one night only. *To Sea, Another Ocean* (1997) was also a one night installation/performance, primarily created in inauguration of the new GAle GAtes space in DUMBO, and utilized four performers and 500 blue umbrellas. By 2000, Counts began experimenting with productions outside of the warehouse, such as his successful production of Gertrude Stein's *Listen to Me* at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, where he met and recruited choreographer Ken Roht, as well as his homage to post 9/11 New York in *Looking Forward*, a video installation that cyclically took place over the course of a month from the DUMBO clock watchtower. Fruin's company, Transmission Project, co-created with company members Sugg, Hopkins and Barkan also created work within the space, and resident composer Diebes created major installation-opera, *Strange Birds*, over the course of company work in collaboration with Sugg.

Text was employed in both dialogue and monologue form, while foreign languages were also sometimes utilized. Director Michael Counts often weaved found and original text, the former typically extracted from classical literature or historical documentation and written from a deeply personalized view on the part of the narrator. Counts also worked closely with notable playwrights Ruth Magraff and Kevin Oakes on the separate productions, *wine-blue-open-water* and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*. In essence, language did not provide primary insight into an understanding of the world of the plays, but rather was one of many dramaturgical elements which collectively served to inform audience experience.

Company work typically lasted slightly over an hour, no intermissions were provided, and production runs themselves had only a maximum of two month allowance based on budgeting needs. The experience of the productions typically suggested a fantastical world, populated by a spectrum of grotesque and magnetic characters, always supported by Counts' enigmatic vistas and Joseph Diebes' driving score. Sound was amplified throughout the space through base subwoofers and microphones: in some instances, text was pre-recorded and actors performed alongside themselves in an uncanny recreation of the original impulse. In my interviews, actors typically described physical vocabulary as the primary building tool for character, as well as Diebes' music, and the highly charged sensorial world. To this end, Counts worked closely with physically trained actors. Later in Counts' and GALE GATES' career, former Reza Abdoh choreographer Ken Roht became a central collaborator. Visual artist Craig McPherson was also important to company development and represented a unique intersection in the visual and performing arts, as he created a series based on company rehearsal and production. In general, company work required an artistic sensibility on the part of the viewer, in that language and story were not provided in cohesive narrative. Rather company aesthetic entailed the thematic assemblage of visual, sonic, and kinetic-driven work, often with a mission towards the sensorial, the reflexive, and the sublime. Audience subjectivity of experience and active participation in the unfolding of the piece were thus integral. However, company work was not entirely abstract, but utilized elements of rhythm and repetition, thereby allowing for thematic association to emerge. In this way GALE GATES' theatre could also be considered ruminations on

a theme (such as the destructive quality of political power), dreamscapes, or embodied metaphors for innate human preoccupations (such as love, masochism or warfare.)³⁷

Over the course of company trajectory, GAle GAtes gained a strong following among the predominantly younger generation of downtown and avant-garde circles, leading to many extended production runs. Over the course of its career the company also experienced grant success through the generosity of organizations such as The Greenwall Foundation, The Heathcote Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, The Howard Gilman Foundation, and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, along with project grants from the National Endowment for the Art, New York State Council of the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The Asian Cultural Council, Franklin Furnace, Goh Productions and others. In the following two chapters, the dramaturgical process, production detail and critical response of the four major DUMBO space productions will be described.

Field of Mars

Foundation and Dramaturgy

Field of Mars was inspired by Roman historian Tacitus' account of the burning of the Field of Mars, shortly before the destruction of the empire itself. Counts' fascination with this historical moment seemed to hinge on its graphic nature, significance in human history, and theatricality, as well as a personal response to the violence of the event. Counts also addresses serendipity as important to his process, not only with this production, but various others:

³⁷ While I was unable to obtain a specific number of seats available for each production, it seems that GAle GAtes' aesthetic was geared towards a more intimate audience for both the promenade and traditional seated productions.

There are a few books that came into my life -- I've often described it as I felt like they jumped off the shelf into my arms. I'm walking through The Strand [bookstore], there are a million books, and there it is. And that book changed my life. I can't describe it. It's happened a few times. And one of those books was *World's Great Letters*. There were various accounts. Dostoyevsky writing to his brother after he was almost assassinated, to letters of obscurity. It was a portrait of human history through correspondence. And that book changed my life. I would build pieces around some of ideas and letters and relationships and the stories that were revealed. There was another book similar to that, "Eyewitness to History." Which was the burning of Rome and which was the birth of *Field of Mars* and a whole universe of symbols and different things. The burning of Rome was at the time one of the most destructive of tragedies. People fled the city to this field, and I just imagined people sitting there on the side of the hill and watching this spectacle-event; they were sitting in this pseudo-amphitheater and watching the fire happen. (19 September 2012)

When asked to articulate specific meanings within his productions, Counts is not so much resistant as open to other possibilities:

There's plenty of story in what I do," he says. It's just more like micro-stories. But the sequence does not deliver an arc that has a resolution and a clear message. You don't walk away from it saying, "I know what Michael Counts thinks about Nero. He's really made a definitive statement about Nero and about how power corrupts and power is bad." I don't know that that's true. I don't know that I'd have anything to say about it, and that if I did, you would necessarily care about that. I'm not so unique. The things that I've struggled with other people struggle with. Feelings and fears and attractions and

frustrations and the ambitions and struggles. A lot those things are just shared. I find my way through my own and make theatre about it; but not in a definitive way. (19 September 2012)

Tacitus' account of the burning of Rome is short and vivid. He opens his writing with a commentary on the moral decline of the land, writing that "the situation of the country was deteriorating every day" (1). He continues to describe Nero's rule by noting the emperor's selection of two commanders of the Guard – one based on his popularity, and the other "because Nero found his unending immoralities and evil reputation fascinating" (2). On the fire itself, Tacitus writes:

First, the fire swept violently over the level spaces, then climbed the hills -- but returned to ravage the lower ground again. It outstripped every counter measure. The ancient city's narrow winding streets and irregular blocks encouraged its progress. Terrified, shrieking women, helpless old and young, people intent on their own safety, people unselfishly supporting invalids or waiting for them, fugitives and lingerers alike – all heightened the confusion. When people looked back, menacing flames sprang up before them or outflanked them. When they escaped to a neighboring quarter, the fire followed – even districts believed remote proved to be involved. Finally, with no idea where or what to flee, they crowded onto the country roads, or lay in the fields For the relief of the homeless, fugitive masses, [Nero] threw open the field of mars, including Agrippa's public buildings and even his own gardens. Nero also constructed emergency accommodation for the destitute multitude. Food was brought ... and the price of corn was cut. Yet these measures, for all their popular character,

earned no gratitude. For a rumor spread that while the city was burning, Nero had gone to his private stage and comparing modern calamities with ancient, had sung of the destruction of Troy. (21-2)

While Counts insists on a lack of absolute statement within the production, the foundational offspring of the piece, that being Nero's Rome, suggests not only the corrupting potential of power, but also the dangers of privilege and the potential for theatricality in mass tragedy, that being the act of witnessing by a people. In Counts' dramaturgy, there is a purposeful avoidance of the declamatory:

There's a point to reveal things, but the idea that one can make a definitive statement – I've always had a hard time with it. My approach is I'm proposing something, I'm exploring something. I'm throwing out questions. I'm creating very personal, autobiographical work. I'm letting you in. At the time I was considering the production I was a 20-something sophomore misanthropic kid figuring out his own world in the 90's. It was like I was watching my own Rome burn both as our civilization goes off the cliff in one interpretation of where humanity was headed, and then in another, I was struggling with all kinds of things as a 20-something. I was coming of age. The conflict and the confusion. And that story resonated on all those levels to me. Creating the production was very much about my own experience. Some people say that all art is autobiographical. Mine was very much so. (19 September 2012)

Details and Description

Field of Mars essentially launched the company into the critical hemi-sphere, and it was with this work that Counts' viscerally enigmatic style and resident composer Joseph Diebes' original composition came into significant play. In *Field of Mars*, a non-narrative promenade event, spectators were guided from the entry foyer and its view of Manhattan and the river to an upstairs cinema seating area which gave way to multiple false prosceniums in a crescendo of red lights. The audience was then cued to walk through a maze of wood and urban landscapes to the backbeat of Diebes' rhythmically-driven composition. Among the many installations the audiences encountered were a graffiti bathroom, a floating dining room, the appropriated interior of Matisse's *Icarus* painting, a surreal living room still-life, and a serene final image reminiscent of twilight in the suspended world of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for G-dot*. Videos and text were projected on various surfaces. In a 1998 *Playbill* review, writer Sean McGrath describes the production as "various shifting landscapes that take [audience] from Ancient Rome to a New York City apartment, from a lavishly set formal dining table to an 8,000 square foot forest." The production was likewise populated by an odd mix of characters, both modern and ancient, such as the Greek prophet Tiresias, upper-class metropolitans, Huns and witches, all who inhabited a visual background recalling Matisse, Hopper and Counts' own vision. The production borrowed from stylized elements relating to film noir, the fairytale, and had an overarching nightclub aesthetic enforced by Diebes' music. The program notes read: "This performance is as a dream is, or a landscape. Its meaning is more or less what you determine."

Actors, who performed multiple roles, as in most GALE GATES productions, were miked and consistently moved through the space. "Kate Moran told me once she loved GALE GATES because it was more like athletics than theatre," recalls development director Kit Baker:

It was always about running to get in the right place. So what was running in her mind was not “what’s my motivation” but “will I have time to run to the next cue?” Michael really stretched the actors this way – physically – and so they were allowed to spin. (27 February 2012)

Text was generally tangential and even sometimes produced in other languages:

From time to time [we] discern the name Nero, hear references to a ship sinking, and gather that a man and a woman are meeting, joining, and coming to blows. One can make out whole lines...: "We always bear with us what we flee from." "Only suffering can vanquish suffering." Once, when the [noise] abates ... a woman sings a plaintive lament about "slovenly dreams" awash in alcohol. (Solomon *Wasteland*)

The synergy of lighting and sound, conjunct with the enigmatic imagery and promenade structure created a highly sensorial experience. Says former GALE GAtes designer Jeff Sugg: “It was mayhem. It was like punk-rock Robert Wilson on acid. It was insanely magical” (19 September 2012).

The production began in a melding of life and performance, as audience gathered in the gallery foyer, many like myself chatting with companions and drinking wine to the backdrop of the waterfront, Manhattan visible in the distance. The music and lighting began to emerge very subtly: the expectant silence of audience took over as people slowly realized that the production had begun, fed by the image of a platinum haired man (Brian Bickerstaff) in a business suit suspended – seemingly levitating – in the air.

Bickerstaff himself recalls beginning the production, positioned in front of a column. “I remember writing some mathematical equations on a little pad. This character was trying to

grasp math and gravity,” he says. “I was tying him back to a historical figure, maybe Newton. It was something for me to grasp on to” (17 October 2012). The character was lifted to the top of the column and slowly flipped over, then began to descend head first. I recall the image evoking that of a body in water; and my own association was that of the womb. For Bickerstaff, “It was like I was entering a different world. It was like I was inviting the audience into my dream.” His character next walked up the ramp and stood staring at the audience, before turning into the playing space, a gesture which served as an invitation for the audience to follow. His movements were slow and precise which in turn provided a solemn rituality to each moment, and which were accentuated by Diebes’ drone bass and the atmospheric lightning.

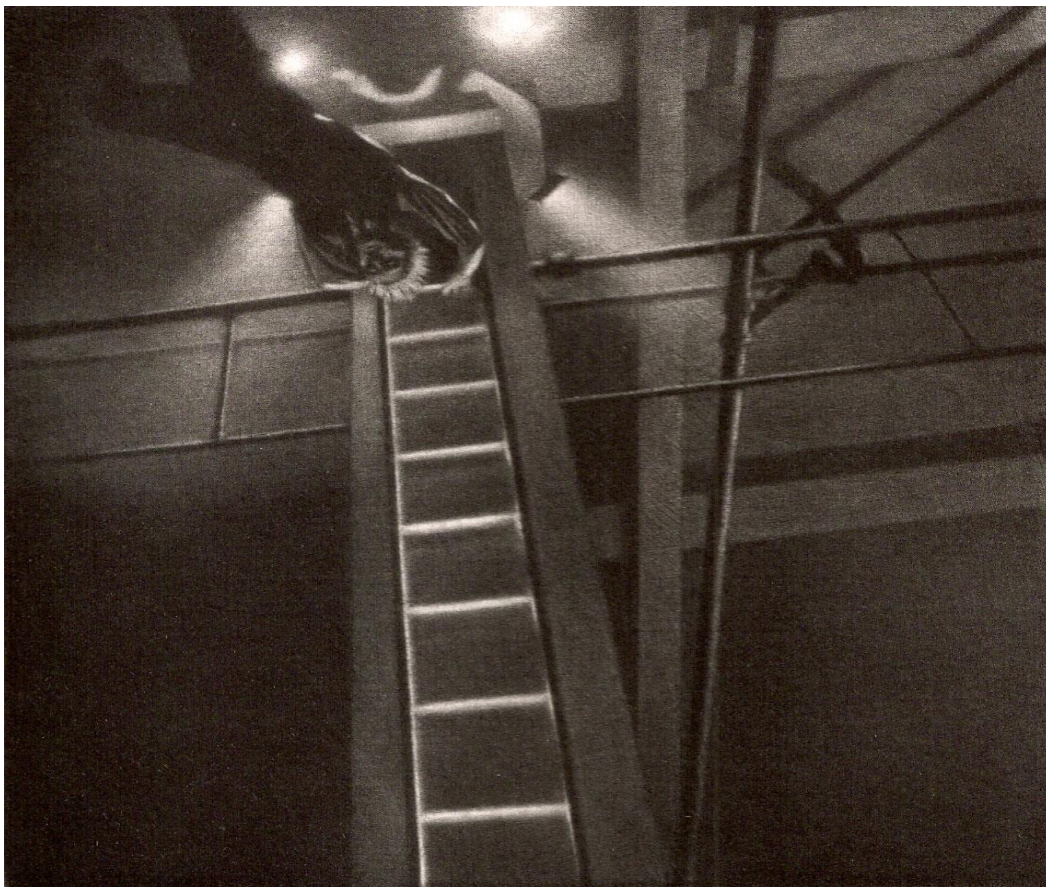


Figure 9. Artist Craig McPherson. Courtesy of the Artist. *Field-of-Mars-Mezzo W.*

As the audience walked up the ramp and through the space, lighting slowly accentuated numerous rows of seats, at the same time illuminating an enormous painting of a woman on the far wall. The area was staged like a miniature black box theatre, and as soon as the audience was seated, a living room became visible in the playing space. “There was a very geometric lighting,” says Boyd. “Everything was very square and edgy.” Recalls Kurkjian:

The living room scene required an incredible tension in our performer bodies. It was as if there was a couple – there were no established relationships between the people – basically it was the image of someone’s living room that opened up into something less literal. It was like a Matisse rendering of a person. My character was very still on this couch. And then I started in a drawn way to stagger myself while holding on to the armrest of the couch, pulled myself off up and did a disrobing. I had a gorgeous costume; there was all this tulle under beneath, so it was very bulbous. So when I disrobed there was a sense that we were now going to enter the underbelly of things. My character was like a dark damsel, but it wasn’t necessarily articulated like that. Basically the question was how do you get out of this beautiful costume? How do you dance in the slip? So I was using my elbow movements and making angles. Anika [Barkan] was visible in the background as a Roman slave. There wasn’t a place of pain or crisis that this was coming from. Nor was it whimsical. It was just very sharp and specific.

Everything was very scored. (29 January 2013)

Around the point of Kurkjian’s disrobing, the back wall was pushed away, which exposed another farther back wall. This reveal was repeated twice more, so that three walls in total gave way to a dramatic reveal of the complete warehouse space. “Virtually no one had seen the GAle

Gates' space before," recalls Bickerstaff. This moment seemed significant in its repetitive reveal of space and body.

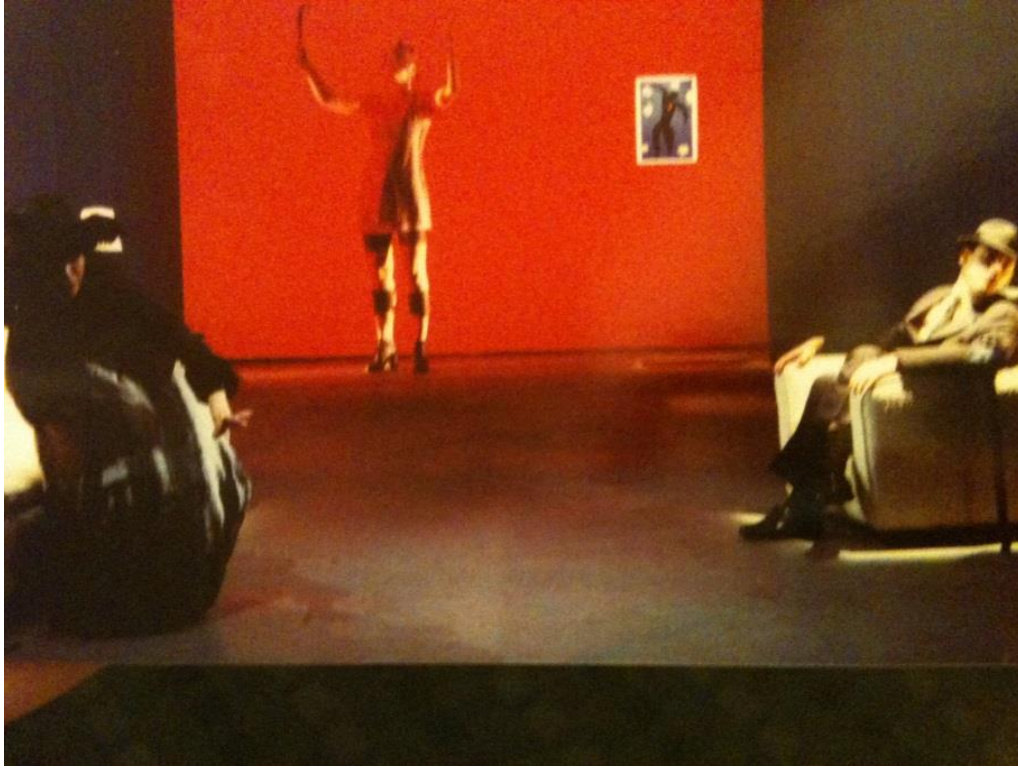


Figure 10. GAle GAtes et al. Archival photo. *Field of Mars* Living Room scene. Actors left to right, Beth Kurkjian, Anika Barkan, Ben Busch.

After the final wall was pushed away a forest was visible in the distance. “It was a dream world we’d opened up to everybody,” (18 October 2012) says Bickerstaff. As the audience sat looking at the living room, the forest, which was on a rolling platform, slowly pulled away 80 feet until it reached the darkness, leaving lights strung through the forest as the remaining image. Recalls Boyd:

Cynthia Hopkins was inside the forest dressed as a pixie, all in white, and the scene was lit in greens. It was all lush and strange. It was one of those moments that was just magical. And all of a sudden the platform she was on began to track upstage and we managed to light it multiple times. I had to have series and series of gogos set in the space and the whole thing was on timers and would time out so that her platform would disappear into the distance. (6 February 2013)

After the retreat of the forest, the house lights dimmed and rose in the back space in invitation. Various members recall the uncertainty and excitement of the audience as the lights darkened in the house and they entered into the playing space itself. “When the audience walked into the forest it was like a shot gun had gone off” recalls Bickerstaff. Moving lights, including a spinning red light on the floor took over the space together with Diebes’ drum and bass rhythmic score. “It was an awesome visual and sonic moment,” says Boyd.



Figure 11. Photo courtesy of Beth Kurkjian. *Field of Mars*. GALE GATES et al. Photo featuring Kurkjian, Ben Busch and Cynthia Hopkins

According to many company members, it was *Field of Mars* that placed GALE GATES “on the map” (Bickerstaff 8 January 2011). Actor Brian Bickerstaff, who later came to be a core performance member, recalls auditioning for the production, based on a recommendation by Boyd:

I returned to New York after college [and] went to GALE GATES on a weekend night. I was introduced to Michael almost immediately. They were doing a gallery. And I think the first thing he asked me was, “who are your three favorite playwrights?” And I said, “Sam Beckett, Harold Pinter and Shakespeare.” And he said, “We’re working on a new show. I’d like you to come audition for it.” At the audition, I think he just wanted to see if you could speak like a human being, and also get a sense of your personality. They had just moved to the space in DUMBO. He made me do a monologue from a 1908 Polish Futurist play called *The Crazy Locomotive*. Once rehearsal started, we would rehearse for months. There were a lot of sets to build. It was a 40,000 square foot space, probably a good 2/3 or more of that was performance area. We went in. There was a script pieced together from different things. We sat around a table for a while and talked about ideas we had. (18 October 2012)

It was during *Field of Mars* that many influential artists gravitated towards the company and became core members. Bickerstaff for example recommended actor/musician Josh Stark, who also joined the company around this time. Says Bickerstaff: “Josh went in and auditioned with a guitar and guitar amp. He was immediately cast.” Other members, such as Dutch dancer/performer Anika Barkan and grant writer Kit Baker joined GALE GATES around this period. Baker, a long time grant writer for the Lincoln Center and curator for the Tate Museum, held international art experience via venues and cities such as the Almeida in London, the

Edinburgh Festival as well as production work in Berlin, Lisbon, and Siberia. During his time with GALE GATES, Kit raised funds from foundations and government agencies and worked with Counts and Stern on a range of artistic and management issues. According to Stern, Baker's work was instrumental to the company development (1 March 2012). Barkan contributed to the foundational physical vocabulary of the company through her knowledge of Butoh study from Min Tanaka's Body Weather Farm and Bogart SITI training, as well as her extensive knowledge of dance, and remained a core performer in many GALE GATES productions. Stark, who too played an important role in company growth and development, is credited by various members for his talents and positive influence.



Figure 12. Field of Mars. Archive Still. Living Room Scene. Kurkjian, Busch and Hopkins.

Field of Mars also represented the first of three collaborations between Counts and Boyd. Boyd, a graduate from Webster Conservatory, came from the theatre and shared a lifelong

interest in lighting, and was also a long term collaborator and friend of Michelle Stern (as well as former member of their earlier Teleotheatre company):

I always had a fascination with light. Even in my room, as a child, as a teenager, I had different colored light bulbs in each fixture and all sort of different colored lamps. It was this thing I was drawn to. And my parents were in the theatre. My mother was an actress and my stepfather was a designer and a director. I had that in my background. It was pretty much in the blood. During college I moved to New York for an internship and worked at Circle Rep, while simultaneously meeting a lot of people. My friends from Arts Magnet High School had gone to NYU so we were all living on Avenue A formulating a theatre company of our own, Teleotheater, which Michelle Stern was part of. Teleotheatre reached a critical mass [in 1995] because there were too many visions. We had done a lot of great work, but in that split I was able to go and work with other people, such as Anne Bogart and Lee Breuer. I worked on the reunion of *Gospel at Colonus*. The closing of Teleo also dove-tailed with the opening of GAle GAtes, and Michelle [Stern] went from one to another. In that period I had also come to know Michael [Counts] who had been courting me during the end of my stay. Slowly he began to talk to me about designing for him, and then he got the space in DUMBO. We started making plans for *Field of Mars*. I was impressed with his work and the scope of his vision, and I had always prided myself in be able to doing site-specific work, work in unusual locations Counts really wanted to work with moving lights, and I was one of the first people from off-off Broadway to incorporate moving lights into shows downtown. (6 February 2012)

During his time with GALE GATES, Boyd returned near his hometown in Austin, Texas and worked closely with High End Systems to learn about its functionality.³⁸ He described the console as initially difficult: “It was weird. It was not theatrical. It didn’t make a lot of sense.” For the production, Boyd transferred the moving lights to a regular theatre board, which proved extraordinarily difficult to program and was very time consuming. It took Boyd and Counts approximately three weeks to create all the lighting for *Field of Mars*, while two light boards were used for the front and back half of the space. During our interview, Boyd shared an incident in which the lighting cues were lost during one rehearsal:

There was actually a famous moment between Michael and I where something happened and the power got kicked out of the console and the board lost this enormous amount of cues we had programmed. We both had a mental breakdown at the moment. I ran outside screaming and yelling and we got into a total fight. And he said, “you’re going to have to come back here and redo it.” I was four-letter wording everything, as you could imagine. I was losing my mind. We used to have moments like that, he and I, where we would become like oil and water and other times we were like brothers. It was like that. They were intense times: we were all very young and really creative and everybody was very talented. (6 February 2013)

Critical Response

Critics and audience expressed various responses. According to *New York Times* critic Peter Marks, *Field of Mars* was an ambitious “visual feast” incorporating “coded monodramas” and “lightning bolts of imagination” (*Carnival*). Marks describes the piece as difficult to define,

³⁸ High End Systems is a leading manufacturer of lighting systems for the entertainment industry.

and like other reviewers to follow, expresses trouble with a lack of narrative, which he comically equates with “deciphering a haiku in Icelandic.” He describes the work as “a little bit like chasing a two year old around an apartment: you’re at the mercy of a devilish intelligence that may, at any particular moment, try your patience, tire you out, or tickle you to no end.” There is a sense of novelty, excitement, and amusement in the writer’s tone. He suggests the production concept is one of perception, supported by its cascade of odd images and playlet, slide show, vignette and dumb show meta-performances. “In fact,” Marks writes, “the first image is of a man aloft [Bickerstaff]: you walk into a staging area, where an actor is suspended 20 feet in the air” and describes the alternating use of classical and modern artwork imagery and spatial experimentation as “a spectacular example of playing with perspective.” For *Village Voice* critic Alissa Solomon, the production was a failure due to a lack of cohesion; she further directly expresses concern over the company’s use of technology:

The Field of Mars is another of those unfocused, noisy performances in which the audience wanders from scene to scene, peering in on a man suspended from the ceiling here, a woman babbling away while swiveling to a merengue tune there. So my attention was drawn most frequently to the only site where the action made some sense: the sound, light, and scenic controls. Though the boards were perched on a platform too high up for me to get a good look, and the operators remained nonchalant about executing their cues, they were more intriguing than all the screaming, rushing, slow-motion miming, and ohso-very-intense recitations of incoherent monologues sprouting up around me. The technical wizardry of *Field of Mars* is its most impressive -- and most troubling -- achievement.

For *Art in America* critic and art historian Douglas Davis, however, company aesthetic and its use of technology signaled an exciting development in the intersection of theatre and visual arts, which he discusses in his article, *Drama on the Move*.

Development director Baker recalls: “One of the best reviews we got was from *Art in America*. I was working in Lincoln Center and Michael called me up and said, ‘buy *Art in America*. There’s this great review in there.’ So I went across to Barnes and Noble and I was so excited I inadvertently stole a copy. I had to go back and pay for it” (1 March 2012). Davis introduces the article by comparing the characters to extra-terrestrials and the audience itself as “dazzled witnesses to a cosmic event” in a seeming response to the eerie otherworldliness of the piece. Davis then explains the production basis in Tacitus’ account, describing Counts as having brought guests to “an ironically similar remove, a renovated warehouse across the East River from Manhattan in DUMBO, where we ostensibly witnessed something like the burning of our own Rome-on-the-Hudson.” For Davis, the greatest aspect of the production was the use of multi-media and state of the art lighting design. He concludes by describing the company as power theatre for the new millennium, and writes that “the era of an extended artist theatre is upon us” (69). The influence of the visual arts in company production was not only located in set design and construction, as noted by Davis, but also served as critical backdrop for audience experience.

According to Sugg, the temporal dimensions of the pieces themselves were highly cubistic in nature, wherein the multi-focus environment allowed for multiple interpretations to

emerge.³⁹ The spatial/temporal dynamic of the works were highly charged and volatile, expanding audience perception so that time became accentuated, in some respects gaining a presence in the space not unlike that of another character. To this end, the spectator experience was highly dependent upon individual journey and a subjective “piecing together” of the installation works. In this regard, the GAle GAtes spectator enjoyed an experience similar to the gallery or museum, where form overtook content in a procession of visually elaborate imagery, whose arc and thematic correlations were to some degree up to the spectator to form. This allowed for a non-judgmental and subjective experience which became true throughout future company works, even those not employing the promenade aesthetic.



Figure 13. Artist Craig McPherson. The-Poet's-Eye. Image courtesy of the artist.

³⁹ Cubism is an arts movement that emerged in the early 20th century, largely spearheaded by artists such as Pablo Picasso. In Cubism, objects are presented in broken and abstracted form rather than realistic, in turn highlighting three-dimensionality and subjectivity of perception through the depiction of multiple viewpoints.

According to resident composer Joseph Diebes, *Field of Mars* immersed the viewer-listener through the use of sound as sonic weather and specifically through that of “hard core dance music.” He says, “The idea was to create a meteorological environment for the piece. In *Field of Mars* we were trying to do something a little darker” (1 March 2012). He continues by describing aesthetic concern of the production as wanting to excite the nerves of the audience. “We were trying to do something very visceral,” he says. “I was interested in low frequencies. And the way to really get those low frequencies into people’s bodies is to rhythmically propel it like the way you do in a dance club” (1 March 2012). Diebes’ use of subwoofer bass speakers was critical to company shows, and *Field of Mars* in particular achieved what the composer describes as “that cool sensation of vibration in the ribcage, that feeling of something happening, like that the building is shaking.” On a more logistical level, the low frequencies of the bass did not interfere with the frequencies of the voice, allowing for text and live speech to enter the space in conjunction with the base. “So still you have this visceral feeling but you don’t cover up the sound,” (1 March 2012) he says.

Indeed, a critical aspect of *Field of Mars* was its recreation of the night club aesthetic, which was supported through Diebes’ musical score, and the use of spectacle and promenade. “Some people,” said Baker, “didn’t ‘get it.’ They felt it was a rehash of what they’d seen in the clubs in the 80’s. That kind of club energy, the raves. I don’t share the view of those people who said ‘I’ve seen it all before’ because I hadn’t” (27 February 2012). The production’s appropriation of the night club aesthetic seemed to reflect its exploration of remote geographies and concern for the relationship between hedonism and self-destruction. Part of the implication of the night club aesthetic was that of its partial identity as a danger-zone, specifically, that of

prominent drug use and the nihilistic impulse, a theme intrinsically bound within *Field of Mars* itself.

Tilly Losch

Inspiration, Details and Description

Gale Gates' next work, *Tilly Losch*, opened in December 1998 for a two month extended run. In this production, the audience was given a more traditional seating arrangement, with an intimate capacity of only 70 seats. Like many company works, no definitive story was provided: rather images relating to stasis, elevation, art, love and nature were thematically presented. There was little to no dialogue in this production; rather much of the soundtrack was derived from the film *Casablanca* and the sound score of Adam Griffin while resident composer Joseph Diebes was abroad in Australia.

Gale Gates' production of *Tilly Losch* was a largely visually-driven montage of images derived from Americana, and thematically presented the vision of a world in flux (Mission Statement). Like many Gale Gates works, the visual arts inspired the production. The title of the piece, for example, did not refer to Losch herself, a famous ballerina of the 1930's era, but to the obscure shadow box made in her honor by surrealist artist, Joseph Cornell. Cornell, known for his fascination with female dancers and movie stars, created a box dedicated to the ballerina featuring her floating away in a hot air balloon. Art scholar Diane Waldman describes the piece as:

A typical 1930s box that features an enchanting cutout of a girl suspended above an engraving of snow-covered mountains. In the Romantic era ballerinas were supported by wires that enabled them to appear as if they were floating about the stage. The mountains

are pictured in depth, thus creating a trompe l'oeil spatial effect. The figure is mounted over a book of matches, which becomes her skirt, and she holds a red ball between her hands. Losch appeared to be the perfect match for the little girl in Cornell's box. Despite the charm of the figure, the setting and the matches suggest a parable on the ephemerality of life, an underlying theme in the majority of Cornell's work. (64)

The final image of the production was the figure of Tilly Losch, "suspended among the clouds by a balloon, in communication with the beyond" (Gale Gates' mission statement).



Figure 14. Untitled (Tilly Losch) by Joseph Cornell, c. 1935. Construction and collage. 10 x 9¼ x 2⅞ inches. Robert Lehrman Collection, Washington D.C.. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York. Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, DC

In addition to Cornell's piece, Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*, which was inspired by Wyeth's father's death, played a significant role. In the famous 1948 painting, a young woman is featured lying on the grass near a farmhouse, in a portrait of asymmetry and stasis: the inspiration for the work was his widowed neighbor, Anna Christina Olson, who was thought to have been struck by polio in the 1920's and rejected a wheelchair, instead pulling herself through the world by the torso. A giant three-dimensional recreation of the painting was looped throughout the production; in one instance, an airplane was seen in the distance, in another, the figure of Tosch (played by Hopkins) floated through the sky.

Gale Gates' *Tilly Losch* also made frequent reference to the classic film *Casablanca*, a black and white love story from the classical Hollywood era. Dialogue from the film was appropriated, and in some instances the actors would lip-synch with the recording. The sound of a plane flying overhead, borrowed from a significant moment in the film, was heard through-out, and as mentioned above, even trailed through the Counts' *Christina's World*. Among the many notable production images was that of an antique cinema populated by *Casablanca* characters; as the film was heard, a row of cinema seats seemed to move in an endlessly revolving track.⁴⁰ In one of the introductory scenes, borrowed from the film, two soldiers (Beth Kurkjian and Cynthia Hopkins) perform chess at lightning speed. "It was a comical moment," recalls Kurkjian. "Both characters would cheat" (29 January 2013).

Another aspect of *Tilly Losch* was its focus on shifting perspective and the effort to create live stage perspectives that would only otherwise be available cinematically (Counts 6 February 2012). In an example of cinematic voyeurism, the exterior of an enormous building is visible, its

⁴⁰ According to actor Brian Bickerstaff, as the actors reached the curtain, they would leap off of the 4 feet by 8 feet platform and manually push it so as to create the seamless effect of a track of a camera, "as if one continuous beautiful camera pan" (22 March 2013).

interiors visible through the framework of windows. In one apartment a couple (Josh Stark and Michelle Stern) mutedly argue⁴¹, as a neighbor (Brian Bickerstaff) plays a Nina Simone record and opens the window, allowing for the music to drift out. “We couldn’t figure out how to make it land,” recalls Bickerstaff. “One time I put my hand gently on the window, and Michael [Counts] said, ‘That’s it. That movement connects it all,’”(22 October 2012).

Technology was also essential to this production. In one instance, the designers constructed an 18 feet deep by 24 feet wide aluminum platform with a second story back wall, which slowly tilted over the series of two minutes. “If you have hydraulics you can do that,” says Sugg. “But we didn’t have hydraulics. We had a series of hand wrenches that people would crank in one set to get it to its tipping point.” In another instance, the set gave way to a progression of rolling scenes, many of them retreating “further and further into the stage’s proscenium, ending at a beautiful, almost impossible remove” according to critic Brian Parks in his *Village Voice* review. (*Usual Suspects*).

For Counts, the logic of dreams largely guided the dramaturgy of this work. “It’s a logic we all understand,” he says, explaining that “an individual while asleep at night might have a dream that is very bizarre, [and yet] might intuitively grasp its meaning.” For the director, *Tilly Losch* itself could be thought of as “a dream one might have had if falling asleep after watching *Casablanca*.” In essence, the narrative of *Tilly Losch*, as with many of GAle GAtes’ works, “if you had to define it, was the narrative of dreams” (Counts 6 February 2013).

⁴¹ Stern and Stark mutedly performed a scene from Tennessee William’s *A Street Car Named Desire*.

“Christina’s World”

One of the most notable images from *Tilly Losch* was Counts’ rendering of *Christina’s World*. The three-dimensional recreation included:

sounds of crickets, birds chirping, and the wind whistling on this barren hill. Here, the young crippled woman, played by Beth Kurkjian, drags herself painfully towards the house. She seems eager to get to a balloon floating across the sky behind the house but she only gets so far. An airplane flying overhead distracts her; stops her in her tracks as it were. (qtd. in “Ensemble”)

The image of *Christina’s World* looped through the piece and intersected with other imagery. During our interview, lighting designer Jason Boyd recalled the finale image, where the floating image of Cornell’s Tilly Losch (Hopkins) was seen drifting across the landscape of *Christina’s World* in an antique hot balloon. He also recalled changing the color of the grass and sky, making it go from sunrise to sunset very slowly during the progression of *Christina’s World*. “It took 15 minutes for it all to happen,” he says. “The cues were so slow and subtle. There were multiple parts to each one but they would take four and five minutes in between each.”

Kurkjian, who performed the role of Christina Olsen laughing recalls: “Michael [Counts] sold it to me as the key moment of the play.” As part of her process, Kurkjian studied the painting intensely and worked towards the imagining and creation of Christina’s movements; during rehearsal Kurkjian would then experiment with this physicality in ongoing dialogue with Counts in the cultivation of a final movement score. Kurkjian described the final score as

strenuous and highly choreographed, demanding rigorous discipline of form and also a deepened awareness of the world which Christina inhabited:

I had imagined that I had already gone across a couple of fields and had been moving for a while, and that it was really hard to do. And in the resting and in the looking, I imagined it was a nice moment for her, that she was taking in the vista. Because of her body – as much as she was physically dragging herself, she was still upright and looking. I loved the image of hair and the wind It was very physically hard. I had to make micro-undulations and contortions and constrictions in how I was pulling myself and stopping and adjusting ever so slightly. It was about finding the shape blindly and the rhythm and progression of it, which landed in the right way from Michael's perspective for the audience. It was like living within art. (29 January 2013)

Kurkjian further explains that although she did not experience a through-line for the multiple characters she performed within the production, she felt a particular affinity for Christina. "I felt [she] was someone on the periphery, and it bonded me to the other characters." Kurkjian further contextualizes her character approach with the abstract work of physical-based directors such as Robert Wilson and Ann Bogart:

I just didn't feel the need to be anybody in particular or create that narrative for myself, but I was beholden to what I had to do and the kind of fire I had to enact in order to make that interesting to the audience. And I was sweating. I was absolutely disgusting. I had studied Suzuki method, I really believed in the full body giving yourself over to whatever you were doing, even if it was a soft or subtle moment. I had to generate a lot of heat in my body. When you're exerting so much and you're in those shapes and responding so

sharply to all those cues and stimuli, you feel things, but I didn't try to search for an identity in that. I felt like a receptor to what was around me and I had to respond. (29 January 2013)

The high level input from the lights and overall stimuli also informed the actress's process by a desire to match its scale with various acting tools, such as: "how do you emit force and play with angles and tension and surprise and pacing so that someone is fascinated by what you are doing inside that world?" To this end Kurkjian's process was highly devised and moment-to-moment centered, and was given further dimension by the landscape of the playing area itself.

In summary, in GAle GAtes' recreation of *Christina's World*, the tension between immobility and movement were made present through visual metaphor; in the case of the character Christina this was literal. At the same time, in the intersection of these images was a sense of buoyancy; in witnessing the air craft, Christina is given the possibility of freedom from physical challenge and flight; this is echoed later in the final image of Cornell's recreated *Tilly Losch*. In such instances, the production seemed to play with notions of magnetism: that between people and the pursuit of romantic fulfillment, the physical and ethereal self, and a physical tension between body and landscape.

Critical Response

The production was generally well-received by *Time Out New York* and the *Village Voice*. "Tilly Losch is a series of carefully composed vistas," writes *Time Out* critic Erik Jackson, noting that "Counts excels with beautifully modulated unveilings of his elaborate

design, which render the seemingly ordinary extraordinary Many audience members might find the show's leisurely pace off-putting, but the difficult-to-define work might best be called a theatrical gallery – and when the pictures are this staggering, they deserve to be lingered over.”⁴² He concludes that Counts' shifting perspectives create “staggering living diorama.” *Village Voice* critic Brian Parks writes, “doleful and Hopper-esque, [*Tilly Losch*] reveals Counts' vision at its most arresting;” particularly noting the evocative transition of *Christina's World* to a city exterior populated by anonymous, drifting residents.



Figure 15. Gale Gates et al. *Tilly Losch*. Photo courtesy of Beth Kurkjian, featured here.

⁴² See Works Cited. Copy of review in thanks to Exit Art Gallery.

Critics variously expressed frustration with the lack of plot or narrative while citing the visual elegance of the production.. “There’s no “play” to speak of, just a progression of scenes in Counts’ sumptuous theatre of images,” Jackson writes. “Granted there’s not much here to engage the emotions [although for now] the visual inspiration pouring from *Tilly Losch* will more than suffice.” While Jackson’s review is largely positive, if marked by a lack of emotional engagement, Parks is less forgiving. He writes that “if GAle GAtes ever get a thought in their head, they may be a theatre to reckon with.” Parks also finds fault with the lack of original or live text and even suggests the possibility of copyright infringement as a quarter length of the production is lip-synched to the film audio. Parks then concludes his review by recapping his opinion that the company functioned through a superficial stress on design over content. “Perhaps Counts needs a collaborator (he designs, directs, and writes),” he writes. “Otherwise, GAle GAtes seems fated to more productions like this one— a lovely but meaningless exercise in scene design” (*Usual Suspect*).



Figure 16. The figure of Cornell’s *Tilly Losch* seen floating against the sky of *Christina’s World*. Archive still.

Interestingly, a dialogue was sparked by Park's review from a former GALE GATES attendee, Mr. Craig O'Connor, who wrote a response to *The Village Voice* and which was subsequently published.⁴³ O'Connor described Counts' production as the "manifestation of new ideas" and suggested that the production provided a commentary on modernity and the evolution of the cinema, writing:

Using a depth-of-field approach to bring a deeply cinematic dialectic of images into the realm of live performance, Counts achieved a Tarkovskyan emotional and visual tone that forces the audience to consider the spectacle before it. Counts transgresses the bound areas between art forms. He is not only a genius of stage design, he is a filmmaker without a camera and a painter without a canvas. (*Gale Force*)

In conclusion, while *Field of Mars* launched GALE GATES into the critical and mass hemispheres as the first production to take place in DUMBO, *Tilly Losch* furthered the company signature. *Field of Mars* consisted of a series of vignettes that took place throughout the gargantuan performance area, allowing audience to walk through a labyrinth of installations after multiple prosceniums gave way throughout the progression of the play. Text was borrowed and inspired by Tacitus's account of the burning of Rome; the seeming appropriation of this cautionary tale and its relevancy to contemporary society through Counts' referencing of filthy cityscapes, hedonism and the nightclub aesthetic was countered by non-linearity and abstract imagery. Further, Counts' disinterest in chronological narrative and openness towards subjectivity of audience experience allowed *Field of Mars* to function more through the auditory and visual capacities, promoting a more sensorium-based experience than that of traditional

⁴³ I have found no evidence that O'Connor has any personal or professional relationship with GALE GATES, but seemed sincerely invested in the integrity of the production review.

theatre. *Field of Mars* was in some respects the company's initiation with the space, and an indication of the larger and more audacious works to follow.

In *Tilly Losch*, Counts seemed to be interested in exploring the nostalgic sentimentality of the 1940's art world via cinema, sculpture and painting. He borrowed from archetypes of the Americana and seemed to present a visual rumination on the tension between stasis and escape in an atmosphere of the melancholic and wistful. *Tilly Losch* was dramaturgical driven by the fine arts and the vehicle of the dream, and re-created and intersected *Casablanca*, Cornell's *Tilly Losch* and Wyeth's *Christina's World* through repetitive and overlapping images. Diebes, a core GALE GATES' collaborator, typically generated compositional scores over the course of the production in close dialogue with Counts. His voice was however absent for this production while he worked abroad. In both productions, elements of the surreal and stylized were utilized, with an emphasis on the visual and sonic registers; the effect was that of a thematic dreamscape. In the following chapter, a closer examination of GALE GATES' final two works in the DUMBO space is made. *1839*, named after the year the camera was invented, and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, a collaborative re-imagining of Dante's *Divine Comedy* will be discussed.

Chapter Five

Spectacle, Dance, Text and the Classics: *1839 (1999) and So Long Ago I Can't Remember (2001)*

By 1999, GAle GAtes had spent two years in the DUMBO warehouse space given them by the Walentas' Two Tree Management. In many ways, the company seemed to be gaining momentum. While Counts and company has been producing work in unique spaces internationally and in New York city's financial district for a number of former years, it was not until they were given the challenge of promoting the then remote area of Brooklyn in exchange for a permanent playing space that the company's signature style, full-on technological experimentation, and growing audience could take hold. Over the next two years, GAle GAtes produced *1839* and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*. While both works were largely inspired by the visual arts, physical theatre/dance vocabulary, Counts' vision and Diebes' dramatic sound score; they departed from former works in a more deliberate investigation of the classics and utilization of text. While text did not play a pivotal role such as with the naturalistic stage, it did allow for a more textual-based insight into the abstract realms created by GAle GAtes, as did the structure of the classical works the independent productions revisited. *So Long Ago I Can't Remember* in many respects represented the apex of company work before Counts' created a final solo installation on the DUMBO clock tower in 2002 in honor of 9/11. In the following chapter, the production details, dramaturgical process and critical response of these last final works will be examined.

1839

Dramaturgy

In 1999, GAle GAtes produced its third major work in the DUMBO space, entitled *1839*. In this production, artistic director Michael Counts merged classical imagery and text with radical space reconfiguration. The title *1839* was derived from the year of the invention of the camera, and borrowed from the Oedipus tale in the representation of a fractured family, with a primary lens on a young man in the roles of both Oedipus and a character named Henry. According to the company press release, the play itself is described as a dream by the inventor of the camera, J.M. Daguerre, “in which a child, in the guise of Oedipus, wanders through a landscape peopled by narcissists in love with their own photographed images.”

1839 has a loose narrative structure, borrowing elements from the Oedipus tale. The maternal-bond, the inherited sins of the (absent) father, and taboo are thematically visited. The set, braced by two enormous classical-inspired white pillars, and the simple costuming suggest a theatrical world outside of human history but reflective of an antiquated age. This is further supported by the text, which largely borrows from Sophocles’ play. Dialogue is rarely (if ever) exchanged between characters in a naturalistic exchange. Text, however, saturates the performance through endless speeches, both contemplative and expositional, and is often delivered both fast and clipped, or as in the case of Jacinta/Henry’s mother (D.D. Duvalier), melodious and song-like, so that the sense of the words themselves is subverted for the sound. Certain phrases thematically rebound throughout the play: “It’s so pretty, Henry,” and “That’s the book of the dead” are often heard. “Are we leaving this ruin now?” asks the figure of Henry/Oedipus’s mother in a seeming key moment, “are we all blind now?” As she speaks, she gazes at her naked self before a mirror. In this moment she seems to refer not only to Thebes,

but the relationship of self to image: consumed by one's self, one becomes blind to one's surroundings and its subsequent disintegration. In another instance, the characters stand on the stage against a whirlwind of moving lights and beeps, suggesting an exterior world artificial, if not apocalyptic, in design. Moran, performing the role of an ingénue, stands in a demure pose, then cocks her head and stamps a foot, revolves away, each movement deliberate and poised. The fragmentation of her movement within this world suggested a hybridity of the organic and fragmented, accentuated by the set itself.

The setting for *1839* seems to take place in the cavern of a palace, whose set continuously shifts through sliding floors and turn-tables, pits within pits, walls that emerge from nowhere, and a high distant perch from which Jacinta sits and looks outside a window. Her dialogue reveals that this is a universe with no stars and an eternally full moon: it is unclear if there is ever daylight, aside from slits of light that randomly fall from above during random scenes. Time does shift over the course of the play, which is suggested through the cycled image of a young man (Henry/Oedipus) with his arms outstretched towards his mother. In the first instance, the young boy, dressed in a navy sailor suit, is in fact a statue seemingly made to represent the malleability of youth. His outstretched posture is later re-created by an adult actor dressed in the same costume, suggesting Henry's maturation. The vision of red autumn leaves, placed downstage right is also a recurrent image, also shows the passage of seasons, time and place.



Figure 17. GAle GAtes et al. 1839. Archival Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler.

Joseph Diebes’ musical composition for 1839 is described as maintaining “an eerie tension through a layering of indecipherable voices” by critic Michael (93). A further tension was created through a dissonance; specifically between natural sound, such as water and wind chimes, and an underlying mechanical score of static sounds, thumps and beeps. In discussing his process, Diebes says:

The idea of sonic weather makes sense to me. The idea of sound as energy makes sense to me. Duration of time, not materiality; sound can somehow embody this. These very essential things -- water, birdsongs, the sound of fire. And then the indiscernible. I

would have voices on other languages percolating through this thing. They were kind of escaping you. (1 March 2012)

Language was also often written in non-sequiturs, and as Walker recalls, was directed to be expressed at “80 miles an hour in an act of loquacity;” at the same time the natural world of the play was populated by aberrant and peculiar beings, which culminated in a climactic moment, that being the reveal of an exposed naked female body within the armadillo.⁴⁴



Figure 18. Rehearsal for 1839. Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler

⁴⁴ According to a statement from puppet designer, Manju Shandler, “my main recollection working with Counts was that of pushing the boundaries of perception and scale. The puppet was an absurd and poetic piece of the action that changed audience impressions depending on if it was viewed at a distance - taking advantage of the 40 foot depth of the stage, up close, or as a reveal to show the vulnerable naked individual beneath the hard and prickly exterior.”

The large armadillo played a central role, despite its few appearances. The oversized puppet, otherwise recreated in the like of the animal, would in select moments move slowly across the stage. In a key instance, Walker's character was given a "long, beautiful and meditative speech" as the armadillo slowly plodded toward a hole. The piece was an excerpt from Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's memoirs, made unknown to the audience:

I thought about it with apprehension day and night: the duty to testify, to offer depositions for history, to serve memory. What would man be without his capacity to remember? What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. It is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death. (44)

Actress Kate Moran played the pivotal role of the armadillo, as well as that of a hermaphroditic child who shifted genders over the course of the play. *1839* was Moran's first production with the company and she was cast while an undergraduate at the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University. The connection was made through Counts' friendship with dancer/choreographer Annie-b Parson. He recalls:

Annie said, I think you're looking for Kate, and I think Kate's looking for you. She came and auditioned. I just pushed and pushed on her audition and to see the limits of where she would go. She would go anywhere. She had such poise. She was wise beyond her years. Even then: very mature, very sophisticated. A great performer. Riveting. I've had Kate do nothing, nothing on stage and you're on the edge of your seat.

The armadillo, with this beautiful naked girl inside. Some of it is obvious. That to me was a little bit about who it was. It was Kate. It was a little bit about beauty protected by layers and layers and layers of defense. It was about that feeling that I had at the Met sometimes. Both feeling like I'm an outsider that I'm looking at the world through four inches of plate glass and it's all on the other side. And feeling those things that I want that aren't accessible. That there's this itch that will never be scratched. Existential. But to me its beauty. What makes me weep at the Met sometimes is seeing a beautiful piece of art or a beautiful piece of anything: you want to commune with it; you want to fall through it and never come back. (19 September 2012)

For myself, the armadillo is remarkable in light of Counts' insight is the sense of loss it evokes in the performance: this seems to be quite literal as the image of the wandering armadillo is echoed throughout the piece. It is never threatening, but plods through the set with a slow grace, seemingly in lost discord with the harsh world of *1839* itself. In certain moments the armadillo is seen resting and traveling within a dark pit whose presence beneath the stage seems to evoke the image of the grave: does the armadillo then represent an aspect of human nature near extinction?

It is not only death and art that Counts referred to through imagery, but the erotic as well. In one instance two masked characters with elongated noses engage in a hot and juvenile dialogue of swirling hips and graphic language. The figure of the naked sacrificial virgin is visited throughout. In a particularly moving image, the figure of an adolescent (Kate Moran) sits by an enormous sleeping cat, who is revealed to be dreaming about nature and a run through the woods in a video that plays above them. When asked to elaborate on the figure of the cat,

Counts explains that the composition was derived from a classical still life painting, while the figure of the cat was inspired by the work of Balthus, the painter. According to Counts, Balthus' work was highly sexual and provocative. For Counts, many such scenes sought to resonate elements of the classical, beautiful and dead (6 February 2013).

Perhaps the most striking image is that of a nightmarish figure (Anika Barkan). The character, costumed in an enormous fat-suit and clothed only in an Elizabethan collar, first appears when the name "Apollo" is cried out, suggesting the characterization of the G-d himself or the manifestation of what fears emerge in his absence. The character is macabre and eerie: no other characters acknowledge it, suggesting its invisibility, and it is accompanied by strange music. It communicates directly with the audience at one point, speaking to the pre-recorded voice of a man. The effect is that of the grotesque: it is genderless, questionably human, perhaps a macabre G-d. The movements of the figure are deliberate and seamlessly executed by Barkan, a trained dancer: she alternately swivels and stomps, seeming to communicate through an angular dance-gesture. In one instance, it turns its' attention towards the sleeping figure of Jacinta and ominously runs toward her, only to be cut off at the last moment by a wall that appears from nowhere.

In many ways, *1839* represented the culmination of company technical experimentation. During the run of *Field of Mars*, for example, lighting designer Jason Boyd was invited to join musician Nathalie Merchant on the international Lilith Fair, after she saw the production with her brother, a former member of Teleotheatre. "*Field of Mars* blew her mind," recalls Boyd. "She said, 'if you can do that you can definitely light some rock n roll songs.'" Boyd toured with Merchant the summer of 1998, which sparked a new career in lighting concerts. Boyd toured the

globe with Merchant and a large roster of acts including John Paul Jones from Led Zeppelin and Powderfinger from Australia. Over the course of the tour, Boyd:

mastered this concept of the moving lights in this period of time in ways I didn't have before. When I came back to Michael to work on *Tilly Losch* and *1839*, I had many more skills in my pocket, so we were able to do even more extravagant work in the coming shows. (8 February 2013)

Former Reza Abdoh producer Diane White was also in dialogue with the company over the prospect of funding a tour of *1839*. To this end, many of the complex set designs were created so as to realize this possibility. Designer Jim Findlay was specifically recruited to help with such designs, such as in the collaborative engineering “of a huge wall that had to spin down on a single pivot point and become the floor. It was something like 18' tall and 35' wide and it just had to, boom; lay down really fast but in a controlled way” (4 January 2013). According to critical reviews, the set was described as a “fascinating living creature” that “spins, slides and hides” seemingly of its own accord (Soloski). There was also a rotating turn-table on built on wheels so that in one scene, as Jacinta was positioned on a chaise she tracked off into the distance and disappeared 100 feet away. Intricate specialized lighting known as cyberlights were essential to this production, as earlier works, and in the original blocking, the first scene alone had 157 cues; by final count, the entire work had approximately 750.

Critical and Company Response

1839 was received as stunning and dreamlike, with effects that range from the startling to hypnotic in a “cinematic dreamscape of gods, beasts, nudes, forests, temples, and velvet divans”

(Rush 93). Writes scholar Michael Rush: “in 1839, extraordinarily precise lighting and gesture cues isolate moments of genuine beauty. The crowning moment in this visual feast is when Oedipus/Henry’s mother, in a naked re-enactment of Manet’s *Olympia*, lies on her illuminated bed and drifts away on it, deep into the vast upstage playing area” (93) According to Alexis Soloski’s 1999 Village Voice review, “1839 is unabashedly, ineluctably lovely.” She also described designer Jay Boy’s lighting design as hypnotic and “heartbreakingly” beautiful; archival pictures reveal a nuanced blend of cerulean, indigo and blues, bathed in whites and shadows. For Rush, 1839 is a pre-American revolution landscape dense with images of fertility, the macabre and decadent. He writes, “it is an Oedipal conflict in revolutionary era America, which leads to a pregnant mother’s death by arrows as participants in a life drawing class and over-sized escapees from a bestiary do a dans macabre in the falling house of Atreus. Clear? Not to worry, with Counts’ work the play is not the thing,” and concludes by describing the director as having emerged with “his own brand of [exquisite] theatre of images” (92-3).



Figure 19. GAle GAtes et al. 1839. Kate Moran (featured). Photo courtesy of Manju Shandler.

During our interview, actor Tom Walker, who performed alongside Josh Stark in a duo that blended elements of commedia dell' arte and *A Clockwork Orange*⁴⁵ describes the production as:

this magnificent, incredible, atmospheric, mysterious thing. And there happened to be a little acting going on as well. There were the two gladiators with the Pinocchio noses [Stark and Walker]. There was Kate Moran, who was at times a young boy, at times a young girl. She was hermaphroditic. She was the armadillo, which appeared once, maybe twice. There was a pair of classical lovers [performed by D.D. Devalier and Peter Jacobs]. And then there was this girl, and she was in some sort of a strange costume. It was a horrible endurance test. There was a statue of a little boy. So those were the characters. There were oversized heads in this play. They may have floated through space. There was this contrast of beauty and ugliness that Michael was toying with. I can tell you it was very much like a dream. I felt that Michael was creating a world where it was hard to find clarity, and it was heartbreakingly tender and beautiful.

⁴⁵ This is according to Counts from a 14 November 2012 email interview. *A Clockwork Orange* is a 1962 novella later made into a film that portrays a futuristic dystopic Western society with elements youthful violence and rebellion.



Figure 20. 1839 archival photo

In Walker's view, "there was a great sadness to the play -- it was trying to make sense of a world that could not entirely be made sense of" (18 September 2013). For the actor, the production was inhabited by feelings of dislocation, which he feels was accentuated by the enormity of the playing space and which furthered his character's sense of loneliness. Walker describes the production as fueled by an "impossible effort to break through." He says, "I felt disembodied. There was a disconnectedness. They could have had a plate of glass and we could have been given sledgehammers to try get through it, and that would have represented the sorrow and the pity" (18 September 2012).

In summary, *1839* perhaps most evoked the dream state through its utilization of imagery both decadent and alienating. According to the Counts himself, *1839*'s Oedipal structure

allowed him to explore the inner conflict of “both a terror and gratitude for life” as well as his own incoming fears over the prospect of parenthood and the nihilistic impulse of “at times even the wish to never have been born” (19 September 2012). *1839* seemed to also explore childhood, its moments of isolation, and the passions of a transitioning young man. Says Counts, “*1839* had a lot to do with Oedipus and my mother and maybe even thoughts of being a parent one day. Love of passion and lust and infatuation.” In this way, *1839* represented a deeply personal investigation into the existential, a revisiting of those youthful sentiments relating to love, and the tension between fact and poetic memory. It was the only production created for the possibility of tour, although that possibility collapsed for reasons unknown.



Figure 21. 1839 archival photo courtesy of Manju Shandler. Armadillo reveal.

So Long Ago I Can't Remember: A Divine Comedy

Dramaturgy

So Long Ago, the final major GAle GAtes production to be produced in the DUMBO space, ran for two months in the spring and summer of 2001 and represented to many the crowning achievement of Counts and company. The piece was a popular success, leading to an extended run. The production structure involved a fifteen-installation walking tour of the space based on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, including the nine circles of hell, purgatory, and finally, paradise. Thirteen of the installations were written in collaboration with playwright Kevin Oaks, while purgatory was an opera composed by Joseph Diebes and the final scene was a wordless dance event. According to Baker, "if *Field of Mars* was a collection of little vignettes; *So Long Ago* literally pressed against the walls" (27 February 2012).

In this production, Counts and Oakes worked in careful collaboration. Oakes, whose work was featured in and developed by establishments such as the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and Soho Rep, was approached by Counts for this project in 1999. "Working with Kevin [Oakes] I realized I was not a writer," shared Counts in a 2001 *TheatreForum* interview. "I have in the past compiled text from various sources I did not however hear [the dialogue]" (16). Counts had been composing ideas for the piece for six months prior to meeting Oakes; after their meeting Counts temporarily relocated to Avignon, France, where he completed storyboards for the structure of the piece. The two artists worked with Dante's text, as well as contemporary and Renaissance art as areas of inspiration. The "dark woods" in which Dante begins his journey in the original text was transformed into the idea of a café populated by various deviants, or as Oaks describes, "a watering hole for those in spiritual jeopardy." These

characters are not so much involved in coherent dialogue amongst each other but voicing concerns and dark memories:

WOMAN ONE: He thinks scrubbing my face and shouting,
“You look like a dirty whore” is sex
He makes me sit on the toilet with my
pants pulled down
then he removes all my make up. (Oakes 21)

In another instance, a character says, “my favorite books are no longer a comfort to me. They’re belittling me. I hate it when this happens” (21) while another tries to seduce a young woman, telling her, “I saw the way you smiled when I said the word ‘machine,’ to which she responds, ““You didn’t say the word machine”” (23). The café is populated by perverts, intellectuals and the grieving, and often lines are punctuated by other languages, promoting a disjointed feeling. In describing his own process, the playwright says:

In my plays, I often allow the characters’ subconscious desires to bubble up and permeate the spoken language, so that their dialogue becomes an interesting mix of what they might actually say in a given situation, and their private obsessions As it turns out, this is a good strategy for writing lines for the damned. Many of the characters in *So Long Ago* are afflicted with a sort of confessional Tourette Syndrome. (17)

In this production, Counts pivoted the spatial configuration so that audience entered through the roll up gate in the back of the space, and exited through what previously used as the foyer entrance. The audience was thereby given a utopic view of Manhattan and the water as a final farewell image. Purgatory took place in the mezzanine and “paradise” was constructed in the lobby. Partitions were built between various columns which created multiple stages and rooms for installation pieces, which the audience was guided through. “It was like a maze, but

where everything was revealed one after another,” says Bickerstaff (22 March 2013). The majority of the production took place in hell among a mix of modern figures, some of whom did not recognize that they were deceased. According to company publicity statement, the structure of the piece did not so much employ Dante’s text, but rather emphasized the imagined changes in the landscape of Hell, purgatory and paradise since his death 700 years ago. While no clear narration or protagonist was established, according to Counts, the role of Dante and Virgil the poet were weaved through the structure, respectively performed by Bickerstaff and Moran.

Among the many images found within the piece were a Las Vegas dance number created by Reza Abdoh choreographer Ken Roht, a purgatorial autumn forest animated by a quartet of female singers, a boat traveling the river Styx, and a 100 foot steel bridge ascending over a bed of fog as the character of Dante's Beatrice (Adrienne Campbell-Holt) performed an arial dance. The production referenced literal epochs in human history, such as the rise of the Nazi empire and the Spanish Inquisition; and also incorporated abstraction and spectacle, such as in a performance moment inspired by Buster Keaton, a Fred and Ginger Rogers tap duet (Brian Bickerstaff and Michelle Stern), an 80 feet falling wall with accompanying blast of cold wind, and a rock-inspired tour guide dressed all in black (Kate Moran), all to the backdrop of Joseph Diebes’ industrial score. Explains Counts: “In the opening number there’s a reference to cinema and history and Buster Keaton and then they go into a tap dance. This jazz age thing. How is that the first circle of hell? Just that question allows for so much exploration” (19 September 2012).

This production utilized playwright Kevin Oakes’ work, and seemed to subvert language more consciously than previous productions through its mix of non-linear dialogue, multi-lingual

text, and use of echoes and acoustics. A pre-recorded text was filtered through the space to which performers recited alongside their pre-recorded selves. For Counts:

There is something so perfect about the structure of the *Divine Comedy*. In rendering my version of hell as it was in my mind a sort of contemporary experiencing: what would hell look like after Dante rendered his hell? A lot has changed in the world. And then using that structure to say, you don't need to understand what's happening in the first circle definitely, which could then remain abstract, and then lead you into the second circle. Just knowing where you are in the numeric sequence -- I'm in 4 -- that gives you so much information that can anchor you. Versus, I don't even know how many circles there are. I don't even know that I'm in circles. I just know that I'm in this space then this space. But the progression implies so much. (19 September 2012)

The production began after the audience entered through the backspace of the warehouse, at which point they were immediately introduced to an image of the river Styx and a boat immersed in fog, which transitioned into a café scene. The café was populated by various delinquents who sat along a 20 foot white wall. "They were people that you might [imagine] encountering on your way to hell, and the text supported that" says Bickerstaff (22 March 2013).

As the scene progressed, Bickerstaff emerged in the role of Dante, and stood on a platform silently observing the audience. The music became louder and more disjointed, at which point Moran appeared (the only character to perform with a live mike), and authoritatively dictated a list of things the audience could not do, such as not touching the performers, going beyond delineated spaces, and the like. "As that went on the music grew louder and louder and

all the tables and chairs were pulled offstage by a rope,” recalls Bickerstaff. “The air was moving with the sound, the music crescendoed and it just went out” (22 March 2013).

The supports on the wall then clicked out, and the wall fell towards the audience, revealing Bickerstaff in a tuxedo and top hat and a slick blood red floor. A cold gust of wind resulted from the falling wall, which was heightened by fans hidden backstage “People’s hats would fly off. It was pretty intense,” Bickerstaff says. The moment itself recalled a significant moment in cinema history: in Buster Keaton’s piece *Steamboat Junior*, Keaton is standing in front of a façade of a house, which falls down around him in a storm. Two dance numbers followed, choreographed by Ken Roht. In a following scene, the entire floor was filled with sand and adorned with stone arches. The character of Pope Pious (Josh Stark) came out in full pope regalia. “He was sickly and pedophilic,” recalls Bickerstaff, “He gave a long monologue. It was incredibly creepy but haunting.” In another instance the audience was seated in front of a 20 foot long hotel hallway, which housed mobsters. In a key instance the wall revolved upwards, revealing a murder scene as the last stanza of the *Inferno* performed in Italian. During the twelfth installation, entitled “Gargoyles (Things the Devil Might Say),” four gargoyles discussed the nature of the devil. “What sort of thing am I?” asks one. “The thing I am doesn’t even have a name anymore.” Another tells the audience: “This is a death time story What am I? A human idea. A very bad human idea” (34).



Figure 22. Pope Pious performed by Josh Stark. Archival photo. GAle GATes et al. So Long Ago I Can't Remember.

The audience was then led to purgatory, an opera which took place on a seated and raked forest stage. “It was an eerie, in-between world,” says Bickerstaff:

You see certain characters from the inferno wandering around, as if they made their way through and are trying to find their way on their journey. There were wounded soldiers who may have died during the Civil War and who were part of a war they didn't ask for, who had killed people and found their way in purgatory. (22 March 2013)

The finale of the piece took place over a steel serpentine bridge which hung over a lake of mist. Stern was visible ascending a staircase in the distance, while the recurring character of Dante's Beatrice (Adrienne Campbell-Holt) performed a slow ariel dance. The audience then exited the warehouse to an immediate image of the waterfront and Manhattan skyline. Neil Genzlinger of *The New York Times*, for example, described the conclusion of the piece as the crowning moment, "leaving a vision of hell ... into a sort of urban heaven on earth."

According to various designers, the finale image, and specifically the 100 foot steel bridge constructed for *So Long Ago I Can't Remember* represented a seminal memory. For Counts:

So much effort was put into creating an experience for the audience at the end that was my rendering of paradise. And the progression through the piece had been that this girl in a red dress was introduced and reintroduced and reintroduced throughout inferno and purgatory, then reappeared in paradise. We took this enormous front room of GALE GAtes and painted the entire thing black. Created this steel bridge that the entire audience would assemble on. We filled it with smoke, and the idea was it was to be in this depthless, vast open space. You couldn't see the stairs themselves, but you could see people walking up them. This couple, from earlier in the production [would ascend] -- you could watch them ascend for essentially forever. Then the woman in the red dress appears in a red bathing suit, essentially on a ledge. In slow motion she dives over the audience into the water and as she approaches the water or smoke there is a blackout, and that's the end of the piece.

And what does a women diving into the ether and disappear into the water or smoke mean about paradise? I'm not sure but I have a feeling, it always struck me as so evocative, in ways that were both referencing things that you may have seen before but just as a stand-alone image, this idea of this youth, beauty, sexuality and innocence that his actress really depicted so well. And the idea of diving into the unknown— a moment of release and a moment of abandon represents so many things on so many different levels that are about these peak moments of our human experience.⁴⁶ (19 September 2012)

According to Fruin, the creation of the bridge and lake was a “gargantuan effort ... [and] through the human spirit of volunteering and longer hours -- while inhaling welding fumes” (27 February 2012) these things were made.

Indeed, in order to create the final installation of *So Long Ago*, tremendous experimentation and effort was required. The serpentine bridge was created in a different portion of the warehouse and brought in after the final performance space was sealed with pond liner. However, havoc followed the initial attempt of creating the “paradise” installation.

Recalls Suggs:

Basically, we wanted to fill this gallery with water. So we block off the edges and put in the pond liner for the purpose of the very last installation. We build the serpentine pieces of the steel structure somewhere. We built the legs. We put down the pond liner. Seal that. And then we bring the seal in to put the bridge on. Make sure the legs aren't puncturing the rubber or anything like that. We have welded the legs. So now we're

⁴⁶ Consider this action of “diving into the unknown” as a possible metaphor for the avant-garde itself in its thrill over the undiscovered

welding over this rubber pond line. This isn't so ... smart. But we're being diligent. We're using the blankets for cover – but we're just never going to win those battles, right? So it's 4 in the morning when we finally finish and decide to fill up the pond because that was the only time we could get to the fire hydrant. Because that's how much water you need for an 80 by 80 foot pool. So we fill it up. Great. Dye it blue. Everything's cool.

The next day... two days later ... we start noticing that the water levels are going down. So thus the debate ensues: No, it's just evaporation, there's a lot of surface area. No, that's a half an inch dropping water level, that's not evaporation. That is water leaking. So we drain it. The floor was destroyed. How that problem was solved was we ended up filled it up with dry ice, cold fog, and it was gorgeous. It really was. The water was weird because it is very hard to light. The smoke looked fantastic. And it was done.

The falling wall in the beginning of the piece also represented a technological challenge for the company. Its dimension were 16 feet tall and 60 feet long, and it had to fall each night, after which two characters (Michelle Stern and Brian Bickerstaff) would perform a Ginger and Fred Rogers inspired tap dance number on the fallen construction. “So it couldn't be a light, flat wall. And then it had to do that for every night for four months or so,” says Sugg. “It was all totally manual” (19 September 2012).

Text and Dance

Another technically critical component of much of Gale Gates' work and which played a more prominent role in *So Long Ago* was this use of pre-recorded text, and the resulting friction between live and automated performance. Diebes spoke at length on the dramaturgical facets of this form of technology:

There was something about the machine that was very built into what we were doing. Some kind of technological aesthetic that came across. Not that we were using technology so much, but that people were instrumentalized, such as the idea of the lip-synching that was used in some shows. [The actors] were in [this] way marionettes. I think that people who came from the traditional theatre were seeking catharsis. We didn't provide that. We were much more interested in creating this kind of machine. (1 March 2012)

He continued by describing the uncanny effect of a live body working through machinic tasks, and lip-synching itself as a digital process.⁴⁷ "It's like a record playback going through a human body," he says, "and for a very good performer –and they were all very good at it -- there was always a little edge to it, because it was never perfect because it can't be perfect. The virtuosity of almost getting there is what makes it interesting" (1 March 2012). The result was that of the disembodied and ventriloquized body. Recalls Bickerstaff: "It was eerie. At times you'd be singing in harmony with yourself. Other times you'd whisper. It was uneasy, otherworldly" (22 March 2013).

⁴⁷ Diebes is referring to the dynamic of live performance with lip-synching.

Stern explains that the pre-recorded text was a dramaturgical response to working in the space, whose sizable concrete led to the frequent loss of sound and mikes within the warehouse. In one section, Stern performed the role of Emma Goldman, a Russian labor-organizer in a speech to the workers. The piece itself began with a pessimistic outlook towards the future, imagining that in 150 years people will wear clothes of “flying machines” and yet “will be as desperate as they are now” and continues in a rumination on the existence of hell (33). For this piece, Diebes created a soundtrack of cheering crowds. “And even though it was pre-recorded,” says Stern, “the sound manipulation would gain such volume you would feel it in your guts. It actually caused an emotional response. It was a great integration of those things” (1 March 2012).

The use of pre-recorded text and the relationship of audio to blocking required the performer to utilize a level of listening akin to dance. Over the course of our interviews, Bickerstaff describes Diebes’ music as central to his character development and a guide in his movement choices and blocking. Stern, a trained dancer, specifically references choreography in her description of the relationship of live performance to pre-recorded text in *So Long Ago*, suggesting that it required a higher level of discipline:

We were finding how to live within this intense structure of sound. The image that pops into my head is that of a dancer or a body in a metal structure. Choreography, because it is live, gives you freedom. The recording was completely rigid. It was a point of contention for performers because we weren’t speaking our lines live and we had changed through the course of rehearsal And so your work as an actor then became, how do you nail it? Which is super technical. To have it be alive, not like someone who is trying to perfectly imitate herself. (22 October 2012)

In summary, the pre-recorded text used in *So Long Ago* was the result of a dramaturgical response to the space. While the overlap of live and recorded performance created an eerie otherworldly effect, to quote many of the performers themselves, in this way it structurally responded to the themes of *So Long Ago* itself. At the same time, because the recordings occurred early in the process and the performers discovered new impulses over the course of rehearsal, the pre-recorded text and live performance were sometimes in conflict.

Another aspect of *So Long Ago* was the use of choreography and the shift in company movement aesthetic from physical gesture to pure dance. This was largely due to the contribution of choreographer Ken Roht, who had worked closely with director Reza Abdoh in Los Angeles. Many company members expressed head-over-heels delight over Roht's contribution to the company. Says Stern: "We were incredibly lucky to have him join us. He is brilliant. What he sees bodies doing is nothing you ever dreamed of, choreographically speaking. And he is a pure and very special person" (22 October 2012). According to Counts, the movement vocabulary pivoted when he met Roht during a guest residency at Cal Arts. One of Roht's most significant pieces in *So Long Ago* was his choreography of a work that came to be known as the "Las Vegas number." According to Stern:

You had these women in bikinis with glitter and big headdresses, Vegas style costume. There were elements of the dance that were classic showgirl stage dancing, but mixed with rhythms that were punk-rock, jarring and certain moves that were unexpected or in juxtaposition to the initial aesthetic. It sets something up and then changes it very fast. Roht's genius is that what he comes up with is so visceral for the dancer and audience; it is evocative of so many things. Watching people's faces during that dance was so interesting – the men looked awed and terrified, and the women all wanted to be on stage

dancing, too. It was so powerful. There we were, traipsing around in bikinis, which can be a very not-powerful experience, but the dance was empowering: it was sexy and technically super challenging, and maybe that's the key too – they are so complex and hard to do -- his dances -- that it forces you to – you come out through it. (22 October 2012)

When asked about Stern's view of the potential objectification of women through moments such as these or use of nudity, she responds, "there were people that felt strongly about it. There was always a naked girl somewhere, and it could add up to an image of objectification. However, I don't think Michael was sexist or misogynist. He always surrounded himself with incredible, strong and smart women, starting with his grandmother."⁴⁸

When discussing the point of departure Dante's *Divine Comedy* provided and Counts' own personal relationship to the piece, he explains:

I feel like [playwright Charles Mee] once said something about taking one of his adaptations and said, "I start with this Rolls Royce of a structure, and I take it where I want." I felt the same way about the *Divine Comedy*. *So Long Ago* was my way of processing what was effectively my bottom. Really the darkest hour of my life was that show. And the show told the story of making the show. It was a very meta-depictive of what I was struggling with at the time. It was a pivot point in my life. I was 31 years old and was very self-destructive and either I was going to come to a fiery end or I was going to change. And I came out the other side. My whole life turned on a dime and became

⁴⁸ While the subject of nudity in the performance arts lies outside the scope of this study, for further research see *American Theatre Magazine's* January 2013 article, "Baring It All," written by playwright/director Ken Kaiser in an insightful perspective on the role of nudity in the theatre.

something different. But *So Long Ago* was my depiction of how dark that era before that pivot point was. (19 September 2012)

Critical Response

Critics expressed various responses to the production. Critic Tom Breidenbach of *Art Forum Magazine* described the piece as a “phantasmagoric_satire.” In addition to the standard repertoire of villains, he noted the comic inclusion of mobsters, tourists and overworked industry workers, perhaps as a meta-reference to the industrial space itself, all populating the guts of hell. In his conclusion, he writes:

Given that so much of Counts' hell is dedicated to silly diversions, greed, slovenliness, infantile fantasy, hypocrisy, excess, and despair, the production ultimately reads as a critique of contemporary living. The lyric visions of a Robert Wilsonesque purgatory and a strangely dim, lovely-if-confusing apotheosis in a wooded paradise bring no redemption This canny and dedicated group is one to watch.

The Brooklyn Paper critic Paulanne Simmons and Alisa Solomon from the *Village Voice* did not see eye to eye with Breidenbach. Solomon summarized the work as a “meandering, sometimes menacing, utterly meaningless series of tableaux” (*Fresh Hells*). Solomon did however credit some of the more memorable images before admitting to leaving mid-performance, such as that of a young girl swinging against the background of a shifting color scrim. Simmons also left the production early; subsequently half of her lengthy review is an essential recap of Counts’ previous productions. The core of Simmons’ dissatisfaction was issue with non-linearity. Despite her dislike of the production, in her review, “Something to Forget,”

she acknowledges that “some critics have lauded *So Long Ago* and suggests “that perhaps it all depends on your definition of theater or how you think that definition can be changed or whether you even believe theater can be defined.” Simmons concludes by giving her own dramaturgical take on the experience, suggesting that in her view, "*So Long Ago* might have succeeded if it had been presented as a kind of avant-garde silent film - all music, action and expression - with no words to intrude and confuse.”

Dan Bacalzo from *Theatremania* wrote a generally positive critique of the production, noting unusual details such as Hitler’s presence in circle eight, “traditionally the realm for sowers of discord, while Cardinals O’Connor and Law can be found in Circle Six, where Dante placed heretics. This is a daring move,” he writes, “considering that O’Connor only recently died and Law is still alive; but Dante sets a precedent in his tale, as it is revealed that those with especially grievous sins can be sent to Hell while their bodies are still living.” Like Simmons, Bacalzo offers his own dramaturgical take, noting that “there is not much physical punishment going on in Counts’ version of Hell. The crimes are clear; it’s the punishment that is suspect,” and completes the review with praise for designers and performers, particularly noting Moran’s “cool, collected presence” and the work of Brian Bickerstaff, who “radiates a disturbing malevolence in multiple roles.”

The *New York Times* gave the most significant praise to *So Long Ago*. Critic Neil Genzlinger described the work as a “visually stunning” amalgam of theater, art installation, and opera, in his review, “It’s Strange and Unsettling, Adrift Amid Hellish Images,” writing:

In Mr. Counts’ hell there is a lust-filled restaurant and a mysterious Waldorf-Astoria and a Fred and Ginger-ish pair of tap dancers in formal wear. There is a heavy industrial

score by Joseph Diebes that sometimes makes you think the building is still a working factory and you've stumbled into the day shift The high-wind encounter (no, it's not a giant fan) is just one of many startling stage effects And the meaning of it all is as obscure as can be. This is not a play with anything resembling a plot, but a series of tableaux.... In one of the more arresting scenes, Nazis rant in German while across the room a girl on a swing goes back and forth, framed like some rich man's perverse living artwork The crowning moment comes when you exit the factory, to a great skyline view across the East River. If you've happened to pick a nice spring evening, you really do feel as if you've just left a vision of hell and stepped back into a sort of urban heaven on earth.

In Counts' final work in the DUMBO warehouse, he took the greatest advantage of the space allotted to him. Like *Field of Mars, So Long Ago* centered on the dangers of hedonism in the intersection of classical and contemporary life; it both exercised the elements of a cautionary tale and avoided the pedantic through the use of large scale abstraction and spectacle.

1839 depicted a world populated by narcissistic lovers and the inability to pierce through an ever-present façade of beauty, and the resultant feeling of alienation. While no clear narrative was established, the production thematically borrowed from the classical play *Oedipus* in the exploration of manhood. *1839* presented a world of contradicting scale and upheaval, where “mammoth armadillos roamed the earth” as “walls disappear, floors slide, and actors dive into a void,” contrasting the sublime with the macabre in visions of oversized slaughtered game, hermaphroditic children, and appropriations of 18th century grand style portraits, such as sir Joshua Reynolds' *The Honorable Henry Fane* in dazzling finale. Lighting, puppetry and original

electronic composition played prominent roles, and were integrated into the world of the play with the elegance characteristic of Counts' direction.

So Long Ago represented an imaginative take on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, seen through the eyes of the contemporary theatre-goer, and borrowed elements of abstraction and the literal through episodic structure. The production was generally well-received and experienced a sold-out two month run. *So Long Ago* was unique from previous works through its more advanced use of technology, increased use of text and production structure. The technological capacity of company members and designers in *So Long Ago* represented new heights of complexity. This was due not only to a gained sensitivity to the space and Counts' vision, developed over years of commitment to GAle GAtes, but also to an expertise cultivated over years of freelance work. While the cast size of *So Long Ago* was larger than previous works, there were also a reduced number of core members. Beth Kurkjian, Cynthia Hopkins, and Jason Boyd had left the company by this time for various reasons, perhaps indicated the first crack in company cohesion before its collapse in 2003. The movement score was completely reinvented through the guest collaboration of choreographer, former Reza Abdoh performer and dancer Ken Roht, who according to various members, brought production quality to a new height through his idiosyncratic style. In summary, *So Long Ago* for many represented the apex of company work.



Figure 23. Craig McPherson. *Rehearsal*. Courtesy of the Artist.

Looking Forward

Soon after *So Long Ago*, Counts left the space to create a \$50,000 video installation through an ongoing loop within the face of the DUMBO clock tower. If *So Long Ago* represented the theatrical embodiment of hellish angst, then the 2002 video-installation *Looking Forward* represented the diametric notion of positivity and hope. This final work, essentially a solo installation by Counts' but produced under GALE GATES, was created in homage to the victims of 9/11 and the city of New York. Says Counts, "The idea was to create a portrait of New York and have a human aspect to the architectural skyline of the city" (Bahrampour). The piece involved 100 New Yorkers who were taped describing their most memorable impressions of the city, such as a favorite place, or a first day in town. The silent loop, which showed interviewees in a range of scale from distant to intimate, appeared every night for a number of weeks. On May 5, the final night of the installation, viewers were invited to tune in to the audio broadcast portion of the piece. Counts continued to create smaller works throughout the city and a Stein production at the California Institute of the Arts before the company closed. *Looking Forward* represented the company's final work in the DUMBO space before its disintegration in 2003.

In conclusion, by *So Long Ago*, company aesthetic had solidified into a sophisticated collaboration to be reckoned with. Despite the snarky and increasingly predictable censure of those reviewers who could not reconcile the company's lack of production narrative and immersive production style, GALE GATES had landed as a company of fortitude and significance in the downtown and avant-garde circles of late 20th century New York. However, despite this highly regarded success, internal friction largely relating to personal financial matters and a growing desire for better quality of life on the part of some members began to motivate outside

work interests, eventually leading the company to fold in a move initiated by artistic director Michael Counts. Although the company's close was difficult for many, it ultimately provided various members a new personal longevity in the arts.



Figure 24. Looking Forward. Archive Photo. Artist Michael Counts.



Figure 25. Photo: Michael Anderson, during the era of GAle GAtes, courtesy of the artist

“When I think about those years it’s like a clatter of sound. If you took all the aluminum siding off of fifty houses in the suburbs and took it up the top of a thirty story building and dropped it off -- that was the sound of the time -- of GAle GAtes.”
~Artist Michael Anderson

Chapter Six

Engendering the Arts: The Visual Arts Model, The Emerging Curator and Sonic Venture Series, and Company Festivities

GAle GAtes et al. produced large-scale theatrical works internationally and from its 40,000 square foot warehouse home in DUMBO, Brooklyn, over the course of its lifetime from approximately 1995-2001. In many respects the company epitomized the artistic spirit of creativity and the celebration of the artistic endeavor through on-going exhibits, workshops, performance and festivities. In addition, the company was very active in the visual arts world, and garnered a significant reputation for its various exhibits and workshops, drawing international crowds in the thousands (Baker *Letter to Greenwall* 62). The visual arts very much played a core part of company function and production aesthetic. Together with its resident artist model and artistic director Michael Counts’ informed knowledge of the sculptural and fine arts, as well as the ongoing contribution of resident composer Joseph Diebes, and integral resident and associate artists Michael Anderson, Jason Boyd, Tom Fruin, Jeff Sugg and Manju Shandler, GAle GAtes’ atmosphere was that of a highly-charged art collective. According to various members, GAle GAtes was not a collective: the theatrical works were largely conceived, designed and directed by artistic director Michael Counts; at the same time, the contribution of the resident artists positively informed company energy and development, and their talents and

labor were integral to its structure. The work and contribution of resident visual artists Anderson and Fruin were described with significant appreciation and regard by former members over the course of my personal interviews, as well as the critical engineering of designer/technician Jeff Sugg, the highly stylized and atmospheric lighting of Jay Boyd, the charged lyrical scores of Joe Diebes and Manju Shandler's evocative puppetry.⁴⁹

Anderson, Fruin and Sugg met Counts independent of one another during their twenties in New York in 1997. As part of the company work structure, they were given free studio space in exchange for their labor and talents towards the execution of Counts' production designs. Diebes, Shandler and Suggs were also given independent studios for production work. This arrangement allowed the artists critical time and space towards the development of their own voices, while giving essential support towards company work. Sarah Carlson, Adam Griffin, Andrew Hill, Anna Sokol, Wandjina Glasheen-Brown also contributed to various productions through administration, sound, and costume design.⁵⁰ Wandjina and Anna Sokol are in particular credited for keeping the spirit of the company light, and for their "spiritual advisement." Award-winning designer/director and artistic director of Collapsible Giraffe theatre company, Jim Findlay, also devoted time and efforts to company work, and former En Garde Arts producer Karen Dalzell played a prominent role as company producer early in its existence. According to company co-founder Michelle Stern, the "brilliant and very important"

⁴⁹ Shandler created puppetry for *1839* (1999) and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember* (2000), while Jason Boyd designed lights for *Field of Mars* (1998), *Tilly Losch* (1999) and *1839* (1999). Diebes was absent from *Tilly Losch* due to overseas business.

⁵⁰ Please note I have attempted to give recognition to all those individuals that contributed to the dynamic production and arts environment of GALE GATES: sources include various interviews and playbills. The author wishes to acknowledge that due to the extraordinarily rich artistic community of GALE GATES, a near decade in the making, there may be individuals who have not been credited.

(October 11 2012) dedication of all these artists was fundamental to the arc and development of GAle GAtes.

GAle GAtes was also known for its contribution to the arts world through exhibits committed to the emergence of new voices in the visual, sculptural, sonic and performing arts. While these series ranged in numbers, years and size, GAle GAtes fostered innumerable new and critical voices through the sharing of space and support. The company's Emerging Curator Series and the Sonic Venture Series, to be discussed further in this chapter, were major company functions.

In the following chapter, ties between the visual and performing arts, such as site-specificity and the intuitive process and the critical involvement of resident artists Anderson, Fruin and Sugg will be detailed. The development of the resident artist model, the overlap of visual and theatrical sensibilities, and the various series and workshops hosted by the company will be explored as well. Finally, this chapter will also focus on those elements leading to the company's collapse in 2003.

Engendering the Arts

According to company grant writer Kit Baker, through the implementation of on-site studios and artist residencies, GAle GAtes in some respects ran a performance company according to the working practices of the visual art world rather than that of theater (8 January 2013). The visual and sonic disciplines were integral to GAle GAtes' production life and yearlong functions, and the engendering of the arts and overlap between the various artistic

mediums led to a unique theatrical viewpoint.⁵¹ According to Sugg, “A lot of us there were given an open door and it developed a different sensibility,” he says. “A bunch of theatre people will develop something one way. A bunch of visual artists will develop something in another” (19 September 2012).

Counts, initially trained as an artist and whose frequent visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art was a keystone in his theatre productions, referenced both his own work and various paintings and artists throughout his works. According to the artistic director:

“The visual arts weren’t a separate piece. The way everyone was thinking was very much influencing each other. There was overlap. A shared sensibility. Just the way [Michael Anderson and Tom Fruin] think about art informed a lot of what the company was doing. It’s just my point of view, but I think there is a bit of a shared outsider experience that we had. [Anderson] used to have this key ring with 300 or more Metropolitan Museum of Art clip badges -- he used to throw it on the table and say “here’s my art education.” This pile of experience. Things like that. I grew up blocks from the Met. That was a big part of my education and experience and influence. (19 September 2012)

Collage was an important aspect of GALE GATES’ visual arts aesthetic and that of its members. Collage, a form of cutting and pasting images is an early 20th century development, which has been furthered through the image-laden world of the digital age (Goody 3) and was a trademark of many of its productions.

⁵¹ Various members spoke in-length about the overlap between the theatrical and visual arts mediums in GALE GATES’ production, often using the phrase “engendering the arts.”

Anderson, a self-taught collage artist, primarily uses found international street posters as his medium in the creation of work which he creates from his Harlem Collage Shop studio in New York. In her article on Anderson, entitled “International Street Gangster” *Dapper Dan Magazine* writer Victoria DeliGianni of describes his art as “torn-down, ripped-up, painstakingly layered street posters, [which] tell intricate stories about the chaos, dirt and beauty we live in.”⁵² Anderson’s primary medium is collage, created from posters gathered from places such as Mexico City, Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Paris, Rome and New York City. In his artist statement, Anderson describes his work as creating “non-linear narratives that capture the experience of contemporary life with dark humor,” borrowing from commercial and pop imagery.

⁵² Anderson’s work in Greece is the focus of his interview with Victoria DeliGianni in *Dapper Dan Magazine*, which is a high art and style men’s magazine, based in Athens.



Figure 26. Artist Michael Anderson. “the attack of the 50' three graces.” 6' x 15'. 2012 international street poster collage, vintage playboy centerfolds, album cover, postcard.

improvisation course that was reserved for majors. “I was so mad,” he recalls. “My girlfriend at the time said, “Calm down. Why don’t you take a figure drawing class with me? There will be nude models.”” Anderson agreed to take the course, in which he excelled. “After that,” he says, “I drew everything at the Met. This was self-schooled” (1 March 2012). Anderson met Counts soon after graduating from college with a degree in international affairs. At the time, Gale Gates had just acquired space from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council for their second grand scale indoor production, *wine-blue-open-water*. When he was asked to join the company, Anderson had little hesitation. “I had a German girlfriend then,” he recalls. “I was going to

move to Berlin. I felt it was the time to do something spectacular. I was making art but not getting any shows. It was time to do something crazy” (1 March 2012).

Artist Tom Fruin also met Counts during his early twenties, soon after relocating to New York from Los Angeles with a degree in art. While Fruin has grown into a major artist of distinguished international repute, during his early post-college years, he struggled to find art-related work. Fruin began breaking into Manhattan university centers to look at job boards. He was not alone in this among the GAle GAtes crowd:

At New York University I saw a flyer, illegally posted I think, because all the other flyers said, Speak to your counselor and plug in "xyz" code but one poster just said: call this number for GAle GAtes. (27 February 2012)

Fruin contacted Stern through this posting, and soon after met with both Counts and Stern in their temporary East Village office in St. Marks. He describes the office as smoky and overflowing with piles of ripped down posters to be used as material for an Anderson exhibit. At the time, the company was transitioning into their second space in the financial district, which they were going to open with a show of Mike Anderson collages. “I was only 21 and had literally just moved to New York,” shared Fruin. “I went to the financial district the next day and started helping with the space” (27 February 2012).

When asked about the relationship between the visual arts and the company, Counts parallels Anderson’s methodology to his own, specifically referencing the use of intuition and flexibility of process:

There was the idea of improvisation in Mike’s work. Compositions that unfolded. He used to say that he would put tons and tons of these sniper posters, that were sometimes

an inch thick, in layer after layer after layer. He would soak the posters -- that was the beginning of his process making the composition. You could see the top layer, but you'd have no idea of the layers underneath it. As it soaked and separated and he dug into it to make his composition, it was almost like discovering your color palette and having that guide and shapes you. He was also very into jazz as was I, influenced by jazz. But this idea of creating something spontaneously -- being influenced by what's happening around you -- by what ideas literally float to the top -- was very consistent with my ideas about trusting subconscious impulses and ideas that might not necessarily fit rationally into a paradigm. So for me the process of discovery was similar to his process of discovery. What's floating to the top of my ideation and consciousness and dreaming and whatever had a parallel in what Michael was doing. (19 September 2012)

In his 2011 interview, "Michael Counts" with composer John Zorn, (who Counts collaborated with in the 2010 New York City opera production of *The Monodramas*), Counts also stresses the overlapping importance of site-specificity and the visual process as key to his own directorial work.⁵³ GAle GAtes Development Director Kit Baker recalls Counts' process at the New York City Opera:

When Counts was directing the *Monodramas*, he just took the music and he said "Look, I just want to sit in the auditorium is that okay?," and they said "okay, fine." So he would sit for hours in the space just listening, and taking notes, feeling the space. The dramaturg from the New York City Opera would come in and say, "Are you okay? Can I get you coffee?" and he would say, "No, I'm fine, I'm fine, just leave me alone." So he

⁵³ John Zorn is an accomplished avant-garde musician and composer, and is the recipient of numerous awards, including a 2006 MacArthur Fellow.

really had only that space around him, and he would meditate on the space. (27 February 2012)

Fruin and Andersons' work with found objects also share a home in the intersection of visual arts and site-specificity. While Anderson predominantly utilizes found street posters the world over in the creation of his collages, Fruin's launch in the art world began with his creation of a drug-bag series. "These drug bags I was collecting and sewing together and making quilts and flags [took off]," he says, continuing:

I lived in the lower east side and Mike Anderson would sleep on my floor and we'd walk to and fro – from the space to lower Manhattan In the process of collecting the quilt I would go out of my comfort scene further and further or nearer and nearer – subway tracks -- etc. I started to collect in the morning because I wouldn't get harassed as much. It was about me exploring my city, understanding it. I didn't want to comment on it, and it ended up being quite beautiful. It was a way of putting myself out there. What's at the end of R Line? Or the Morningside park in Harlem. So I'd go there and learn about it from what I found. (Fruin 27 February 2012)

In this way there was a shared overlap of visual art sensibility, sculptural impulse, and sensitivity towards the thematic resonance of location and geography.

For Fruin, a continued interest in the intersection of cityscape and architecture led to a series of later international works, including a Brooklyn water tower sculpture in part sponsored by the Walentas' Two Trees Development. Fruin's earlier Dutch piece, *Kolonihavehus*, translated as "The Garden Shed" was the result of continued collaboration with GALE GATES'

former member, Anika Barkan who returned to Copenhagen after company closure. According to Fruin, the project was initiated when Barkan's company found a large amount of scrap plexi, which they gave to Fruin in an invitation to house their dance-theatre performance. The production, which takes place in the sculpture, is performed entirely in Danish. "I designed a lighting program," says Fruin, "so the house has a life of its own The intent was maybe to make it a private place for contemplation or a sense of security in an open plaza," he says. "So you could relate it to a more cathedral or chapel-like environment. You appreciate your environment like never before" (27 February 2012). According to Fruin, these works are in part inspired by his past "drug-bag series" and individual city architecture and skyline.



Figure 27. Artist Tom Fruin. Image: The Garden Shed. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 28. Artist Tom Fruin. Image: *Water Tower*. Courtesy of the Artist.

For Counts, his lifelong visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art seemed to play a keystone in his dramaturgical process. In an interview with American composer John Zorn, who Counts collaborated with in the 2010 New York City Opera mounting of *The Monodramas*, Counts reflects on his visits to the museum as a child, and in particular discusses the meditative quality a walk through the exhibits provides:

[Walking from] the Temple of Dendur, to 19th-century painting, to the Modern wing, to African art [all in the context of seven minutes] ... gave me the freedom to make those connections from an early age, to have ideas emerge that I don't necessarily understand, to follow my own intuition, my own hunch.

Sculpture was also integral to Counts' work in his creation of miniature box worlds, which he created in parallel to his productions as a means of informing the theatrical process.⁵⁴

In summary, the ties between the visual and performing arts were intrinsic to the GALE GAtes model, specifically relating to artistic director Michael Counts' personal perception of the world and his highly involved relationship to the visual arts through the incorporation of site-specificity, visual intuition, and the direct influence of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In his interviews, Counts credits and draws parallels to the working methods of now internationally celebrated core resident artists Anderson and Fruin, who perform sensitivity towards landscape in their own work through the medium of found objects and awareness of place. While Counts primarily expresses his vision through the mediums of theatre and opera, Anderson and Fruin create extensive and intricate collage works and sculptures, such as Anderson's famous international poster collage, and Fruin's drug-bag series and most recent attention to international identity through the creation of geographically-inspired icon sculpture.

Roots, Resident Model and Design

The heart of the visual arts model lay in an exchange of artistic labor towards free studio space, the details of which developed over time and were initiated by Fruin and others. Idealism and hard work ethic were foundational to company value structure; however, over time the demands of the space, production work and ongoing festivities and exhibits called for a refined set of expectations of administrative duties. There was a great deal of physical demand in not only the creation of sets and personal work, but also the physicality of dealing with 40,000 feet

⁵⁴ See Chapter Seven *Landscape Theatre*

space rental. Boundaries and barter thus became necessary towards company health and equity. For Fruin, for example:

It was about defining the thing. So you are a resident artist. What does that mean? “You work upstairs and you’re an artist and we respect your contributions artistically.” But I didn’t know if I cared. “I like my studio. How about I’m working here in exchange for my studio, what does that mean?” “That means you’re here three days a week.” “Great.” So I started this new association. “So if my days are working here three days, if I’m operating scenery at night, then I need to get paid for that, like the actors do.” Someone would have to mop. So I’d say, “Well I’ll mop but it’s a trade day or you have to pay me.” I was spending more and more time making art. Which is why I had to define my role more and more. It [couldn’t be] so loosey-goosey. I didn’t want to work 20 hours straight to realize someone else’s goals and dreams. I had my own that I had to work on. So I said, “I’ll be there 8 in the morning and I’ll work hard till 6, but at 6 pm I need to work on my own.” At one point I had a show of my own, and I went to the office and expressed my needs and I created a sabbatical. (27 February 2012)

In this way, the artistic model developed over time. Challenges, however, were not only constricted to a fair distribution of labor and the question of compensation, which for some members remained unresolved and problematic, but also the issue of danger in the workplace. Set design construction, and the scale of Counts’ vision required mechanical inventiveness and massive shared efforts. The design itself required the use of use of harnesses, pulleys and intensive welding, and the artists sometimes lacked the right tools. Recalls Fruin:

We did things that were dangerous. Instead of having an extension ladder that would reach the gallery ceiling; we would put one found ladder on top of two tables. I think about that now, and I just think that was dumb. That was tempting. I think we were game for it – but now I’d say “I’m not doing that. You have to get the right ladder.” (27 February 2012)

Says Sugg with in a mix of levity and candor: “It’s a miracle no one died. Anderson was ready to go at me once when he thought I was electrocuted. The potential for death was ... large” (19 September 2012). Despite these difficulties, the artists were supplied with a tremendous amount of space and opportunity to develop. “We had these huge studios,” Anderson says. “There was a lot of freedom to do a lot of work. We had an amazing shop. We became completely expert at building theatrical sets. It was a great combined effort” (1 March 2012).



Figure 29. Photo of resident artists' studio, courtesy of Michael Anderson

The kind of work the resident artists were asked to complete for the productions was varied. "Counts would ask for very specific things," said Fruin. "I don't know how to do this -- can you make a miniature walking person as if walking through a model house, so we can see the silhouette.' So I would play around with those ideas." The design process often included Counts sharing his renderings and images with the designers who would collectively work to execute his vision through continued drafts, problem solving, and construction, which Counts would also assist with. However, the problem solving mechanics of the set pieces was an integral part of the production process, as Counts would frequently conceive physically enormous pieces which

would require extreme ingenuity in their creation and use. The artists were also occasionally given opportunities for ownership through detailing. “You could spin off into your own little thing – whether it was a prop, such as carving arrows or the designs you rake in the sand in *So Long Ago* before the show,” says Sugg. “There were all these places you could have ownership and your own little fun.” The physical space of the warehouse also largely informed the creation of sets. “The length of the space -- we used it and used it and used it in every show,” recalls Boyd during our interview. We put a million lighting positions in that space. Fruin and Anderson were on ladders for days just putting bolts into the ceiling for me so I could hang lights in all these weird places. We were a real team for sure” (6 February 2012).

While Counts shared in the physical creation of the set, the bulk of the welding and production was accorded to Anderson and Fruin, with mechanical insight and construction by resident associate designer Jeff Sugg. Much of the effort was shared, and at times extended into the larger experimental theatre ecosystem of downtown New York and Brooklyn, such as critical assistance by Findlay. “We were basically all playing in each other’s back yard,” says Sugg, who himself is frequently referenced in personal interviews. “Jeff is a super-specialist,” says Anderson. “He can solve any problem. He is a mechanical genius” (1 March 2012).

The production work executed by the resident artists ranged in scale and delicacy, but often demanded remarkable technical precision and integrity of visual detail. The production designs were conceived by Counts, and would incorporate his vision and interpretation of landmark paintings, sculpture and cultural icons, such as an enormous rendering of Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, a recreation of the hovering ballerina beneath a gas balloon in Joseph Cornell’s *Tilly Losch*, theatrical appropriation of *Casablanca*, and theatrical renderings reminiscent of Hopper, Classical portraiture, Matisse, Manet and still-life painting, as well as

original design. In 1839, for example, Anderson disassembled a statue of a young boy and rebuilt it to represent the silent witness of the production in an experimental re-telling of the Oedipus myth.

Gale Gates greatest achievements were their masterpiece sets, often mechanically challenging to execute and technologically inspiring. Douglas Davis of *Art in America*, for example, concluded his review of *Field of Mars* by describing it as a work “brilliantly imploded at once by its acting and technology” and that “the era of the extended artist’s theatre is upon us.” Included among their work were massive turn tables, false 80 foot walls, lakes walls and forests, a 100 foot descending steel bridge, and boat that glided through an artificial river Styx. According to Findlay, the company was innovative in “both ... their use of technology and the sheer scope of their work,” continuing:

Every piece just seemed massive and there was a kind of hands on DIY aesthetic⁵⁵ to solving big design challenges. The technology wasn't precious or always clean (although Michael wanted it that way) but they [Gale Gates] were making stuff in ways that no one else would have thought was okay You wouldn't do it that way unless you just applied a very weird mind like Tom Fruin's or Jeff Sugg's to a very weird problem. It was always sort of dangerous too. That sense of danger wasn't always really apparent though in the performances.... (4 January 2013)

In summary, Gale Gates overlap with the visual arts lay in Counts' personal inspiration by the arts and the extensive contributions of company resident and associate artists. The evolution of the artistic model, and specifically those elements relating to boundaries, equity and

⁵⁵ DIY (“do-it-yourself”) aesthetic, sometimes referred to as DIY punk aesthetic, refers to the championed quality of self-sufficiency and hard personal labor.

compensation developed over time, allowing opportunity for the resident artists to foster their personal signature voices in the studios provided. This was in exchange for work towards GALE GAtes productions. This model allowed for not only the championing of the resident artists' works, but also for a rich mixture of visual and sculptural sensibilities to enter the production process. In effect, Counts' ethereal and complex designs were physically realized by the talents of his resident artist production team and the support of neighboring artist/designer, Jim Findlay. The result was technologically innovative installation works, both poetic and often awe-inspiring for their scope of vision and execution. Together they constructed odd and massive set fixtures, who's detailing and problem-solving was made by possible through deep labor, quirky innovation and quick-thinking.



Figure 30. Photo of artist build studio. Set pieces for *1839* shown here. Photo courtesy of Michael Anderson.

Company Series , Festivities and Closure

Another vital element of GAle Gates and its relationship to the arts was that of its ongoing exhibitions, such as but not limited to the *Emerging Curator Series*, conceived by BAM Executive Producer Joseph Melillo, in the support of up-and-coming curators, as well as the *400 Artists* and *Sonic Series*, which were likewise committed to the emergent voice of promising artists and composers. Anderson, Counts, and Fruin were instrumental in the development of these art series, together with Joseph Diebes who initiated the Sonic Series through a sound grant. These various series attracted countless crowds, ranging from downtown New Yorkers to international clientele, and the opening exhibit for the Emerging Curator Series drew an estimated 10, 000 people alone (*Letter to Greenwall* 62). “We started a gallery series, which fit. At our core we were visual artists inspired by visual art and the overlap of the different art forms was the epicenter of where we wanted to be,” says Counts (19 September 2012). Anderson and Fruin were highly instrumental in these series, sometimes featuring their own work, other times providing support for visiting curators. Counts, a trained artist, also had his work occasionally featured in these exhibits.

According to Baker, “The series offered emerging curators a rare opportunity to flex their curatorial muscles in a large space in a leading visual art district at a critical early stage of their careers” (*Letter to Greenwall* 62). Among the guest curators were Anne Ellegood, Senior Curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and Deb Singer, Executive Director of the Kitchen; while among the many featured artists were Jim Lambie, a nominee for the 2005 Turner Prize; Patty Chang, a finalist for the 2008 Hugo Boss prize; and Candice Breitz, winner of the 2007 Prix International d’Art Contemporizing of 62 the Foundation Prince Pierre de Monaco. The Series proved to be an essential and leading force in the catapult of many young artistic

careers. According to Anderson: “We launched a lot of people. Many people got their start from us” (1 March 2013).



Figure 31. Michael Anderson. Abstract Billboard, GAle GAtes et al. 2001. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The content of the exhibits ranged greatly.⁵⁶ *Size Matters* (1999), curated by Mike Weiss and *Mental Wilderness* (2000), curated by Richard Harrods, Nicholas Muellner and David Wickland, were major installments of the Emerging Curator Series. *Size Matters* was a 400 artist group show that ran for three months, and which sought to challenge the notion of size as implying substance by allowing the close-knit images to be viewed in isolation, closely or as broad mosaics. Donald Baechler, Maureen Connor, Giles Lyon, Lucio Pozzi, Kenny Scharf and

⁵⁶ Special thanks to artist Michael Anderson who shared various press release and anecdotal reflections on these varied exhibits for the purpose of this study.

Gary Stephan were among those artists featured. *Mental Wilderness* exploring landscape in the depiction of psychological and emotional states, resulting in the cultivation of fantastical worlds. *The Light Show* (2000) curated by Christine Kim, investigated the role of light on ideas in contemporary culture and dealt with topics such race, landscape and religion. *Serial Number* (2001), curated by Lauren Ross, was the company's 4th exhibit and presented the work of thirteen artists influenced by serialized media, such as television, comic books, film and municipal projects. The 5th exhibit, *Mimic*, ran from 2001 to 2002 and was organized by artist Robert Boyd; this series presented 16 artists in the examination of mimicry in art. During 2001, the company also began holding annual art auctions in order to raise funds for the Emerging Curator Series.

The various arts events hosted by GAle GAtes received significant notice. *The Brooklyn Paper's* review, *Viva Italia* (2000) was archived by the Brooklyn Museum, for example, and describes the 2000 Emerging Curator Series, *Na.TO*, which was committed to the rising stars of the contemporary Italian arts world. This exhibit was curated by Ombretta Agro and is described as "a show brimming with vitality and lusty figures." In fall of 2010, Exit Art gallery hosted an exhibit dedicated to the legacy of alternative and pioneering New York City art spaces and projects since the 1960s, with a primary focus on 140 areas and their contribution to the cultural foundation of New York City, thereby giving visibility to many of these pioneer and fringe these artists. GAle GAtes was among those spaces and companies featured in the exhibit, which has since been published in a book entitled *Alternative Histories*, and which *The New York Times* describes as providing:

Thumbnail sketches of more than 140 alternative spaces and related organizations, including the artist-run restaurant Food, *Bomb* magazine and the activist group Gran

Fury... This is an indispensable source book that leaves you wanting more—specifically, individual studies of some of the organizations it covers. It stands as a vibrant and irrefutable evidence of what happens when people take things into their own hands. (qtd in *Alternative Histories: Reviews*)



Figure 32. Emerging Curator Series. Size Matters. Courtesy of Michael Anderson

In essence, the Emerging Curator Series allowed for a tremendous exposure of up-and-coming curators and artists to the international visual arts world, and successfully attracted large and notable crowds to GAle Gates. Brooklyn Academy of Music executive producer Joseph

Melillo and his assistant Bob Bangiola were critical to the initiation and ongoing support of the series. The exhibited artists, featured curators, and GAle GAtes itself benefited. “[The artists] started selling work for substantial sums,” says Baker, “People were finding out about us” (27 February 2012).

The *Sonic Adventure Series*, initiated by composer Joseph Diebes, as well as the work of Transmission Project, a small company formed among GAle GAtes members Fruin, Sugg, and core performers Anika Barkan and Cynthia Hopkins, also kept the space alive and vibrant with innovation. Many of Transmission Project’s works were wordless and featured Hopkins and Barkan in movement-driven performance. According to Barkan:

The work in Transmission Projects was very much based on a desire to work with equal artistic leadership, with a deep respect for the different art practices. We worked from an equal decided theme and then we went and worked individually and then we met along the way to share our ideas. As we got closer, Cynthia Hopkins and I would stay combining our individual writings into a script and afterwards start rehearsals together; Tom Fruin and Jeff Sugg would continue to work on the visual ideas, and then in the end we would put it all together. The idea was the work should be able to work both as a visual art show and as a performance piece. (6 January 2013)

In one of their works, *Hazard of Gravity: Could You Maybe Borrow Me a Hammer*, the program note synopsis describes the story of a ghost living in a barn, who is disrupted from transcribing her memory in countless diaries by a traveler. The ghost then casts a spell over the traveler so that “she is haunted by the memory of her ancestors;” the ghost then after reveals herself to the traveler and offers her soul “so that both can be free to travel onward.” As part of the music series, Hopkins also presented early music work.

Resident composer Joseph Diebes conceived and began the Sonic Venture series through a music grant. The series was in essence a number of music concerts, often experimental in nature, not only via sound but also in presentation. The immersive framework was thereby often used, where audience were in the midst of audio composition. Diebes presented many of his works as well as that of various individuals. “It was an open container,” says Diebes (1 March 2012). “Some years I presented a lot of New York composers, we even presented international people. Some years it was every couple weeks; some years it was less. It was very ad hoc. We had submissions. Most things that happened were word of mouth.” The composers’ active interest in the intersection of sound and image was often reflected in the presenters’ work. “People were doing films, or films with live sound, or some very visual images with sound environment,” he says. “It was a forum for experimental music.” Among those featured in the Sonic Venture Series was musician and composer Todd Reynolds, who brought in “the ‘who’s-who’” of New York downtown musicians and created an installation in the back space entitled *Still Life with Mic*. “It was like a GAle GAtes' piece only it was with downtown improviser musicians,” says Diebes (1 March 2012). New York composers Michael Schumacher, NNeng, Bill LePage and others were also featured throughout the various series.



Figure 33. According to the project summary, Mandle, in her first indoor multidisciplinary production, created several performance installations with innovative costumes, movement, and sound design within the project space of GALE GATES' forty thousand square foot industrial warehouse (2001)

Artist Julia Mandle and the UK visual artist/composer team of Julia Bardsley and Andrew Poppy were also contributed to the lively artistic community of the GALE GATES space. Among her works, Mandle presented *Return* (2002), which she describes in our electronic interview as:

A movement based performance throughout the GALE GATES' space about my Jewish relative, who was World War II navigator on a B25 bomber over the most dangerous Nazi oilfields, and who spent his adult life wishing he had married his true love, a non-

Jewish woman from the south. The piece was created from his perspective as an old man suffering from Alzheimer's. (Fig. 1)

Artist Craig McPherson also contributed greatly not only to GALE GATES' development through the fostering of professional relationships among the art establishment, but also through a series of paintings which he created in inspiration of company work. As McPherson explains in an email interview, he initially "had an idea for a series of narrative paintings based on experimental theater and wanted to use [Counts'] production for part of this project," explaining that:

A number of contemporary figurative artists had been trying to use classical narrative subjects (biblical, mythological, etc.) and it never quite worked. The work seemed very cliché ridden. I'm a realist artist, which means to some degree I document my world, using the poetry of paint. I thought that the answer to this dilemma – how to revive narrative painting – might be to use a non-linear or indeterminate narrative derived from experimental theatre. Michael [Counts] liked the idea and gave me access to the "backstage" and permission to photograph his productions. Over the course of the next several years I became friends with Michael and most of the Gale Gates crew. At times the relationship seemed voyeuristic – photographing in the "dressing rooms," backstage relationships – most interesting – and watching a piece evolve. (26 April 2013)



Figure 34. *Poet's Eye*. Artist Craig McPherson. Image courtesy of the Artist.

The company supported staged readings and workshops as well. *The Three Birds*, for example, a play by Joanna Laurens was hosted by GALE GATES in a US premier and was directed by premier New York and Broadway director, Sam Gold, who also served as assistant director to Counts' *So Long Ago*. *The Three Birds*, based on Sophocles lost play *Tereus*, received significant praise and awards. Director Phil Soltanoff was another influential artist who created work within the space, and Kit Baker's original work, *Fire in the Shadows*, was given a staged reading and mounted. "The virtue of the system was that you had your role – like my role was to raise money – but you could do anything," says Baker (27 February 2012). As Anderson notes in his interview, "So much was happening, every second."



Figure 35. Emerging Curator Series. *Size Matters*. Courtesy of Michael Anderson.

As part of the various events hosted by GALE GATES, in 2001, resident composer Joe Diebes, in collaboration with resident designer and engineer Jeff Sugg, composed an opera entitled *Strange Birds* (2001), an immersive multi-media opera that imagines a futuristic society with no conflict or character psychology, described as:

A contemporary chamber opera that surrounds the audience, providing an immersive environment in which to reflect on the essential nature of communication, language and social behavior in a world increasingly mediated by technology. There is no libretto and the singers communicate in wordless phrases inspired by birdsong. The orchestra is DJ'd live by myself using samples from 19th century orchestral music. The singers remain spatially separated and immobile over the course of the piece as their virtual counterparts interact inside a multi-screen video-scape created by Jeff Sugg. (*Joe Diebes/Works*)

According to his production notes, *Notes on Strange Birds*, Diebes' intention was to avoid a conventional re-enactment of the mythological past, as is common among operas seeking subjects outside of the contemporary. "Instead," he writes, "I went the other direction—the mythological future." He describes the structure as a vocabulary of repetitive melodic gestures as opposed to words, with the intent of allowing the audience "to hear the act of communicating rather than interpreting exactly what is being communicated." The fundamental rhythmic unit of the piece is found in the breath cycle of the singer or instrumentalist, so that "rather than conform their breath to the melody the idea was to allow the breath in its natural rhythm to carry the melody," allowing for a deeply organic and present execution of sound. The phrases themselves were inspired by birdsong, which he describes as beautiful in their simplicity and "at once alien and immediate." He writes:

Because birds have an acuity of hearing, as well as a metabolism that operates about ten times faster than humans, I usually slow down bird sounds to about one-tenth of their natural speed to reveal the nuances of the expressive gesture. This also avoids the abhorrent effect of the singer sounding like a bird. I wanted to evoke the elliptical and primeval simplicity of birdsong through a peculiar bird-human hybrid vocal style without losing the lyrical potential of the classical voices. The arias in the opera, as well as some of the duets, consist of several phrases sung on breath cycles which in essence are not so different from that of a song sparrow.

Similar to Diebes' compositions for company productions, the orchestral component functioned, as he describes, as "sonic weather." In other words, Diebes' concern was more with state of being as opposed to melodrama. "The last thing I want is to lay out the emotional life of a

represented character,” he writes, “by making music that exists solely to manipulate the moment to moment experience of the audience.” Despite Diebes’ seeming intention to create a world sans dramatic feeling, the work itself is highly visceral. Diebes acknowledges this, continuing “This is not to say that these various textures are not evocative [But] the effect is not an enhanced emotion on stage or the revealing of a character’s emotional state. Rather They are atmospheres in the meteorological sense” (*Notes*).

The GAle GAtes performance of *Strange Birds* was highlighted in the October 2001 *New Yorker* magazine, which describes the work as an attempt to expand the genre of opera in an elliptical and melodic composition. In the more recent 2005 Scotland installation, reviewers responded positively to the work. Critic Mark Brown for example described the opera as “enchanting,” and notes that “the round vowels of the extraordinary song and the abstraction of Diebes' music transcend conceptualism” in his review, “An Elegy for the Modern Age.” He further recognizes Sugg’s “kaleidoscopic digital images” as both seminal and futuristic.

The events hosted by GAle GAtes were not limited to exhibits, performances and workshops. Company members also invested time and energy into party events: in some instances, festivities were the result of space rental, such as that for celebratory occasions such as weddings, as well as location rental for Hollywood feature films and a Brooklyn Academy of Music gala event (*Letter to Greenwall* 60). In other instances, parties were thrown as a means of opening exhibits or productions and drawing larger audiences to the space, thereby building upon company’s healthy following. To this end, the social festivity and celebration of life and art continued to overlap in such company events. For former GAle GAtes actress Beth Kurkjian, there were moments where “things would afterward blend into parties because people had all

these technical gear at their finger-tips and it would morph those two things. It was silly and lighthearted and a blowing off of steam” (29 January 2013).

Despite the highly festive quality of the atmosphere of GAle GAtes, company member work ethic was never negotiated. Individuals took advantage of the festivity available to them as young artists in a thriving art center, sometimes seeming even to draw inspiration from the positive atmosphere. According to Sugg:

It was a great time. It was phenomenal thing to be doing in your 20s in the art world. GAle GAtes was the place where downtown theatre people came to see our shows and hang out. There was a lot of partying and we were 20 year old nuts. That’s just how it was: you stayed up for three days to finish the work. Crazy. And it was okay. (19 September 2012)

When asked to share details about the parties, a close associate humorously wrote: “They'd peel the hair off your scalp, so probably not.” According to Counts, the culture of GAle GAtes and the work Counts was drawn to himself was a reflection of the youth culture of the day, but often transcended the typical party atmosphere, in that the constellation of artistic sensibilities, diverse population and personalities GAle GAtes drew, together with the incredible technology of its day, (namely Boyd’s remarkable lighting systems) which melded club rave and installation:

During GAle GAtes we were all in our early to mid to late 20s during that span and for sure there were a lot of parties. But there was a specific swap of the rave culture, people like Sound Lab and Cultural Alchemy, who would have much more called themselves “artists” than “ravers.” They create these installations and bring together video artists

and graffiti artists and electronic music and DJs and create experiences that were much more art heavy than just the laser partying and ecstasy of raves. (Counts 6 February 2012)

In addition to the massive energy of work and festivities happening within the DUMBO warehouse, the company was also commissioned to create work outside of the space. Perhaps most notable of these events was a long term relationship with the Gotham Awards initiated by Fruin. The Gotham Awards are presented annually to makers of independent films, and is located in Brooklyn, New York. To this end, GALE GAtes was not only “plugged in” to the avant-garde and experimental theatre/arts crowd of downtown New York and Brooklyn, but was also engaged in professional work with the innovators and trend setters of the international cinema landscape.

The enormity of the warehouse space given to the company by the Walentas family and Gale Gates signature overlap with the visual arts led to the creation of large scale and spatially dynamic works. The site-specific nature of these works, however, marked the company productions as largely incapable for tour. The possibility of touring GALE GAtes’ works was complicated by restrictions of scale, technology and finance. Even more so, the detailing of the warehouse architectural space created spatially idiosyncratic productions, such as its enormous false prosceniums and artificial forest and lake landscapes. According to company grant writer Kit Baker, the relationship of company work to the warehouse was symbiotic, not unlike that of skin to skeletal (27 February 2012).

Despite this, the company did make efforts towards touring. Baker, who lived internationally for most of his adult and artistic life, retained close associates in Russia, with

whom he continued to visit and collaborate with over the years. In 1998, Counts suggested another attempt at touring while Baker was visiting Moscow. Baker recalls:

At the same time, we were trying to build up the presenting series, and I was keen to explore what we could do in the way of importing Sympatico Russian productions. It was all very speculative, but I think not beyond the realm of possibility because there was (and still is) a market and appetite for exciting new performance from America. I'd spoken to a number of European presenters who were trying but failing to find U.S. companies that would be a good fit for their programming, and I thought Michael's work would fill that gap. (10 October 2012)

I went to Moscow and I talked to the Chekhov Festival about them taking us in. It was hilarious. They thought I was from *The New York Times*. I showed up and I said, I want to meet the director. They knew I was from New York, and for some reason they got it in their head. So I went in and it was Soviet to the nth degree. There was a big bald man and his secretary. And he suddenly turned to her and said “shto dolnyesta?⁵⁷” She said, “I’m sorry, I thought you were from the *NY Times*. That is why we are having this meeting.” I mean he was great after that. He said, “Ok, let’s talk” and we had a nice chat. (27 February 2012)

In essence, however, the GALE GATES model of the 1990’s was not designed to tour for its site-specific and large scale technical capacities. According to Baker and others, the expense and complication of remounting GALE GATES intrinsically site-specific work would have been near to impossible. Diane White, former producer for Reza Abdoh, toyed with the idea of touring *1839*

⁵⁷ “What’s happening? What’s going on?” Source: self.

for some time, although this venture too proved too difficult. “The design of all those big performance/installations ended up being intricately calibrated with the column and walls of space, as if it were a kind of skin,” says Baker. “By the time Counts started “branching out into the kind of work that could be recreated elsewhere without breaking the bank - for example, *Looking Forward* - the company was on its way out” (27 February 2012). Nonetheless, company success was evident in its large downtown and avant-garde crowd of followers, and repeated sold out runs; over time, productions were extended from three weeks to two months, the longest time available for productions to run successfully within the space (Greenwall 60).

However, the combination of various factors, such as rising quality of life cost in New York conjunct with the unstable income GAle GAtes was able to provide, (despite the generosity of its sponsors and supporters), together with expanding opportunities outside of the company and the growing sophistication of various members artistic voices, together led to company closure. This was initiated by Counts, who left the company around 2002 for new ventures, and the company collapsed soon after. Personality conflicts had also been on the rise, and by company closure, many were saddened by its end.

GAle GAtes held a closing party in 2003 and the general mood was negative, one in which some members analogously described as a painful divorce. “GAle GAtes was such an influential part of my life – it never occurred to me that we would not be a company,” (17 October 2012) shared actor Brian Bickerstaff in a sentiment that seemed to echo with many others. The company also closed with various debts, which members paid off and closed through the leadership of Stern. After closure, however, many members turned toward new projects, which led to a further and more long-term impact on their careers and artistic identity.

“It’s a lot of water under the bridge. I’m in a different phase in my life and career. It was a great moment in time. Many of us are still close, and even if we don’t speak that often, we’re close in our hearts,” says Boyd (8 February 2012).

The reason for the company close occurred for various reasons, dependent on the view of which company members was interviewed. According to Counts:

When push comes to shove, at the end of GAle GAtes, our space was becoming smaller as DUMBO became what it was meant to become. The Walentas were reclaiming little parts, so it was going from 40,000 to 35,000 to 30,000 square feet. They carved out a bank in the back and parking spots downstairs and the space was getting smaller. My vision was getting bigger, and I felt, “there has to be another model. There has to be another model.” I was looking at Cristo. Who with Jean-Claude could fund their own projects to the tune of 20, 25, 30 million per project on their own, without grants. There are other ways. When GAle GAtes was ending, there were the beginnings of wanting to have more than what I had. I just wanted to be able to survive. And what’s more, I wanted to create work on a bigger scale, to pursue bigger dreams and productions and opportunities and not be tied to this model, this type of budget situation. (19 September 2012)

Despite the hardship of the closing, various members agree that the practicalities of maturing as an artist and individual in the increasingly expensive New York City arena demanded a growing sense of personal entrepreneurship and survival. While Counts and Stern worked to fund and compensate company members, many of whom already initiated careers through featured exhibits, commissions, and work with other theatre and musical artists, ultimately the lack of

consistent financial resources and subsequent quality of life lessened company commitment. Many of the artists had developed idiosyncratic and sophisticated signature voices, and felt limited to an outpour of energy and art work for GALE GATES alone. According to Anderson, during our interview, for example: “It was great at the time and I’m proud of my accomplishments there, but to tell you the truth, I have so many shows – I have my own career” (1 March 2012).

Another reason for company close was the administrative headache associated with running an such a large warehouse performance space. The overlap of exhibits, space rentals and production were time consuming and managerially challenging, and often incurred conflict due to scheduling mishaps or miscommunication. The exhibits garnered support and volume, but according to Counts, required intensive supervision, and could have been the limit of GALE GATES’ work alone. The competing interests and needs of the productions, fundraising, and party and performance space rentals was also a source of increasing friction:

We would have a gallery show up and someone might come and say, “I want to rent your space for the Saturday night for my daughter’s wedding for \$5000.” So we’re moving everything out, taking this gallery show, moving everything out. Setting up the wedding. \$5,000. They come and go. And then that might have been inconsistent with the schedule of the gallery show. “Wait on a second, why are we closed on Saturday? where did all the art go?” These were real moments that happened when the curator flipped out. They said, “you didn’t have art handlers move any of this stuff. What are you doing? This is your space but this is my show.” All that conflict. (Counts 19 September 2012)

In conclusion, GAlE GAtes functioned not only as a successful theatre company but also as a thriving arts center. Host to a multitude of events, such as the Emerging Curator Series, The Sonic Venture Series, various readings, performance and workshops, including GAlE GAtes' own company member's four-person ensemble, Transmission Project, and Diebes' 2001 experimental opera, *Strange Birds*, GAlE GAtes served to not only expand the artistic voice of the DUMBO Brooklyn area but also attracted a number of gifted artists from various disciplines, garnering attention from contemporary companies and institutions such as the Gotham Awards and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). According to BAM Executive Director Joseph Melillo:

I was professionally affiliated with Michael Counts as a colleague, supporter and attendee at his performances. GAlE GAtes was his vision and it would be accurate to state that his organization was "before its time" here in NYC. He crafted visually stunning productions of performance art that were housed in his space in DUMBO Brooklyn. A large format gallery/storefront/office building environment. A combination of lacking sufficient financial resources to underwrite his work and the loss of the space to real estate development all compounded for the termination of his work and the company.

GAlE GAtes functioned as an expansive arts center: not only through its resident arts model, technologically awesome theatre works, and the artistic sensibilities provided by its players, but also through its promotion and advocacy of creativity in the disciplines of theatre, dance, music and visual arts, as well as the spirit of perseverance and revelry.

To this end, the company's various events, including The Emerging Curator Series, The Sonic Venture Series, ongoing Transmission Project works, as well as the plethora of hosted

exhibits and performance helped develop GAle GAtes into a multi-disciplinary art source and hotbed of inspiration. In our interview, Boyd shared:

GAle GAtes is a bit of a soap opera in scope. It has it all: love and hate and blood and brotherhood and people losing their minds and having nervous breakdowns. It's all mixed together. It's all there. But it made for good art. In the end we always came back to the work and tried to make the best work we could. That was really always the goal.

(6 February 2013)

*The Opera is obviously the first draft of a fine
spectacle; it suggests the idea of one.*
~ Jean de la Bruyere

*It seems to me that the sound, that is the
verbal meaning and sound of the opera,
besides evoking character also evokes
landscape ... I think when you put
characters in landscape, that's opera.*
~Robert Ashley

Chapter Seven

Aspiring to Music: GAle GAtes et al, the Wilsonian Opera, and Critical Response

An issue for Gale GAtes et al. during its time of production was that of categorization. Because company worked spanned so many disciplines and was highly non-linear in nature, easy classification eluded various reviewers and caused a rift between experience and critical response. According to *New York Times* reviewer Peter Marks, the adventurous work of the company was best described as having “one foot in the world of post-modern art and the other in downtown performance (*Carnival*) while critic Erik Jackson of *TimeOut* New York describes the work as “difficult-to define”(Tilly Losch). Because genre allows for specific vocabulary to be used toward the dissemination of work, GAle Gates’ distinct production style, while invigorating to its followers, otherwise situated it in the netherworld of critical response.

In some circles, attempts were made to classify GAle GAtes work. For example, the immersive and sensorial nature of the work landed it in a cutting-edge aesthetic, and artistic director Michael Counts' moody and visually-driven atmosphere often ranked the work within the Theatre of Images. The company itself described the work as installation/performance in its mission, and according to Counts, company intentionally veered away from labels. However, when asked to retrospectively articulate a framework for discussion, many members referred to the Wagnerian mission of *Gesumtkunstwerk* or "unified art," frequently referencing "opera."

During the height of GAle Gates' productions in the 1990's, there existed tremendous experimentation in the American opera form. While company work itself was never defined as opera, the genre is a helpful groundwork for examination. Historically, opera is considered a classical European form, which allows variance in American experimentation. "Generally there's very little indoctrination into a canon," says company resident composer Joseph Diebes (23 Jan. 2013). "So if we were to take on a form like 'opera' we would have to approach it from a direction that isn't even thinkable in European terms" and continues by citing director Robert Wilson and American composer Robert Ashley as models.⁵⁸ Ashley himself suggests that opera is as an artificial American form inherited from European culture and that "the acoustics of America's varied landscapes construct ways of listening and shared cultural experiences that require different musical environments for performances" (qtd. in Sabarini 327). The term opera is also tied to the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, suggesting a production of large scale in its use of the various disciplines; the synonymous phrase of "total art" thereby refers to performance operatic in scope.

⁵⁸ Since the 1960's Robert Ashley has been composing work that around stories of American lives and landscapes, and promotes the idea that opera serves as the perfect term and vehicle for his work. See "The Sonic Landscapes of Robert Ashley" by Arthur J. Sabatini in *Land/Scap/Theatre*, editor Una Chaudhari. U. of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. 2002. (325)

In their company mission statement, the company writes that they “are in constant pursuit of Richard Wagner’s idea of the ‘unified artwork.’” Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was a revolutionary composer and theorist, and his vision for the performing arts concerned the idea of unified production, wherein poetry and music were synthesized through the vehicle of theatre in what he described as “music-dramas” or the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Sterberg 336).⁵⁹ Wagner refers to his concept of total theatre in both his essays, “Art and Revolution” and “The Artwork of the Future” (1849), writing that “by attempting to visualize a work of art which would unite all the single arts, allowing each to attain its highest perfection ... I was led ... to formulate the ideal ... a complete fusion of poetry and music” (Wagner *Music of the Future*, 21-2).⁶⁰ Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* arrives out of opera’s original meaning, that of “work,” and reflects his dissatisfaction with the opera of his day, which he found to be flat and more a vehicle of audience social life than artistic.

The Wagnerian notion of unified artwork, or opera, reflected GAle Gates’ interest in forging innovative paradigms of performance. It can be argued that the company furthered the concept of the Wagnerian spectacle through the inclusion of space and architecture as elements of dramaturgy, and broke the traditional proscenium in favor of grand scale promenade works which took place in the 40,000 square foot DUMBO warehouse. Further, Counts’ partnership with resident composer Joseph Diebes allowed for an alternative theatrical landscape to emerge, one saturated in both evocative image and sound. This partnership was not unlike the

⁵⁹ Theatrical landscape is also considered important to the realization of Wagner’s theories, although the specifics of its execution have been controversial through time. “Wagner sought landscape images to play on the environmental per-conceptions of his audiences, complementing music and myth” (Sternberg 336).

collaboration of 20th century director Robert Wilson and composer Philip Glass, which pre-dated GALE GATES' emergence and played a vital role in its exploration of the operatic landscape.⁶¹

While GALE GATES, now defunct, continues to defy classification, the influence of the Wagnerian “total art” and its realization in the foundational work of Wilson and the director's own influence on the company, namely the early work of artistic director Michael Counts, merits historical study. In the following chapter, Wagner's notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the possibility of GALE GATES as opera is explored, with a focus on the groundbreaking work of Wilson and specifically his landmark work, *Einstein on the Beach*. Critical reception of experimentation in American opera and the avant-garde theatre is also discussed, as well as the fundamental compositions of GALE GATES' resident composer Joseph Diebes.

Wagner, Wilson and *Einstein on the Beach*

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) suggested that the opera of his day was ineffectual and alienating due to what he termed an “affirmation of the separation of the arts” despite its “seeming point of reunion” (Wagner *Separation of the Arts*, 4). Wagner proposed theatre as the site for the actualization of total art.⁶² “If differences of language prevent literature from attaining universality, music – that great language all men understand – should have the power, by dissolving verbal concepts into feeling, to communicate the innermost secrets of the artist's

⁶¹ An important issue of dissent lies in GALE GATES' immersion process; by breaking the 4th wall it can be argued that GALE GATES' aesthetic was entirely non-Wagnerian through its inclusion of spectator.

⁶² Wagner speaks in length about this in his essay, “The Essence of Drama is Knowing through Feeling.”

vision – especially when it is raised through the medium of a dramatic performance,” (*Music of the Future* 18) he writes.⁶³

Wagner’s frustration with the independent arts was its general lack of rapport. His feelings were that if synthesized, “total art” could create a whole greater than the individualized parts. His frustration lay in the static frame of the visual arts, the incapability of literature to express sheer feeling, and the emotive but abstract quality of music (Jacobs ix). Wagner was inspired by the Greeks, whose dramatic work he believed encapsulated his vision of total theatre. He writes, for example, that the various artistic expressions within the Greek classics “combined to produce perfect drama” and were thus able to “present the sublime and the deepest human truths” (21). Wagner’s work was thus oriented towards myth and legend, which he defined as “true for all time ... [and] inexhaustible through the ages” (qtd. in Simons 298).

Wagner was frustrated by the audience of his day. In “Music of the Future,” he suggests that opera caters only to “the business of diverting and entertaining a bored, pleasure loving public” (19) whose integrity he describes as infinitely removed from his ideal. In seeking to invest a new integrity of form to opera, Wagner envisioned a structure that could allow the spectator to be engaged with the drama-music on an intuitive, sensory level, wherein the atmosphere of the theatre could fully envelope the audience in the fantasy of performance. He sought to eradicate any signs of artifice or distraction from the theatrical experience through the synergy of total art.

To fully realize his vision of an opulent dream-world experience and in the hopes of eradicating the more social atmosphere of opera-past, Wagner’s Bayreuth theatre allowed the

⁶³ Note that Wagner refers to this clarity of expressiveness and power as “hitherto reserved to painting alone” (18).

auditorium to be darkened for the first time during a performance, where even the orchestra was hidden from view, allowing the spectators to observe the world of opera without distraction (Beacham 18). For Wagner, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the fused destiny of the arts, wherein its “realization is to be a result of history, of a cultural evolutionary process,” perhaps ideally encapsulated in the avant-garde artistry of the twentieth century, and notably that of Robert Wilson (Kirby *Total Art* xiv).

It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to discuss GAle GAtes in contemporary operatic terms however without pointing towards the revelatory work of Wilson and his contributions to the evolving genre. “I saw *Einstein* 20 years ago,” says Counts. It changed my life then. Seeing it in 2012, seeing everything I’ve done since then, it was like brackets around everything I’ve done” (19 September 2013). Wilson’s influence on the theatrical and opera landscape are significant, and he is considered one of the most important practioners of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It has even been suggested that one of Wilson’s greatest contributions has been a re-addressing of the question, of “what is theatre?” (Tomkins 90). Perhaps the same could be said for his investigation of the operatic form.

Wilson himself typically refers to his larger works as operas, a term likewise used by the critics in describing his work, including French scholars who colorfully describe his work as “silent opera” (Tomkins 83). According to scholar Roselee Goldberg, “while the term opera cannot always be applied strictly to the visual-theater musicals, the opulence [of Wilson’s work is] indeed operatic” (202). Although Wilson has continued to direct innumerable productions throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, arguably his most seminal work is the 1976 opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, which he created in collaboration with composer Philip

Glass and dancer/choreographer Lucinda Childs. In describing his landmark production of *Einstein on Beach*, Scholar John Rockwell writes:

Wilson's lyrical mysticism was lent muscle and body by Glass's structuralism, and the mystical implications of Glass's hypnotic music, always just beneath the surface, were made manifest by Wilson's theatrics. This was not an opera in the conventional sense... [B]ut in the larger, truer sense of opera as a mixed-media theatrical piece of prominent music, this was very much part of the tradition and the most overt Wilson has yet become in emulating Wagner. (Rockwell *Stage Works* 22)

Einstein was first produced in July 1976 at the festival d'Avignon, later at the Venice Biennale, and was given two performances at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York after a European tour. It was remounted in 1984, 1992 and experienced a triumphant international revival in 2012. Throughout its history the work received glowing response. In an elegantly written review of the original New York premier, critic Bonnie Marranca writes:

Wilson had in the past named his productions after historical figures (Sigmund Freud, Joseph Stalin, Queen Victoria) but *Einstein on the Beach* is his most specifically historical piece simply because there is a direct link between what is being related in the opera (the destruction of the world through technological means) and the historical figure it is named after (Einstein, whose discoveries led to the bomb). Yet it remains a meditation on the modern age rather than an attempt to explore the life of Albert Einstein. Einstein is both inside (as a presence) and outside (playing his beloved violin from a position between stage and orchestra pit) the work, a witness to history on trial. Or is the opera offering a grotesque pun: the earth burned while Einstein fiddled? (*The Avant-Garde and Audience* 144-5)

As part of the 2012 *Einstein* revival, former lead Gale Gates actress, Kate Moran was cast in Lucinda Childs' original speaking role, while Child's dance section was performed by radiant dancer Caitlin Scranton. Former GALE GATES core actor Brian Bickerstaff, a close friend of Moran reflects on the casting process:

Kate's a Renaissance woman. She's living the life a lot of actors would like to live We were both asked to audition for *Einstein on the Beach*. There were thoughts of changing the two lead women for two men but they wound up keeping the [original casting]. It was amazing to be recognized, to be asked to audition for this seminal lead. I really felt like I had arrived [to have] even been asked to audition for this very important piece of work in the lexicon of performance.

When Kate [Moran] got the lead, I was working in a restaurant and she came in to specifically tell me in person she had got cast. I poured her some wine. We hung out for a bit. She leaned over the bar and she said, "I have something I have to tell you. I was cast in *Einstein on the Beach*." I was floored. I was so happy for her. (17 October 2012)

Moran, a highly-regarded international stage and film actress, approached the role with understandable diligence and sensitivity, and describes the work as a "dream role." Moran's preparation included extensive archival research at the Lincoln Center Library, and the actress arrived to the first rehearsal completely off book. "*Einstein* is such an iconic piece, I wanted to have as much knowledge as possible in order to be in the present with Bob, and to propose a certain newness (as it would be impossible to simply "replace" Lucinda)," she states (fig. 1.). The realization that *Einstein*, like all theatre, "is fleeting and will one day be over" inspired Moran to perform "as though each show is the last and in appreciation of it" (17 March 2013).

According to Moran, a central parallel in working with Wilson and Counts is the directors' mutual cultivation of "highly specific universes," primarily requiring a non-Stanislawski approach for the actor. In discussing her process with these works, Moran acknowledges the context of a non-hierarchical structure wherein design, performance, score and actor have equal footing. To this end, the presence of the performing body seems to take precedence, and requires performers capable of intense concentration. In the earlier trial scene, for example, Moran is situated in the witness chair in near stillness for 42 minutes:

Some nights are more difficult than others, simply because of body fatigue or weather conditions...when it is cold my feet tend to fall asleep... but I enjoy that scene. It is a meditation and the music carries me. Bob [Wilson] often says to us that we shouldn't think of ourselves as standing (or sitting) still, because we actually never are; there is always breath, blood flowing, heart beating. That is a simple thing to go back to and concentrate on and to refocus if necessary. (17 March 2013)

In my experience of the fall 2012 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Moran's stage presence is highly charged, elegant and precise, which she seems to attribute to her love for Wilson's work, as well as a physical availability of breath and openness:

Whatever emotion each individual audience member feels is their own journey, I am not there to project any clichéd version of human sentiment... Obviously in other work I have done, especially in film, there is more of a character based work. With *Einstein*, I am not setting out to portray anyone, but simply be an element like all the others that creates the experience. My part is text and movement based, but it is no more or less present than the lights, set, score, visual imagery, etc. I feel Michael [Counts'] work also

has this quality. Bob [Wilson] and I worked often on the sound of my voice, but as sound, not as character. I think that avoids it becoming too precious or important. (Moran 17 March 2013).

Subversion of text, lack of formal character and equal stress on design allowed for a similar non-hierarchical production experience to exist within GAle GAtes' productions, which seem to have a historical foundation with Wilson's work. Former GAle GAtes core actress Beth Kurkjian, for example, describes her own initial spectator experience with *Einstein* as revelatory. "After that I perceived lighting and different stylistic elements as less supporting the character and more creating a sensory field in that they all contributed to the experience," she says. For Kurkjian, a trained dancer, Wilson's work was also exciting in its privileging of the body and space over language, which she was given opportunity to articulate in the movement-based vocabulary in many GAle GAtes' works (29 January 2013).

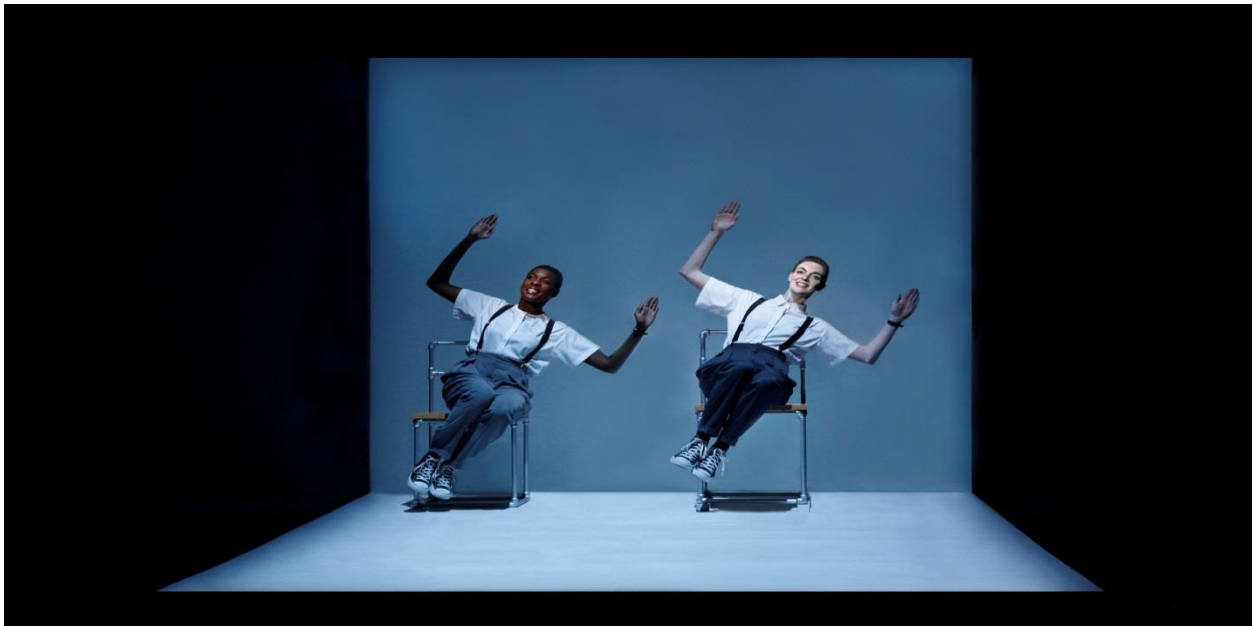


Figure 36. Helga Davis and Kate Moran perform in the 2012 *Einstein on the Beach* revival, "Knee Play 2." © Lucie Jansch 2012

Einstein on the Beach lacks a direct narrative and is a near-five hour opera performance incorporating stunning visual sets, lighting, music, dance and theatre. The production is divided into four acts which are threaded together by five “knee-plays” (or interludes) which Wilson created as a visual palette between acts; in the simplest form the acts consists of two trials, a night train, a scene beneath a tower, and the interior of a space machine often described as a factory. There is no intermission, and the audience is free to come and go at will. The images themselves are dazzling and strange: in the middle of the production, a seashell gleams upstage left under a night-time sky, while in the center of the stage a train seems to trek through eternity to a volatile, flooding repetition of notes. There is also a jail cell; at another instance a tower appears Chiciro-like in its glow. Often through Wilson’s design, the stage becomes positively radiant.

In the night train scene, a Victorian couple is seen is the back of a night train, while a wave of mist rolls by suggesting the perpetual movement of the engine. It is a moment trapped in time, as a hanging moon shifts from crescent to full and back again at glacier speed in the suggestion of endless night. Over the course of the scene I am reminded of the story of former Wilson actress Cindy Lubar, was almost institutionalized during Paris rehearsals of *KA MOUNTAIN*. “I felt as though too many things were happening in my mind at the time,” she has since said, “it was out of control” (qtd. in Tomkins 89). According to scholar Calvin Tomkins, it seems important to Wilson to “explore the kinds of communication that such states [as madness] open up.” For myself, Glass’s ceaselessly spiraling melody (the opera singers seem inhuman, there is no pause for breath and they execute tremendously powerful notes to a cyclically advancing libretto of repeated numbers) is unhinging in its beauty and repetition.

Wilson refers to pictures of Einstein himself as important to the development of the work, although the production itself makes no direct linear reference to the scientist or his autobiography. Rather, *Einstein on the Beach* seems to be a rumination on the man, a scientific God of the twentieth century, and our position as a civilization in the universe itself. For Wilson, the physical attributes of the scientist suggested a poetry that in part inspired the production:

In 1976, I created an opera with Philip Glass called *Einstein on the Beach*. I began with this photo of Einstein in his study in Princeton. All of the performers were dressed in the same way: baggy gray pants, starched white T-shirts and suspenders. They wore tennis shoes and a wristwatch. I looked at many photos of Einstein. Photos of him when he was two years old, 20 years old, 40, 60, 70 years old. In all standing portraits of him, he held his hands in the same position as in this photo. The little space between his thumb and index finger is always the same. I started the opera with this gesture. And continued. I thought about this space: between his two fingers he held his chalk with which he made his calculations. He held the bow for the violin that he loved to play. And he pulled the ropes of the sailboat that was his favorite pastime. (*From Within* 313)

To some, *Einstein on the Beach* represents the trampling progress of science on nature through the association of the title and correlating images it brings, such as its reference to Nevil Shute's post-nuclear novel, *On the Beach*, as well as the serenity of the beachscape itself and its symbolic representation of a pre-industrial world. The melodiousness of the first Knee Play, for example, is reminiscent of wind carrying away conversation on a beachside; snippets of numbers and repetitive phrases of "these are the days my friend" are more felt than heard in the slow idyllic unfolding introduction of the piece. Wilson's lighting is luminous throughout. The "Spaceship" act is an epic finale of orgiastic lights and swelling music, as two Einsteins glide

adjacently in elevated glass (what I read to be) coffins, while the concluding Knee Play seems to be a deliverance of love to a world made cynic, forever altered by the knowledge of the atom bomb (fig. 2.). According to Brooklyn Academy of Music executive producer Joe Melillo, “*Einstein on the Beach* is a visionary work of two titans of the 20th century, and it’s a meditation on the historic character Einstein and the implications of his history, his research for all of us as human beings, for our daily lives and our existence” (*Of Bob and BAM* 142).



Figure 37. The inner pyrotechnics of the 2012 *Einstein on the Beach* “Spaceship.” © Lesley Leslie-Spinks 2012

As a mother met daily with the wonderment of a young son, my audience experience is informed by the cyclical resurfacing images of boats, trains, planes, rockets, as well as even the literal image of a boy actor suspended high on a crane poised with a paper airplane, conjoined

with the lullaby tone of the closing speech which seem to evoke mutual innocence and childlike astonishment over the universe (fig. 3). The miniature rocket that trails over the stage in Act Three is rickety, quaint and toy-like. According to Rockwell, Wilson’s signature succession of dreamlike images allows for a particular subjectivity to take hold on the part of the viewer. “No one person could definitively say what the pictures ‘meant’ or tell their ‘story,’ but every sympathetic observer felt sure they meant something, something personal and profound,” (*Painterly Visions* 48) he writes.



Figure 38. A young boy (Jasper Newell) stands suspended in the first act, “Train.” © Lucie Jansch 2012

Throughout the revival, I am reminded of Wilson’s personal philanthropic bent and charged generosity among the disabled and disenfranchised communities, his adoption of the

deaf and mute Raymond Andrews and ongoing collaboration with autistic artist Christopher Knowles:

My first play that had text was written with Christopher Knowles, where the text is arranged musically and mathematically, and the structure of the work was arranged architecturally in terms of math and geometry, so that he could readily see the whole. So I think that the third most important influence on the work I'm doing today was the meeting of Christopher Knowles, a 13-year-old boy who was institutionalized since age 2. Chris taught me how to think quickly on a large scale, how to see big pictures quickly. (*From Within* 320).

Andrews played a significant role in many of Wilson's productions, and his drawings and presence inspired not only the work Wilson creates at his Byrd Hoffman school, but also served as foundational to the 1970 work, *Deafman Glance*. Wilson's meeting with Andrews was similarly intense, and reflects an attitude of compassion compelled to action:

In 1967, I was walking on the street in Summit, New Jersey, and I saw policemen about to hit an Afro-American boy over the head with a club ... [A]nd I stopped the policeman, I said, "why do you hit this boy?" And the policeman said, "it's none of your business, "and I said, "but it is. I'm a responsible citizen. Why do you hit the boy?" And after much to-do I left with the policeman and the boy and started walking to a police station and on the way, I heard the sounds coming from the boy and recognize them as those of a deaf person. And after some time at the police station, the boy was released, and I went to a two room apartment where he was living with 13 people, an Afro-American family. And I had learned that recently he had been sent to New Jersey, where I had met him. And

before that time he had been living in Alabama and Louisiana in rural communities. And the people with whom he lived did not understand that his problem was one of not hearing. He had never been to school. As far as I could tell, he knew no words. I thought he was intelligent, perhaps highly intelligent, and it became apparent after a short period of time that he thought in terms of visual signs and signals. He had no legal guardian, and he was going to be institutionalized. It was thought that he couldn't learn. And to make a long story short, at age 27 as a single man I went to court to adopt him, so that he would have a legal Guardian and I could prevent him from being institutionalized. I had a 27 year old lawyer. I said to the lawyer, "do you think I'll get this boy?" and he said, "no, I don't think so." The judge said, "Mr. Wilson, what makes you think this child is intelligent? I said, "your honor, judge, he has a sense of humor, and that's a sign of intelligence." Towards the end of the proceedings, I asked once again the lawyer, "I said, do you think I'll get that boy? What can I say to the judge to convince him to give me the boy? He said, "I don't know." So in the final moments of the trial, I said to the judge, "you know, Judge, if you don't give me this boy, it's going to cost the state of New Jersey a hell of a lot of money to lock him up" and the judge said, "Mr. Wilson, you've got a very good point," and they gave me the boy, and he came to live with me. And my first work in the theater was written with his 13-year-old deaf mute boy who had never been to school and knew no words. It was based on observations of the boy, dreams he had, drawings he made. It's how he heard and saw the world. (318)

In *Einstein*, a piece so dense with multiplicity of meanings, what emerges most consistently in my reading is the act of communication from a stage world so alien from the mainstream: this is the seeming embodiment of Wilson's own concern with communication with

those on the periphery and an expanded perception of the world. In working with Andrews and Knowles, for example, Wilson's approach was to adapt his perceptions and mode of communication to that of his collaborators rather than impose a traditional view.

In the tower scene, a hand is visible: its movements are frenetic, laborious, spasmodic. From the distance of the audience it takes on the visibility of a deformed tongue, and its flicking signals remind me of the esoteric hand gestures of dementia patients whose illness preclude language. The satirical and seemingly eternal blinking of the Judges is reminiscent of iconic Americana: it is a playful image lifted from the innocence of 1930's animations; at the same time, it is a comment on the very act of seeing and being seen. The use of two judges: one, an older African-American actor of dignified stature, the other, a solemn white child, seem to embody for me the viewpoints of those on the periphery of society, whose perceptivity performs an authoritative role in Wilson's own dramaturgy (fig. 4.). It occurs to me, perhaps they are representing Raymond himself? Mid-way the performance, a parade of performers join each other on the stage in a spectrum of race and performance discipline. They face the audience in a still portrait of awkward and finessed bodies while a piercing saxophone solo plays. As avant-garde director Richard Foreman writes in his description of Act Two and the finale of Wilson's *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*:

At long intervals, people enter – I mean people! Not performers! A collection of all shapes, sizes, ages ... [O]ne realizes that few directors have ever composed their stage times-pace so that bodies and persons emerged as the impenetrable (holy) objects they really are, rather than the virtuoso tools used to project some play's predetermined energies ... [The production] evokes the whole spectrum of feeling tone that is [the] aim of art on its highest level. (qtd. in Aronson 128)



Figure 39. *Einstein on the Beach* 2012, “Trial.” © Lucie Jansch 2012

In his later directing career, Wilson increasingly turned towards more traditional opera and literary works, such as *The Magic Flute* (1991), *The Black Rider* (1991), *Madame Butterfly* (1993) *Woyzeck* (2000), *The Ring Cycle* (2005), *Threepenny Opera* (2007), *Happy Days* (2008) and *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (2009). Wilson also continued to cultivate a new type of opera and subsequent audience through multiple works, among them the 1997 collaboration with musician-composer Lou Reed, *Time Rocker*, and a controversial staging of Wagner’s *Lohengrin* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1998. Most of Wilson’s later work was also created and supported in Germany and France, due to a complicated, if not poor, American reception. “It was as if after

twenty years of deconstructing the theatrical experience and creating a new vocabulary of performance, Wilson, starting in the mid-80's, was willing to return to classical theatre and opera. However, his staging of the classics were always filtered through his unique vision” (Aronson 133).

In summary, director Robert Wilson has made a lasting impact on the landscape of performance, namely that of opera and theatre through his revolutionary reconfiguration of traditional forms and in the grandiose renderings in the scale of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. His collaboration with composer Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, is now considered an icon of the 20th century avant-garde theatre and continues to make a lasting imprint through its continued revivals. It is a production with no stated narrative or objective; rather its dreamy imagery invites subjective realization and awe. Wilson's influence played a fundamental role as well in the development role in GALE GATES, specifically through the early inspired works of artistic director Michael Counts, to be discussed further.

Critical Response

Generally speaking, critics have been unreceptive to those works that defy traditional narrative or expectation. Distinguished scholar Gautam Dasgupta, for example, recalls the audience experience of the American avant garde in the 70's: “Foreman was working for years before he got any recognition. I remember going to Foreman's [early] work and there were only two or three people in the audience. With Wilson it was the same thing,” he says. Interestingly, there exists also an oppositional danger when critics respond toward a piece of work with overwhelming approval and lack of interrogation. Bonnie Marranca notes this in her 1977 review of the opening of *Einstein on the Beach* in New York:

Several people who have written about *Einstein* expressed the belief - good intentioned to be sure - that one could only *experience* the work, that analysis of it is either “inadequate” or “irrelevant,” as if the simple act of coming to terms with the quality of the experience, or its nature, might somehow spoil its integrity as a Work of Art. Such mindlessness on the part of critics, whose writings help shape the audience’s attitude toward the arts, smacks of faddishness and ultimately creates an unhealthy situation in any attempt at prolonged discourse on the arts. This attitude makes the critics the cultural lackeys of artists in vogue, champions of a theatre they do not understand but feel they must praise because everybody is talking about it. Or worse, it turns critics into glorified press agents. (142)

Scholar Arnold Aronson cites this linguistic issue as key contributor to the disintegration of the avant garde, specifically from “well-intentioned academia” wherein scholars seeking to apply literary theory to theatre lack an understanding of the dynamics of performance (Aronson 200). The consequence, he argues, becomes “an ever-widening gulf between scholarly critic and practioners, [where] theory was increasingly read not by artists but by other theorists. Popular journalism, on the other hand, often lacked the tools and vocabulary to deal with non-traditional forms of theatre in a meaningful way” (201). In our interview, for example, GAle GAtes company member Kit Baker specifically referenced a 1997 *New York Times* article entitled *Is It Opera? Maybe, but Who Cares?* written in response to Robert Wilson’s *Time Rocker* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The article called for increased receptivity towards shifts in the form and its evolving definition. Writer Bernard Holland humorously opened the article by writing: “*Time Rocker*, a self-described rock opera at the Brooklyn Academy of Music by Lou

Reed and Robert Wilson, has sent me to the dictionaries.” Baker distilled the argument of the article by explaining that:

This article is basically talking about how Robert Wilson has for years talked about his work as opera. And talking about the original meaning of the word: *work*. The conventional idea of opera being rooted in 19th century. Then looking at [contemporary American composer] Robert Ashley -- all his works are operas and yet there’s no orchestra, there’s no singers. And looking at how people working in this fashion are calling their work operas and really -- why shouldn’t we call it opera? It’s a great way of expressing what people are doing. I think that Michael [Counts], he really wants to create a total work of art. It’s not theatre, it’s not dance.” (27 February 2012)

While Wilson seemed to be making tremendous headway in the evolving forms of the performing arts, namely in his hybrid theatre and opera works, he was also met with severe resistance by the more traditional opera crowd. For example, his 1998 staging of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, led to riotous criticism.⁶⁴ Baker was in attendance at the Metropolitan Opera House opening:

It was a 4.5 hour opera. The first night there was a big scandal about it actually, because you had all these old school Wagner types. The Met was then the most conservative opera house in the world. The Wagner types were even more conservative.They probably didn’t even know who Wilson was. And afterwards, when the singers came on,

⁶⁴ A comprehensive look at the reception of all of Wilson’s work and specifically, operas, is outside the scope of this study. Rather, *Lohengrin*, serves as an iconic example of critics sometimes slow-moving reception of innovative work when it is produced in the mainstream, and directly responds to this study because it is cited by Baker and reveals insight into the critical landscape of the day.

they applauded, applauded. And when Wilson came on, there were the loudest, most vicious boo's I've ever heard in my life. Raining down. (27 February 2012)

The reviewers were generally no better. Writer Alex Ross, in an article he titled *Coma*, observed, "A remarkable sound came from the audience during a recent curtain call at the Metropolitan Opera. To call it booing doesn't do it justice: this was a penetrating moan, a wailing of mostly male Wagnerites in spiritual pain." According to critic Bernard Holland's 1998 *New York Times* review, "Robert Wilson Adds Theatre to Lohengrin":

Mr. Wilson's love of slow movement would seem to complement a composer's equally slow-moving stagecraft. It doesn't. The director's pictorial abstractions would also appear to fit Wagner's larger spiritual themes and mythic grandeur precisely. They don't In "Lohengrin," the minds of a director and a composer come too close for comfort. The devices of the one begin to look like caricatures of the other."

It was not until the 2006 revival that Wilson's direction of the work became well-received. Critic Anthony Tommasini wrote a glowing review for *The New York Times* noting, "Finally, the astute concept behind Mr. Wilson's staging [has come] through." For Gale Gates, "the theatre critics were looking for the literary backbone of it. And the backbone wasn't literary; it was sensorial or experiential or the kinds of things you would associate with a visual arts association," noted Diebes (1 March 2012). According to Baker, "There were factions. Michael's work is so strong, it can be overpowering, and you have to allow it. And I think that rubbed some audience the wrong way" (27 February 2012.) Baker also felt that reviews were irrelevant: "We had momentum anyway," he says. "Foundations were giving us the money we

needed. The NEA gave us a grant. From my point, of view, I didn't see any problem" (27 February 2012).

According to Counts himself, press ultimately did not matter. "If you're in it for the long game you just do what you do," he said. "I had to make the shows that I did. The idea of not was more terrifying than anything. I was driven by a need to create. There was never a need to be a part of the established legitimate mainstream theater. It was like life and death to me" (19 September 2012). Despite this, Counts acknowledges the frustration that accompanies such criticism:

I look back now and it's kind of comical. [But] It's frustrating at times when you feel deeply misunderstood. People have their own weird axe to grind. Their own resentments and strange bitterness. Misanthropic people who just sling dirt. It's painful. There was a critic at the *Village Voice* [Alisa Solomon] that just famously – she never got what I was doing, hated what I was doing, never gave me a good review.... And then a premier critic of *The New York Times*, literally said, having literally never seen anything I did, to our publicist – "Michael Counts should be taken out and shot." He is the premier critic of the *New York Times*. He reviews the Broadway shows. He said I should be taken out and shot for the work that I was doing. And yet never saw anything I did. It's heinous, right? It's absurd. (19 September 2012)

For Dasgupta, the negative reviewers were in accord with the trajectory of the avant-garde, and in his view were the result of a lacuna in critical vocabulary. He notes that it took decades for the critics to get a handle on practioners such as Wilson and Foreman. "For these artists, and certainly Michael," he says, "it was the arts critics ultimately who knew the language

of form, the language of imagery, and were comfortable with it. Historically, theatre critics have always been more comfortable with narrative and text” (22 October 2012). Dasgupta also suggests that the decline of avant-garde theatre in the 90’s led to inadequate experimental activity for the critics to develop a language suitable to the work. “Bob Wilson had for all intent and purposes turned his back on America; he was working abroad because there was no support in this country. Foreman continued to do his shows once a year at St. Marks,” he says. “In an odd way, Michael fell into that crack.”⁶⁵ Dasgupta also acknowledges the depth of success Counts encountered in consequence of this lineage: “Michael has a lot to be very thankful for, he’s run the gambit. He should consider himself very, very fortunate. Where he’ll go from here only he can answer” (22 October 2012).

Aspiring to Music: GALE GATES and the Operatic Framework

For Counts, Wilson’s early influence on his own work is very clear. “One of the things that I found compelling was the extent that Wilson called many of his early works operas,” he says, “and the idea of opera as ‘work.’” I actually corresponded with him very early on when I was a student or just out of school, regarding that idea and referring to the work that I was doing as operatic in that way in the same way he was referring to his” (7 February 2013). During his early twenties, Counts followed Wilson through Europe, and during his undergraduate time as a student at Skidmore College he created an all-night affair titled *The Life and Times of Alice Riddell* in appropriation of Wilson’s own elasticized and fantastical work. “In terms of the [historical] line,” says former company actress Beth Kurkjian, “I think that there were periods where Michael really wanted to model himself after Wilson: such as the specificity and the

⁶⁵ For further reading, see Robert Wilson’s 1982 interview with Laurence Shyer.

sparseness, to not spoon-feed the narrative, all that. Very meta and not what you would expect in a mainstream theatre” (29 January 2013)⁶⁶.

It was through this gestational period that Counts perhaps emerged with his own signature style of opera-installation-performance based on surreality of locale and non-narrative event. Co-founder Stern describes Counts’ process as echoing that of a painter’s education. “[Counts] had trained as a painter at some point,” she says, “and they start by imitating famous Masters and using lessons from that and thus gaining their own aesthetic based on the imitation of the Masters.” She continues, “Mike fell hard for Wilson’s aesthetic clarity, that tyranny of beauty. He was always looking for that crystalized moment. I think he needed to imitate it and then evolve into his own style” (1 March 2012).

During his work with GAle GAtes, Counts was encouraged to apply to the Rolex mentorship program which would have allowed him intensive personal study with Wilson.⁶⁷

The mentorship did not pan out. According to Counts:

There were 25 directors around the world nominated. And I applied and someone from South America got it. That was really the whole story. Many times in my career I had opportunities to go and work with Wilson or be an assistant. I just didn’t want to do that.

There’s some value I probably could have yielded, but I just didn’t want to do that. I had

⁶⁶ Kurkjian, Beth. Personal Interview. Note: when asked to define meta, Kurkjian explains: “You’re going to have to try to figure out what the work means to you and in doing so you may reflect why it might mean that to you.”

⁶⁷ According to its website, “The Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative is a philanthropic programme that was set up in 2002 to make a contribution to global culture. The programme seeks out gifted young artists from all over the world and brings them together with artistic masters for a year of creative collaboration in a one-to-one mentoring relationship.” <<http://www.rolexmentorprotege.com/about>>

my own aesthetic and purpose to uncover, I wanted to make my own mistakes and have my own successes, and find my own way. I'm glad I did that. It took me a long time to shrug off my own mentor worship, even without even working with Wilson, to shrug it off and find my own aesthetic. And I was proud of that. A lot of people have said that I did find my voice. You're in the shadow of your heroes and that can really shape you. (19 September 2012)

According to Dasgupta, "Michael never rejected text in the radical way Wilson did. He was still enamored in a way if you will with text, but had no desire to illustrate it in a linear fashion."

In addition to Counts' collaboration with established playwrights Ruth Magraff and Kevin Oaks (*wine-blue-open-water* and *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*, respectively) Counts would often meld original and found text in his productions, incorporating speech and dialogue, often non-linear and classical-based in nature. For Dasgupta:

There was always a magical component in Michael's aesthetic. His aesthetic does not stem either from the psychic tribulations Foreman went through or wrote about as the agency that drove his plays, nor was it the pre-rational that Bob Wilson claimed was his kind of realm from which he derived his aesthetic and energy. Textual reference is somewhere there addressed more directly Bob Wilson's work has become practically commercial. People know what to expect. The good thing about Michael's work – I was always astonished by what he did. There was always something that yanked me or took me by surprise. (22 October 2012)

For Counts, while initial correlations with Wilson's work existed, the company intentionally veered away from categorization. While the director allows that opera played an

important framework for approaching the work, he rather suggests that it was tied to the process of creating music. “There’s a saying that I would say was an explicit guiding principle to me,” he shares, “it’s the idea that all art aspires to music, that music is the purest form There was never a sense within that we were making operas. It was more that we were making theatre that aspired to a musical structure” (6 February 2013).

The Counts-Diebes Model

Critical to the GAle GAtes’ aesthetic was the collaborative contributions of resident composer Joseph Diebes. Diebes would create full scores that would animate the physical playing space of the theatrical worlds, suggesting an actual sonic climate. Music itself thereby played a significant role in company work and was often heightened through technology, such as through Diebes’ use of the subwoofer bass and pre-recorded text. In terms of the technology, “you could feel the air in the space move against your chest because of the bass,” says actor Bickerstaff. “It created a mood, a tone in the room that affected character. You couldn’t help but be affected -- if you were listening” (17 October 2012). Literal opera was in particular important to *wine-blue-open-water* (*Siren Song*), while the Purgatortio section in *So Long Ago* held an extended opera as four people sang in the deeply imagistic setting of autumnal woods. According to Diebes, the use of singing in a more traditional operatic form seemed to be the direction the company was going towards before its close (1 March 2012).

For many members, Diebes’ composition was critical to company work. According to former resident artist Michael Anderson, “[Diebes’] music is devastating. It is complete

audioscape that happens the entire time.” For lighting designer Jason Boyd, the musical elements of Joe Diebes’ compositional scores hugely impacted his own design:

I had always prided myself in being able to do site-specific work, work in unusual locations. I’m also a musician, and have always had a musical or “rock” edge to my work. So my lighting tends to have a percussive element to it sometimes, and I’ll accent the music and do things in time with the music whenever possible if it’s appropriate, unless the scene calls for a total barrage, which is often what we did do in *Gale Gates*.

Joe Diebes’ music informed the vibe of the space and what was happening hugely. I would try to match Diebes visually. He would be the first influence. He created music we could all riff off; Joe wouldn’t always know what the music was and he would change things too. But often what he was putting forward right in that moment would influence everything else: it would definitely influence my color choices or how I saw something in my mind and [the process of trying] to create that visually, whether it be a texture or a color. Joe and I share the language of musicians. Such as I could ask him his beats per minute, and I could match the lights or strobes to what he was doing. Things feathered together in this way. (8 February 2013)

According to co-founder and core performer Michelle Stern, Diebes’ compositions would literally guide the actor. “You knew where you were physically in the show because of certain sounds. What your body is doing and where you are geographically in the space,” she says. Stern further describes Diebes’ music as a huge element to the production. “It was the water we were all swimming in,” she explains (11 October 2012)

According to Diebes himself, the process was relatively open. Counts would share an initial title or impression, such as Dante and the *Inferno*. Text would occasionally be used as material as well. The artists would work independently until rehearsal. “I’d come in and experiment and I’d respond to him as far as what I saw and what worked – just what connected in that sort of unpredictable way,” says Diebes. “Things weren’t designed together; they just had interesting sparks. And often it was the most incongruous or seemingly incongruous or not obvious choices that were most interesting ... where the audience had space to interpret” (1 March 2012).

During our interview, Diebes also credits the work of John Cage as important to his working relationship with Counts, noting that:

[Our work] was very much in the trace of the ... Cage-Cunningham collaboration, and those are very much about each dimension -- the visual and the sonic registers having completely different operations, temporal structures, sort of lives of their own, so that when they come together something happens or doesn’t happen. There was very little in terms of premeditation in terms of how the audio and visual came together. That was the strength of what we were doing. We were bringing together an aesthetic that came together from the 60’s and 70’s notion of breaking through linearity and connections of narrative.... Romanticism and the machine are very, very dangerous together. It’s like fascism. The only way we could have preceded given that we had these interests is one, the romantic notions of the sublime and secondly, a machine aesthetic, is that we also had the Cage-Cunningham aesthetic notion of completely disjointing elements. So that if the elements are floating separately, they’re not all driving you and manipulating you with all

the power of technology and seduction and affect you are getting from Hollywood movies. (1 March 2012)

In this way, Counts and Diebes utilized chance techniques as a way to short-circuit the possibility of melodrama or affect in their projects.

Diebes and Counts' work was further integrated through the use of metaphorical signs and archetypes. "Archetypes and mythology is where Michael was coming from. I was interested in signs and re-articulating age old myths," said Diebes. "We were interested in fundamental unities. Fundamental human stories that get told and retold historically. *The Odyssey* is an example of that. The voyage, the experience, the drama and resolution. Those kinds of things were very important to Michael, I know that." He continues by giving the example of Counts' recurrent use of the labyrinth, which he describes as a symbol rooted in myth, but whose structural form can imply "many things, such as linearity versus non-linearity" (1 March 2012). The use of symbol as archetype was integral to Diebes process as well. "For the most part it was not about evoking genre," he says," but about evoking a physicality of a certain kind of thing, like a bell or a chime or water or fire. These sounds that have a fundamental almost mythological power to them that signified timeless things" (1 March 2012).

Diebes also describes the dramaturgical function of the Counts-Diebes collaboration as relating to time and space. According to the composer, music could be imagined as animating the visual world through providing not only sound, which he describes in not only in meteorological terms but also that of time. "Music is time made audible and articulated as a perceptible, dynamic form" (144) writes philosopher Susanne Langer. In explaining the dynamic of musical composition in the Wilsonian opera, former collaborator and director/designer

Giuseppe Frigeni likewise acknowledges the integral relationship of sound, sight and temporality in performance:

Opera is not theater put to a soundtrack. It's a different sensory experience, one in which sound and image short-circuit, where the immediate perception of sight and the mnemonic perception of hearing collide. (203)

He further describes this shift in sensory perception as inherent to opera, and in fact, neurologically-based. “The listening brain and the seeing brain don’t function at the same speed,” he writes, “music is constructed memory, which is, in turn, constructed moment by moment by the listener.” Major American opera composer and pioneer Robert Ashley likewise suggests that music can serve as an avenue of perception, and namely that of time (Sabatini 324) which Philip Glass calls “duration” (Glass 102).

In essence then, the opera experience is one of continuous shifting perception, wherein meaning is constructed through the disjointed accumulation of sound and image. In a work such as Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach*, Glass’s spiral of melodic repetition allows time to be experienced in infinitesimally small bits, so that stage imagery seems to radiate doubly through the dynamic stillness of Wilson’s direction. The dramaturgical function of the Counts-Diebes collaboration was likewise critically related to time and space: while Counts created the physical life of the play through imagery, Diebes infused this world with dynamic composition.⁶⁸

While the company’s work was never formally billed as opera, its vision and style, mission of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Diebes’ musical contribution allows for the suggestion of opera

⁶⁸ Over the course of our interviews, Diebes notes that he no longer uses the term opera despite a time in his twenties he was invested in reshaping the form. This was a response to the conservative opera goers, whose resistance he describes as “an uphill battle,” also noting that he has not yet found a suitable replacement term. For further reading, see Diebes notes on “Strange Birds” in Chapter Five.

as integral to its vision. Says Counts, “It’s not that in my mind I’ve had a specific classification and I’ve just been coy with the press in defining it: I just make the work I see in my head and my heart and what I feel compelled to do and I’ve never been particularly concerned with definition” (6 February 2013). For Counts, who now works actively in the New York opera world, the transition was logical. “It’s funny,” he says, “there are people like Joe Melillo who runs the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) and others who had seen my work with GAle GAtes and said, ‘you should really do opera.’ And that made sense to me” (6 February 2013).

In early 2013, for example, Counts was asked to return to the New York City Opera for the direction of Gioachino Rossini’s *Moses in Egypt*, after a successful 2010 direction of the New York City Opera’s *The Monodramas*. According to Counts, “My job was to translate that piece for an audience and to support it with things that made it not just accessible to the .1% of elite music scholars that would get it, but to make it more accessible as a piece of art.” He recalls:

The first time I listened to that piece of music, I thought it was 3 hours long. I thought it was the most esoteric and dense and challenging and dissonant piece of music I’d ever heard, almost unlistenable. And then I fell in love with it through the process of working on it and rendering it. And people, friends and others, for whom Feldman was way too out there, who normally hate that kind of music, they felt it made it very accessible to them. And people who were serious Feldman people said to me “you got at the heart of what he is about.” It was about trying to have an authentic experience with it. Trying to understand it. He created a piece of art. I spent time with it, I spent enough time to crack its code and understand it and to make a personal relationship with it. (19 September 2012)



Figure 40. Moses in Egypt. New York City Opera. Director Michael Counts. Photo Courtesy of John Wyszniwski. Photography by Carol Rosegg.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music as an institution did not play a direct role in Gale Gates' development, although BAM producer Jo Melillo and executive director Harvey Lichtenstein were very supportive of the work of Michael Counts and the company. According to Baker, for example, Melillo put in a good word with Two Trees on Michael's and Gale Gates' behalf, which helped pave the way for the space in DUMBO (1 March 2013). Melillo also recommended Counts for the Rolex mentorship with Robert Wilson, and helped initiate the Emerging Curator Series. "In sum," says Baker, "Harvey and Joseph couldn't have been more supportive. We all had nothing but admiration and gratitude for their interest and support" (1 March 2013). In the 90's BAM was looking for different off-the-beaten-track venues for their galas each year, and one year happened to settle on Gale Gates' space. (Another venue BAM

chose at that time was the lobby of the 34th Street Post Office, which is the location of the first scene of *Batman*, when the Joker (Heath Ledger) robs a bank in a macabre Halloween masks.)

Thus, from a historical lens, the role of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk and the realization of his concept through the staggering epic productions of director Robert Wilson play major import to the foundation of GAle GAtes, specifically in its relationship to music, spectacle and the unification of the arts, such as in the radical 1976 performance monument, *Einstein on the Beach*. If GAle Gates' works were not opera, they were certainly operatic in their grandiose style and fantastical execution, particularly within the parallel universe structure they seemed to bring. While Wilson's work often presents a cool and detached aesthetic through its gradual unfolding of fantastical imagery, and Counts and company created work of a similar large scale, theirs was a galaxy of kinesthetically driven images created through multi-focus environments, audience immersion and animated set design. While the company retained the elegance and thematic myth-based content of Wilson's own work, through time the company and namely Counts himself developed a signature style in the creation of abstract landscapes, or "aestheticization of nature."⁶⁹ Wilson remains an American icon among the American avant-garde. For former GAle GAtes actress Kate Moran and lead performer in the 2012 *Einstein* revival, the production is a dream opportunity. In the realization that like all theatre work "is fleeting and will one day be over" Moran performs "as though each show is the last and in appreciation of it" (17 March 2013).

In the following chapter, the theories of another avant-garde theatre artist, Gertrude Stein, will be studied, specifically relating to her notion of landscape theatre, and its relationship to GAle GAtes' immersive theatre aesthetic and early 21st century avant garde theatre. To this end,

⁶⁹ See Dasgupta in Chapter Three.

the miniature sculpture works of director Michael Counts and the New York commercial phenomena, Punchdrunk Love's production of *Sleep No More* will be explored.



Figure 41. Moses in Egypt. New York City Opera. Director Michael Counts. Photo Courtesy of John Wyszniowski. Photography by Carol Rosegg.

Generally speaking, all the early recollections all a child's feelings of the theatre is two things. One which is in a way like a circus that is the general movement and light and air ... and a great deal of glitter in the light and a great deal of height in the air, and then there are moments, a very, very few moments but still moments.

~ Gertrude Stein

All really truly great artists in every medium, in every discipline, have always believed that in order to really communicate with their audience, they should allow some freedom of meaning.

~ Reza Abdoh

Chapter Eight

Landscape Theatre, the Emancipated Spectator and *Sleep No More*

In 1935, American poet and writer Gertrude Stein composed a lecture on the theatre, entitled "Plays." In this piece, Stein approaches the traditional theatre from a non-traditional lens, and in her writing indicates a call for a new form of drama, one in which conventional modes of dramatic structure could be transformed into spectacle-driven works which she terms "landscape drama."⁷⁰

Historically, the term landscape arose among the visual arts world of the seventeenth century in its description of pictures depicting nature, and suggests "the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque" (Chaudhari 1). The term evolved so as to address nature itself and the dynamic

⁷⁰ Stein does not directly use the term "landscape play" although this is a term that is used to describe her theory of play as landscape. In her lecture, "Play," which is discussed in further detail in this chapter, Stein begins by introducing her reader to her issue as audience in the disjointed experience of dialogue and imagery, and near the end of her lecture suggests the idea of "play as landscape" as alternative dramatic and performance form. (122)

of man to environment, “ranging from the economic to the spiritual.” According to scholar Una Chaudhari: “this chronology suggests that landscapes in painting led to the recognition of landscapes in real life” (15).

In Stein’s lecture, she essentially explains that her collection of work from *Operas and Plays* are textual and dramatic landscapes, inspired by her summer house in Bilignin, France. According to scholar Jane Palatini Bowers, by calling her plays landscapes, Stein draws a parallel to the fine arts, specifically that of the landscape painting. She writes: “in imagining her plays as landscape paintings, Stein was able to free herself from dramatic conventions and to experiment with new forms that had their source in contemporary painting, and not dramatic literature” (121). In other words, Stein generated a theatre paradigm which subverted traditional expectations of the literary for the visual.

GAle GAtes functioned under a similar premise, wherein the artistic sensibility of its core company members was not so much text-based, as imagistically and aurally driven. In effect, GAle GAtes cultivated a dramaturgy based in sensorial experience rather than linearity or story, thereby evoking a landscape experience. The company furthered this aesthetic through the creation of promenade and expansive theatre design, oftentimes incorporating multiple false prosceniums, so as to play with perspective while inviting audience to physically explore the theatrical space. In addition, Diebes’ audio score would often physically immerse the audience through bass speakers placed throughout the space, often composed with the objective of viscerally effecting audience through vibration.

Around 2000, British theatre company Punchdrunk emerged with a commitment to the immersive theatrical experience.⁷¹ Their work, which seems to in some ways embody Stein's concept of landscape theatre, also reflects GAle GAtes aesthetic of large-scale promenade and operatic work, and is perhaps best realized in 2011 New York box office success, *Sleep No More*.

In the following section, Stein's concept of "landscape theatre" through her 1935 lecture "Plays" will be addressed, as well as its immediate relevancy to GAle GAtes immersive and visually-laden work, with a primary focus on Counts' use of miniature box sculptures as a dramaturgical tool and GAle GAtes resident composer Joseph Diebes' concept of music as sonic weather. Additionally, *Sleep No More* will be explored in its use of the immersive production frame, similar to landscape theatre. The theoretical means of analyzing such work from audience perspective, specifically that of French philosopher Jacques Ranciere's concept of the emancipated spectator, will be studied in its significance towards the understanding of the contemporary theatre.

Landscape Theatre and the Sculptural Dramaturgy of GAle GAtes et al.

A key aspect of Stein's 1935 lecture, "Plays" is its focus on the wonderment of theatre seen through a child's eyes. She writes:

Generally speaking, all the early recollections all a child's feelings of the theatre is two things. One which is in a way like a circus that is the general movement and light and air

⁷¹ Company mission and critical response is detailed later in this chapter.

... and a great deal of glitter in the light and a great deal of height in the air, and then there are moments, a very, very few moments but still moments (112).

Here, Stein celebrates the magic of the theatrical experience in a description of spectacle based on dazzling light and movement. In her lecture, Stein argues for a transformation of the traditional theatre form from tightly structured narrative based on a departure from linear storytelling, and seems to imply an implicit *joie de vivre* in the viewing experience.

According to Bowers, Stein's essential dispute with the traditional theatre was rooted in perception: for the poet, there existed two experiences of performance: one in dealing with the visual presentation of the play, and the second in hearing, namely that of dialogue. For Stein, the process of absorption was in conflict. In her writing, she refers to a state of "nervousness" which resulted from differing temporal experiences of sight and sound.⁷² According to the writer, Stein's state of mind or "emotion" was "either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening" (93). In other words, Stein as spectator experienced a duality of perception during the theatrical experience, wherein the visual and sonic fields (aka expositional dialogue) were divergent. As Bowers explains, "the conflict among the succession of visual stimuli, the rhythms of the spectator's consciousness and emotions, and the progression of language in the service of plot" would agitate a spectator such as Stein (123).

For Stein, the concept of theatre as landscape provided a solution to the traditional performance structure which she felt to be alienating. In many respects, Stein originates her own vernacular in approaching the discipline of theatre performance. Among these is her concept of "making acquaintance," in which she personifies the performance experience and likens it to an

⁷² Hans-Thies Lehmann explains this "nervousness" to mean "dramatic tension" in his book, *Postdramatic Theatre*. (63)

acquaintanceship made over time, typically through exposition and dialogue. As the term suggests, Stein is referring to a superficial, if not artificial, relationship between spectator and dramatic experience. In other words, she suggests it is a relationship imposed upon the spectator, resulting in a “nervousness” in seeking to meet the expectations of the play performance; that being, a personal adjustment to the temporal pace of the play. Writes Bowers: “A spectator understands what she hears by following the words from one moment to the next, total comprehension only occurring at the end of the line. Stein felt that what she saw at the theatre distracted her from what she heard” (Bowers 123). Conversely, to focus solely on the dialogue would distract from the unfolding visual story. In effect, this robs Stein’s theoretical audience member from the “simple direct and moving pleasure” of the ideal spectatorship situation (116).

In other words, for Stein the discord between expositional language and the unfolding of the visual theatrical world were at odds. What Stein rather suggests is the situation-less circumstance wherein narrative discourse is eliminated, thereby not so much telling a story but “forming a landscape.... [that] could allow audiences to ‘rest untroubled’ in space rather than compel them forward in time” (Bowers 125). In her lecture, Stein shares with her audience a personal revelatory experience in which she saw a French theatre production starring Sarah Bernhardt. “I knew a little French of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so French I could rest in it untroubled It was better than the theatre because you did not have to get acquainted,” she writes (115).

If the Bernhardt production served as foundational to Stein’s concept of the ideal theatre, this was furthered by her interest in actual natural landscape and the fine arts, which informed her idea of theatre as landscape:

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance (122).

Stein seems to suggest that a theatrical world mirroring the structural aspects of landscapes would immerse the viewer in an experience more visceral than dramaturgical: rather than propel oneself into the imaginary storyline of the play, one could allow one's imagination to "play" within the world provided, creating an organic and more authentic "acquaintance." According to American avant-garde scholar Arnold Aronson:

Stein proposed a theatre with the structural equivalent of a landscape, where the parameters and content may be determined by the artist but the method and organization of viewing and processing information was largely controlled by the spectator. The experience for the spectator became more contemplative or meditative.... Relationships replaced sequentiality (28).

Stein's approach thereby champions the sensorial and subjective; at the same time, the very suggestion of "landscape" allows for a commonality of experience which can in turn promote community. The ambiguity of the theatrical experience allows it to proceed past the exit door and in the dialogue of post-theatrical experience. However, as a playwright, Stein does not entirely call for the eradication of language. Rather, "language takes on a kind of spatial reconfiguration with Stein ... [which] operates in the linguistical level, in the spatial

arrangements of words and phonemes” in the form of what scholar... Bowers calls “lang-scape” (Carlson *After Stein* 147).⁷³

Stein seems to also call for a re-thinking of the spatial divide. In the beginning of her lecture, she draws attention to the role of the proscenium curtain in a note of dissatisfaction that is echoed decades later by John Cage. “I bought a ticket, walked in, and saw this marvelous curtain go up with the possibility of something happening behind it and then nothing happened of any interest whatsoever. There was a great disappointment to anybody interested in the arts,” he said (73). According to Aronson, Stein held a profound influence on Cage through her writings, thereby inspiring “the man who ... exerted the greatest influence on the development of the American avant-garde” (31). For Stein, the curtain was a symbol of anxiety, signifying the differentiation between real time tempo and that of the world of the play:

In the first place at the theatre there is the curtain and the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain. The emotion of you on one side of the curtain and what is on the other side of the curtain are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other. (95)

Possibly for Stein, and certainly among other theatre visionaries, the un-evenness of the playing space called for a revolutionary view of the theatre-going experience, formally activated in the environmental work of Richard Schechner, the “happenings” movement, and the popular

⁷³ Here, Carlson is referring to scholar Jane Palatini Bowers’ concept of “lang-scapes” or the “freezing of visual moments” through “the spatial configuration of language itself.” A deeper look into langscapes lies outside the scope of this study, but for further research see Jane Palantini Bowers’ “*They Watch Me As They Watch This*”: *Gertrude Stein’s Metadramas*, based on Carlson’s endnote.

immersive theatre of the early 21st century, many of which were rooted in the Italian futurist experimentations of the early 20th century.⁷⁴

Critical aspects of Stein's theory are a delocalization of all parts, the abstraction of time, and the privileging of atmosphere (Lehmann 63). Character is a result not so much of the Stanislavsky circumstance, but physical environment. "The human being is not separated from landscape, animal and stone. A rock may fall in slow motion, animals and plants are just as much agents of the events as human figures," writes Lehmann (81). To best appreciate Stein's concept of landscape theatre one may attempt to imagine the panoramic view. As Thornton Wilder wrote, "A myth is not a story read from left to right, from beginning to end, but a thing held in full-view the whole time." According to scholar Hans Lehmann, perhaps this is what Gertrude Stein meant by play as landscape (63).

For Chaudhari, landscape theatre indicates a new and important frame for understanding theatre for the 21st century. "A pervasive new spatiality, of which scenography is the most obvious site, has turned the Aristotelian hierarchy [of privileging story] on its head: now spectacle may be the 'soul' of the dramatic enterprise," she writes. "Landscape names the modern theatre's new spatial paradigm" (2). Landscape theatre, in other words, dissolves traditional dramaturgy to become "a perspective and a method, linking seemingly unrelated theatrical practices in staging, text, scenography and spectatorship" and is a form evident in both experimental playwrighting and spatially-inspired dramaturgical structure.

If landscape theatre predates Stein's own concept of the form, and as Chaudhari writes, manifested at the threshold of modernism, this seems in accord with the modern theatre's

⁷⁴ See Chapter Two.

reaction towards the rise of industrialism and the resultant disintegration of community and rural countryside. The modern theatre provided new radical dramatic structures as a means of promoting individualism; this was a response to the collapse of community and the prizing of its individual make-up for the oligarchy of industrialization, where the profit of the many outweighed the value of the one.⁷⁵ Landscape theatre thus provides an alternative space for nostalgic contemplation: its abstracted world not only allows but promotes individualized spectatorship, resulting in a democratic spectrum of experience. In our phone interview, Dr. Gautam Dasgupta, Counts' longtime mentor and co-founder of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* with scholar Bonnie Marranca, describes Counts' theatrical work in such fashion, noting that, "the experience was perhaps much more democratic because each [spectator] took what he or she wanted to take from the fuctions of the narrative or the display. There wasn't closure or the sense that there was only one single way of seeing the work and the artist wasn't going to constrict you in a prescribed manner."

According to Counts, all of his work is derived or informed by his box sculptures, which he constructs as parallel projects to his directed works. He describes two types of work, both accentuating the value of the box itself and the enigmatic situation of the sculptural environment he creates. In the first instance, Counts' work takes place in boxes created to hold precious elements: such as velvet inlays with molded cut-outs for jewelry or Faberge eggs. "In essence," says Counts, "what that box is saying is endowing its content with meaning" (6 February 2012). Counts would pair unlikely projects, such as:

⁷⁵ See David Gross *The Past in Ruins* for a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of industrialization on the individual.

A padlock, a stone, a cracked birds egg, and then inlay a miniature tree, artifacts, and put those in that context. Which would then pose a question: “what is the history of this lock or egg that has elevated this object to such a position of meaning that you treat it as such?” I found objects ... that evolved into these miniature scenes that were designed to create a cinematic experience.

Counts would then craft the material from a topographical view, so that “it might look like a grassy field but viewed from a helicopter,” often populating the space with miniscule characters he had custom made from Germany, such as 2-3 millimeter miniatures, in effect creating the sensation of a tableaux or a movie still. “We wonder about the reality it is within and its implications: ruminating on this world where we are given limited information,” he says.

For Counts, these miniature boxes informed his theatrical work in that the complicated landscapes and scenarios suggested a story theatrical, cinematic and sculptural in nature, and in turn served as material for his evolving dramaturgy. “There were times I would make full scale theatrical sets derived from these little pieces. Often these sculptural sets were another form of theatrical expression for me,” he says. The other half of Counts’ sculptural-based dramaturgy was the application of landscape to books. “Books are obviously containers of thought and meaning,” he says, “and sometimes I find a book I’m drawn to. Sometimes I’ll literally open to a page, or a chapter heading or specific word or image that I see, and create a theatrical sculptural world on top of the book, or literally within it” (6 February 2013). For actress and scholar Beth Kurkjian, who performed critical roles in two of GAle GAtes’ production, *Field of Mars* and *1839*:

The company ... allocated a lot of resources to create cinematic, precise lighting sequences. At times actors appeared more like chess pieces within the lush landscapes than characters with a particular storyline or even a clear sense of agency. The human element the actors contributed perhaps stemmed from their energetic output and the way in which they made their spoken lines and physical bodies into fleeting, and often overlapping, oral and visual sculptures (46).

Thus the poetics of Counts miniature boxes inspired eerily elegant theatrical vistas, such as the artificial forest backdrop in *Field of Mars*, or the smoky lake of *So Long Ago's* "paradise," which were in turn animated by Diebes' score and the physically trained company of performers. Diebes created devastating audio-scores which he weaved through the entirety of the productions. In effect sound -- often that of elemental nature, such as water, fire and chimes, as well as electronica -- would percolate throughout.⁷⁶ Diebes' compositions were inspired by his concept of music-based meteorological environments, often allowing for a visceral experience to take hold of audience through only sound but also the physical vibrations of his subwoofer base. (1 March 2012). Thus the audience was placed in a physical immediacy with GAle GAtes' theatrical vistas.

⁷⁶ Note that the Counts-Diebes collaborative paradigm and the role of archetype is explored more fully in the manuscript itself.



Figure 42. Counts' miniature box sculpture

Landscape theatre seems a natural extension for artistic director Michael Counts, whose dramaturgy is informed by not only visual art roots (a reflection of Stein's own reference to landscape as painting) but also based on biographical elements: namely, Counts relationship to the urban center of Manhattan, its surrounding boroughs, and his lifelong visitations to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷⁷ New York is a city full of vast possibility, and the pedestrian lifestyle it lends found in the velocity of underground subways, taxi cabs and mazes of upscale and graffiti streets, allows for a daily dance between self and urban landscape. In my experience, to be a New Yorker, (even for a brief episode of time as a New York University undergraduate), a heightened sense of body in space, geography, and kinesthetic response seemed always at

⁷⁷ The role of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the overlapping sensibilities of theatre and the visual arts as well as the work of the resident artists is explored in more detail in Chapters I and IV.

work: one's body seems always poised between the horizontal and vertical of New York's endless pathways and its complex interior of elevators, stairs and lobbies. For Counts, a child of the city, as well as an ongoing student of the fine and performing arts, the artist's kinetically charged visually-driven pieces seems a natural extension of his environment.

Landscape provided an important component of the GAlE GAtes dramaturgy. In various interviews, Counts relates Stein among his many list of heroes. Dasgupta additionally refers to Stein's "landscape theatre" as a source of inspiration for the director. In some ways, the physical playing space of GAlE GAtes' landscape theatre even seemed to take on the weight and presence of another character. According to former company actor Brian Bickerstaff, for example, the sets would be built around the actors throughout the rehearsal process, thereby mirroring their own discoveries and development. "It was a new tool in developing character," he says:

The idea of super-objective works in some theatre, but in *Field of Mars* for example, there wasn't a super-objective. You just had to live in this world and be informed by this world over three months of rehearsal The environment was created to give life to the characters we were playing. It was almost like the set had grown out of the ground. At some point when it all came together, you realized the characters couldn't exist any place else but in that space. It was almost like they were born specifically to live in that world. (17 October 2012)

In many of Counts' exchanges with press he related his work to the creation of novel worlds in which the audience was invited to wander. Even in non-promenade theatre, such as *Tilly Losch* and *1839*, the sweeping technological capacity of the set and nonlinearity of structure suggested unique universes for audience to consider:

My approach with all the things I've ever staged was to create a world and then immerse the audience in that world Creating an alternate reality where the rules were different but it held together. It might be very abstract but held a certain logic that the whole world operated within. It was then a compelling experience to be a voyeur in that world on the part of the audience. (6 February 2013)

Gertrude Stein's revelatory concept of landscape theatre seems to provide an important groundwork for experimental theatre practice of the late 20th and early 21st century (4). In her introduction to *Land/Scape/Theatre*, Chaudhari cites Counts by name as an important landscape theatre artist among other revolutionary theatre directors. Stein's radical departure from story for the more immersive, sensorial and meditative quality of landscape reflected GALE GATES' own work, while resident composer Joseph Diebes' concept of sound as meteorological sonic landscape and Counts' use of miniature sculpture pieces seemed to symbiotically parallel, if not further, Stein's concept of landscape theatre. Most integral to company aesthetic was its joint commitment to the freedom of the theatre-goer and invitation towards subjective response, which seems in anticipation of many important works of the early 21st century, perhaps thereby landing it "before its time."⁷⁸ GALE GATES' dramaturgy proved critical to not only a realization of Stein's theories but the evolution of the "emancipated spectator," a theory beautifully expounded upon in scholar W.B. Worthen's review of Punchdrunk's commercial success, *Sleep No More*, and to be discussed further in the following section of this chapter.

⁷⁸ This quote is from Brooklyn Academy of Music Executive Producer Joseph Melillo in an electronic response, dated Jan. 2 2013. Melillo was a strong friend and supporter of GALE GATES throughout the company lifetime.

The Emancipated Spectator, Immersive Theatre, Punchdrunk and Gale Gates et al.

In scholar W.B. Worthen's elegant review of the mass commercial phenomena, *Sleep No More*, immersive theatre is frequently referenced though never directly defined. Like the ambiguous theatrical spaces it has come to be associated with, "immersive theatre" lacks a formal working definition. Rather, as its name suggests, this form of theatre "immerses" or sensorial submerges the viewer into the landscape of performance, oftentimes through an invitation to physically explore the playing space. As Worthen writes on his experience of *Sleep No More*, the "'immersive' event is not dictated by the dramatic plot. Here, the audience enters the space rather than observing it, and each spectator's progress creates a poetic, associative narrative" (82). In the following section, characteristics of the immersive theatre experience will be addressed, specifically philosopher's Jacques Ranciere's concept of the emancipated spectator in relation to contemporary theatre with a primary focus on Gale Gates and *Sleep No More*.

In 2007, French philosopher Jacques Ranciere conducted a lecture on his concept of the emancipated spectator, which proves critical to any discourse relating to immersive theatre and experimental avant-garde theatre.⁷⁹ This complex talk, later documented in *ArtForum* magazine, argues for a more individualized dynamic between audience and performance, promoting subjectivity through the immersive experience. Within his text, Ranciere summarizes the development of the modern theatre as distilled into two impulses, both of which seek the eradication of passive spectatorship: the Brechtian form of alienation wherein the spectator is aware of self and the artificiality of play for the purpose of further discourse, and the Artaudian

⁷⁹ Special thanks to Worthen in addressing Ranciere in his thoughtful review of *Sleep No More*. Ranciere's critical language is helpful in discourse relating to immersive theatre and the dramaturgy of Gale Gates.

immersion of spectator in the world of the play.⁸⁰ Ranciere articulates a theory based on similar impulses, which he terms “the emancipated spectator.” Ranciere defines emancipation as “the process of verification of the equality of intelligence” garnered through physical communion with the playing space, which he suggests as an extension of the everyday (275).

In a theater, in front of a performance, just as in a museum, at a school, or on the streets, there are only individuals, weaving their own way through the forest of words, acts, and things that stand in front of them or around them. The collective power that is common to these spectators is not the status of members of a collective body It is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at. It is the power to connect with the intellectual adventure that makes any of them similar to any other insofar as his or her path looks like any other. The common power is the power of intelligences. (Ranciere 278)

Ranciere apparently calls for a reconfiguration of the theatrical model, which seems to me is likened to GALE GATE’s own, wherein the traditional proscenium is replaced by a free-flowing audience experience, thereby allowing for the blossoming of personalized spectatorship. Critical to this theory is an engagement with the intellectual/imaginative capacity of the theatre goer; this is a reaction towards traditional modes. “The spectator must be released from the passivity of the viewer, who is fascinated by the appearance standing in front of him and identifies with the characters on the stage,” he writes. “He must be confronted with the spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for

⁸⁰ Although Augusto Boal is not cited here and his contributions lie outside the scope of this study, his lifelong work towards theatre for social change is critical to acknowledge in the study of spectatorship. See Chapter 1 for Artaud and Brecht.

its strangeness. He must be pressed to absolve the role of the passive viewer [for the exchange of] the experience of possessing theater's true vital energies" (272).

Ranciere creates an analogy for this dynamic by describing two oppositional pedagogical styles. In one, there exists a disruptive hierarchy between Master Teacher and student, wherein instructor is motivated by student ignorance, and must ascertain the gap between his own knowledge and the parallel ignorance of his pupil, thereby always staying one step ahead in the game of instruction. Ranciere explains this to be dangerous hierarchy in its espousal of unequal intelligence. Rather, he champions the idea of an educational dynamic based in intellectual credibility, wherein the Master performs a pedagogy based on active learning and in recognition of those elements of knowledge the student may already possess and their function in expanding knowledge.⁸¹ The Master teacher:

does not need to teach *his* knowledge to the students. He commands them to venture in the forest, to report what they see, what they think they have seen, to verify it, and so on. What he ignores is the gap between two intelligences Each intellectual act weaves a causal thread between the form of ignorance and form of knowledge. (275)

Ranciere is not only advocating for the embodied viewpoint, but the inherent credibility bestowed upon the student in the learning process. He describes the former as "the endless verification of its starting point: inequality," while the latter rests in the Masters' faith in the student's ability to translate observation into knowledge (275). For Ranciere, this pedagogical

⁸¹ A further examination of instructional tools and philosophy lies outside the scope of this study. Rather, this extrapolation is a result of Ranciere's thoughts on what he terms the emancipation of the spectator and its relevancy to immersive theatre and the work of Gale Gates et al. In this instance, Ranciere gives the example of an illiterate student who may know a prayer and gathers the knowledge of literacy through observation of the written word of this prayer as a metaphor for the interplay between foundational and observational knowledge.

dialogue serves as a metaphor for the ideal theatrical experience. “Spectatorship is not a passivity that must be turned into an activity. It is our normal situation We don’t need to turn spectators into actors. We need to acknowledge that every spectator is already an actor in his own story and that every actor is in turn the spectator of the same kind of story” (279). The result, he feels, is an evolved society of “active interpreters” able to “render their own translations and appropriate the story for themselves,” thereby creating an “emancipated community of storytellers and translators” (280). Ranciere suggests a need for a theatre that does not doubt its audience imaginative and intellectual capabilities, but rather invites discourse in the synergy of abstract theatrical models and audience subjectivity.

In his essay, “‘The written Troubles of the Brain,’ *Sleep No More* and the Space of Character,” scholar W. B. Worthen writes a compelling analysis of British company Punchdrunk’s 2011 commercial success, citing Ranciere’s writing as a foundational resource. Indeed, *Sleep No More* seems to represent a commercial apex in the trajectory of experimental avant-garde, and serves as a prime example of Ranciere’s emancipated spectatorship, a terminology that unfortunately misses Gale Gates by over a decade. According to scholar Marvin Carlson:

I think the emphasis in a good deal of contemporary performance has shifted from the "total work of art" to the "total experience of art," for which the currently popular term (unknown in the Gale Gates era) is "immersive" theatre looking back from the perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century, what strikes me most is how much Gale Gates anticipated the aesthetics of what is now called "immersive theatre," and which has become a major (and increasingly commercialized) aspect of the

contemporary performance avant-garde GAle GAtes ... was the true modern innovator of this approach. (2 February 13)⁸²

Nonetheless, Punchdrunk has taken U.S. audiences by storm through this work which premiered in London in 2003 and has been sold out without pause since its Manhattan premier in 2011.⁸³

According to their company website:

Since 2000, the company has pioneered a game changing form of immersive theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. Blending classic texts, physical performance, award-winning design installation and unexpected sites, the company's infectious format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences Audiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure. Free to encounter the installed environment in an individual imaginative journey, the choice of what to watch and where to go is theirs alone. (“About”)

Sleep No More is loosely based on Shakespeare’s dark tragedy, *Macbeth*, and is visually inspired by the haunting films of Hitchcock and the 1940’s era. The production is directed, designed and choreographed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle. Worthen describes the experience as “a wordless environmental performance” which “nonetheless hews to a conventional conception of Shakespeare’s character-driven drama and powerful fantasy of text-based theatricality” (88). Text is rarely spoken, rather dialogue occurs in the form of tableaux and out-right modern dance.

⁸² Important to note that here Carlson also credits some of the work of Reza Abdoh.

⁸³ Director Michael Counts has a positive relationship with the producers of *Sleep No More*; while various members have wondered if Punchdrunk saw any of GAle GAtes’ work, it is uncertain, although it is known that GAle GAtes did draw a versatile audience.

Language however is apparent everywhere: Punchdrunk in fact commissioned over 200 volunteers to hand write letters and select poetry and papers as part of its inter-textual décor. The production takes place at the imaginary McKittrick Hotel, which spans the space of three previous nightclubs from the Chelsea district. In my fall 2012 experience of the production, the journey began in the interior of a mock red lit jazz bar, as we the audience were gathered and given blank Venetian like masks with a solemn command to engage in no talking or distraction of any sort.⁸⁴ We are taken on an elevator, and one by one, audience members are randomly released. The production takes place on six floors, including a mythical top level, and occupies over 100,000 square feet of playing space, consisting of over 100 highly ornamented rooms, some of which also appropriate outside space: such as cemeteries populated by decaying Mother Mary statues and fittingly dim lighting, as well as a forest of dried branches where upon entrance the temperature suddenly drops. Among the rooms Punchdrunk invites its audience to wander through are a nursery, a bar, a taxidermy shop, a barren hospital bath, and myriads of ghostly bedrooms. Many rooms are atmospherically lit in blues and yellows, while others suggest more shadow than light through overhanging lamps. There is also an interrogation room, an immense ballroom space, and mazes of hallways claustrophobic in atmosphere. There is a sense of constantly being cramped: drawers and walls flood with papers and photographs. One is often unsure of what he or she is looking at it (*are those animal guts strung up through the room?*) but as part of the voyeuristic pleasure inherent to Punchdrunk's success, one is always allowed to look, such as through drawers and cracks. The performance is essentially produced in loops over a three hour period; audience are invited to travel and explore the space at will. It is suggested that one selects a character to follow through the trajectory of the drama, although the dark

⁸⁴ I am referring to my experience of *Sleep No More* seen in Chelsea: New York on September 19, 2012.

corners and slippery athleticism of the actors can sometimes prove this difficult, as does the temptation of wandering through the rooms by oneself.

Mother Mary pictures and statues, as well as mirrors of every size, seem fanatically posted throughout the playing space: both self and icon are thereby multiplied, suggesting the omnipresence of eyes: the spectator-witness too is always witnessed, in startlingly, and grotesque fashion. To my experience, the mask reveals more than it hides. The most staggering experience of all was the connection to other audience members, who seemed deeply invested in the experience: bodies busily crouched and peering through the endless trinkets of papers and props strewn throughout the space were often seen in the shadows. A fellow masked-attendee and I might glide past each other in *Sleep No More*'s haunting arena and catch a momentary gaze. For myself, the spectator's bodies: poised, committed and tangibly physically intrigued, in fact *enmeshed*, within the space, provided the truest example of theatre.

According to Worthen, the mask allowed an elegant balance between traditional modes of theatrical perception and the physical immersion of the body of the spectator within the realm of play:

When the "proscenium" or the "fourth wall" is broken by immersive theatre, it doesn't necessarily mean that a theatrical economy of viewing/viewed, consumer/commodity is broken. In the New York *Sleep No More*, for instance, it was quite clear that the masks worn by the audience had much the function of the theatre seat: identifying us as nonperformers, keeping us from communicating with one another and so functionally isolated (even if we marched around in a gaggle), and preventing much in the way of address to the actors--except in those moments in which the actors took their power to

touch, gaze at, or speak to us. Yes, the "private" scenes permitted more in the way of exchange, but those moments tended to be unmasked and one-on-one. In this sense, then, the relations of production that the performance seemed to innovate were in fact largely preserved, though superficially changed. (6 March 2013)

Indeed, the function of the masked audience allowed for multiple perspectives: both literally, in the exploration of physical playing space; and figuratively, through the relationship of spectator to self, production, and community of theatre-goers. It seemed to me the mask also represented a physical metaphor for the speechlessness that *Sleep No More* was meant to evoke through its representation of horror: this effect was most acutely realized for me in the grey melancholy of the Macduff nursery. In the play, the Macduff's perhaps have the worst fate among the crew of Macbeth characters: Lady Macduff (seen as pregnant in this production, a painful touch) and her child are slain in the protagonist's path of bloody ambition. *Sleep No More* actualizes this tragedy and the lack of child-like vitality available in so many of Shakespeare's works and characters through its use of barren and deadened imagery, brought to an unsettling apex in the child's room. "As we move through a space emptied of children, their bloody, dismembered absence is palpable, physically and metaphorically memorialized in their rooms, their toys, and the concrete detritus of Shakespeare's language—the headless dolls, broken eggs," (87) writes Worthen.

In the nursery, a window looks out onto a brick wall. The crib sits drably center, and a cascade of headless dolls seem to flow out from it towards the heavens. The ambiguity of the image, contextualized in the profound maternal loss of Shakespeare's characters, including Lady Macbeth's own mysterious line about a lost or deceased child evokes a tremendous sadness, as if

springing from the very walls of the room.⁸⁵ As spectator, I become grateful for my solitude and the meditation it allows between space, image and self. The crib — a signifier of hope and promise, conjunct with the grotesque image of countless headless dolls and their eerie seemingly levitational ascent (for I can see no actual strings), paints a picture of loss. The aesthetic distance that the image provides also allows for a wave of empathy for the Macduff's. In this moment, the artifice of the McKittrick Hotel is broken open. If my personal experience of *Sleep No More* consisted of a seemingly endless roaming through uninhabited rooms, the interpersonal reverberation between self, space, design and object countered the impulse for traditional theatrical rapport.

One intriguing aspect of the production is those rare instances when individual members are taken aside, often to a discreetly hidden room, where “various ritualesque scenes are performed with them one on one” (Worthen 34). In one example, spectators are randomly invited into a hut found within the corner of a labyrinth of blue-lit dead trees. It stood hidden among the sound of crickets, a mammoth taxidermy deer standing guard in the midst, a locked gate visible in the distance. The hut's inner world was completely hidden by the structure sans a crack of light that I attempted to peer through: paper cut outs of bird books, various paintings and soft lighting was barely visible. The location of the wooden shack suggested isolation and the ostracized, an ethereal presence in its center. At random intervals, a nurse – perhaps a midwife, even? -- would unlatch the window and gaze out in sadness. The actress was potent in her beauty and stillness, and during each cycle, a dawning moment of realization would cross her face, next transitioning into an awareness of one of the lingering spectators.

⁸⁵ This is in reference to Lady MacBeth's line, “I have given suck, and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me” in Act I scene vii of *Macbeth*.

In one cycle, the nurse invited me in by gently pulling me through her doorway by the hands. The intimacy of the tactile moment was startling, if not moving furthered by her next step, which was to cradle my mask and whisper “shhh, no more tears,” herself crying as she removed the mask. The inside of the hut was revealed: it was saturated in cozy yellow hues, and a physical relief entered my body from the artificial frigidity of its “outside” station. The initial atmosphere of the hut reminded me of the comforts one receives from one’s own parent as a fevered child. Indeed, the hut suggested a world both womb-like and unstable. Torn books, papers and poetry overflowed from the walls, and endless paper angel cut-outs descended from the ceiling. A line of text hanging from the tapestries of papers fell into view. It read “fainting with love” and was signed by “the Pilgrim;” a source I later discover to be an obscure Medieval ode to the end of times. The nurse sat me down tenderly, placed a napkin on my lap and fed me tea, murmuring, “this will help you.” In whispers she then told me an apocalyptic tale about an orphan boy condemned to the moon, only to discover that it was made of rotten wood; through further travels he discovers that the sun was a withered flower, the stars just insects, and the earth itself a tossed pot. The little boy sits and cries throughout infinity, and so her story ended.⁸⁶

In the instant of her telling, the obscure location of the hut, the geographical remoteness of her story – that of an orphan boy eternally secluded on the moon – and her voice itself, expressed in a softly French lilt, each to each seemed a metaphor for the nurse’s solitaire. The mad nature of the décor suggested an expressionistic atmosphere, wherein the inner apocalyptic state of the character became transferred into the physical space of her world; the infinite seemed captured in her cyclical existence. The hut itself thereby functioned as a mask, and I am reminded of Artaud’s description of the mask, when he writes that:

⁸⁶ This nurse’s monologue is taken from George Buchner’s play, *Woyzeck*.

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable True expression hides what it makes manifest That is why an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech. (*Theatre and Its Double* 71)

While *Sleep No More* represents a radical departure from conventional theatre for mass audiences; for many, primarily those exposed to the avant-garde pre-dating Punchdrunk's arrival, their work, though visually spectacular and seductive, echo aspects of GAle GAtes. For Counts:

A lot of people I know who have seen Punchdrunk call it "GAle GAtes Light" – for a lot of people, it's the most tripped out thing they've ever seen. But the people that know... there are a lot of people who are very, very passionate about GAle GAtes who say, "we were doing this 10, 15 more years ago. And doing it with more backbone and hardcore artistic spirit." (19 September 2012)

For other GAle GAtes members, Punchdrunk's success is bitter-sweet. Says Bickerstaff: "People are all up in arms about it. When people have seen it they come to me so animated. And I think, 'oh man, if only you'd seen the work we'd done'" (17 October 2012). According to Stern, the aspect of Punchdrunk's commercial success is noteworthy:

Often it's a matter of perspective and the changing form. Someone told me *Sleep No More* is like what GAle GAtes was doing with lots of money behind it. I've heard a lot of interesting things about it. It is a commercial success. It sells out 8 weeks in advance. It was unthinkable 15 years ago that you could have a commercial success with that kind of work. (1 March 2012)

For Counts, Punchdrunk's success has invited the possibility of re-mounting GAle GAtes' work, such as *So Long Ago*, but in Manhattan and in "a more mainstream fashion ... in the spirit of a *Sleep No More* experience" (19 September 2012).

Sleep No More significantly departs from GAle GAtes' work in its use of the literary, as GAle GAtes' functioned under more of a visual arts drive. While Punchdrunk borrows from *Macbeth* in a poetic departure, inherent story is suggested, if not retained. While Counts too borrowed from text, his sources were more typically fine-arts based, and were further informed by the visual/aural sensibilities of his associate designers and the highly trained physical theatre vocabulary of his actors. What both Punchdrunk and GAle GAtes can be argued to share is not only a physically immersive ambiance, but also a mutual focus on image which together articulate a new form of spectatorship expressed in Ranciere's notion of the emancipated spectator, which itself has deeper foundation in theatre theory.

"Immersive theatre" has become a prominent and important aesthetic of the early 21st century theatre, acutely manifested in the commercial success of British company, Punchdrunk, and their U.S. phenomena, *Sleep No More*.⁸⁷ GAle GAtes' sprawling large scale works of the 1990's seemed to anticipate this juncture through the creation of abstract installations which audience would frequently walk through. As American visual and multi-disciplinary artists working in the remote area of DUMBO in the late 1990's, the spirit of the company and Counts own idiosyncratic vision collectively lent to the formation of the frontier spirit of the American avant-garde.⁸⁸ Jacques Ranciere's concept of the emancipated spectator allows for a 21st century vocabulary to enter the analysis of works that borrow from the visual arts aesthetic and

⁸⁷ *Sleep No More* was first produced in the U.K. in 2003.

⁸⁸ See Aronson's theory on American avant garde, Chapter Two.

methodology. His notion of the intellectually (and physically) liberated spectator can be argued to be rooted in Stein's concept of landscape theatre. "In the landscape drama, there is no one way, any 'correct' way, to read the work," (31) writes Aronson, thereby allowing the activated spectatorship Ranciere refers to.

In the following chapter, GAle GAtes contemporaries and their individual contribution to the evolving theatre practice will be studied, with a particular focus on the work of Cynthia Hopkins and the Accinosco company, Liz LeCompte and the Wooster Group, and Philadelphia-based Pig Iron Theatre Company. Unquestionably, American thirst for innovation and the pioneer spirit among both practioners and audience have extended the experimental and contemporary theatre platform so as to allow for the growth of innumerable groups. While this study aims to at least respectfully acknowledge most (in the knowledge that there are too many existing companies of merit to mention in full) of these companies, particular focus is given to the above-mentioned artists for not only their bold body of work but also their intrinsic relationship to GAle GAtes and with its former members.

Chapter Nine

Post-Gale Gates and Early Twenty-first Century Experimental Theatre: Accinosco, The Wooster Group, and Pig Iron Theatre Company

In 2003, Gale Gates et al. held its closing party, soon after selling off its material and resolving residual company debt. However, despite the difficulty of its close, a time of personal and professional conflict for many if not all of its members, the Gale Gates group of artists maintain artistically rich and substantial professional lives, and many of them have since launched individual careers into international scope and fame.⁸⁹ In his closing statement to the Greenwall Foundation, company development director Kit Baker writes:

The company closed in 2003, due to a combination of a less bountiful post-9/11 economic landscape and the maturing of the resident artists, who had essentially outgrown the collective ethos that had been the glue for the company's achievements to that point. Without missing a step, Gale Gates et al.'s resident artists then went on to pursue exceptionally successful individual careers. (63)

Indeed, since the company's end, various members have gone on to work with established directors such as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer, the Wooster Group, Moses Kauffman, Lincoln Center, and venues such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Broadway. Many have been recipients of various national and international awards and forms of recognition. The mutual success of Gale Gates' former resident artists and associate designers is likewise note-worthy, and similar to other former performers and members, these artists have been propelled into significant professional careers.

⁸⁹⁸⁹ The complexity of emotion surrounding company closing lies outside the scope of this study.

The company formed in 1995 between Counts, Stern and Ogelevee, and soon after, Diebes. In thanks to the generosity of the Lower Manhattan Council and Two Trees Development, GAle GAtes was able to forge its identity in indoor spaces, and drew artists of significant talent to its workspace and projects. In the following chapter, the work and continued contribution of those ensembles vital to the avant-garde who overlapped with GAle GAtes membership or chronology are discussed: namely, Cynthia Hopkins and her company, Accinosco, The Wooster Group, and Pig Iron Theatre Company. Sustainability will also be peripherally examined before taking a look into the success of GAle GAtes members since closure.

GAle GAtes Contemporaries and Major Twenty-first Century Ensembles

The early twenty-first century experimental theatre is rich with ensembles and artists, too numerous to mention in full here. Many of those artists have a trajectory starting in the twentieth century, while others formed adjacently to or post GAle GAtes. Among those companies, writers and artists are: the Wooster Group, Elevator Repair Service, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Temporary Distortion, The National Theatre of the United States of America, The Debate Society, Pig Iron, Radiohole, the TEAM, Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players, Young Jean Lee, Annie Baker, Thomas Bradshaw, Sibyl Kempson, Rinne Groff, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Adjmi and Suzan-Lori Parks. PS 122, St. Anne's Warehouse and The Public Theatre's "Under the Rader Festival" also contribute to the evolving theatre landscape

through hosting new and important works.⁹⁰ Likewise, the constellations of individual artists that interacted and collaborated with GAle GAtes are too vast to discuss in great detail.

When asked to describe the late Twentieth century experimental theatre scene, designer/director Jim Findlay wrote:

[It was] incestuous. Everyone was stealing, fucking, cheating and making art all over the place. A lot of performers and designers were working with both our companies as well as others, so we shared a lot of fluids. It was before the great influx of the 2000s so the scene was small. (4 January 2013)

Indeed, during the era of GAle GAtes and since its close, many members continue to collaborate amongst each other and within the experimental theatre scene of New York and Philadelphia.

“There was a lot of cross-over. It was such an interesting time,” (1 March 2012) says co-founder and company performer Michelle Stern.

In the following section, the history and mission of active companies and artists will be studied in relationship to their particular influence in the twenty-first century experimental performance realm, as a well as any roots or overlaps or continued collaboration they may share with GAle GAtes. The primary focus will be on Cynthia Hopkins’s ensemble, Accinosco, The Wooster Group, and Pig Iron Theatre Company, as well as on the freelance work of designer Jeff Sugg.

⁹⁰ Special thanks to New York publicist John Wyszniwski for his thoughts and contribution here.

Cynthia Hopkins

Cynthia Hopkins is an internationally acclaimed musical performance artist who creates original work with her ensemble Accinosco and co-founders Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg. Hopkins' defunct band, *Gloria Deluxe*, released five full-length albums over its ten year lifetime and performed world-wide, opening for legendary artists such as David Byrne and Patti Smith. In addition to Hopkins' full-length albums and company production, she works as a freelance performer along with other contemporary artists, such as acclaimed playwright Young Jean Lee and as a lead performer for GALE GATES during the late 90's. Hopkins has been recognized for her work through numerous awards, including the 2007 Alpert Award in Theater and a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as a 2001 Bessie Award for composition and a 2000 OBIE ward for performance for Big Dance Theater's *Another Telepathic Thing*. *TimeOut New York* has described Hopkins as "a breath-taking visionary" and her work as "ethereal, demanding, exuberant rock" ("Press").

As of 2012, Hopkins has produced four performance works: *Accidental Nostalgia* (2004), *Must Don't Whip 'Um* (2007), *The Success of Failure (or the Failure of Success)* (2009), and *The Truth: A Tragedy* (2010). She is transparent in her subject matter, often if not always creating work in response to deeply personal familial dimensions: that between child and parent. Hopkins' mother died from cancer when she was 15 years old and her father suffered from Parkinson's until his death, experiences which collectively informed the artist's work. In her productions, Hopkins weaves fantastical stories, often breaking into song with her onstage band. Live stream technology, digital media and multiple (and sometimes duplicitous) characters (all performed by Hopkins) pervade the stage and projected video. Hopkins' work is a firestorm of imagery, and within her performances she realizes a poetic mix of fact and fiction in the

abstracted translation of her life experiences. In Hopkins' artistic statement, she describes herself as a storyteller:

whose multi-layered stories – addressing relevant social issues through a deeply personal lens, and incorporating elements of documentary-like truth as well as extravagant fiction -- require a multi-faceted structure to be communicated. Whatever enrages, disturbs, and/or frightens me most becomes the subject of my work. My creative process is a survival technique which alchemizes a combination of inner and outer (personal and socio-political) demons into works of intrigue and hope, for the audience and for myself. (“About”)

Hopkins also describes her mission in part as investigating innovative forms of communication, “melding music, text, technical and theatrical design, and video” in the creation of works that “are as philosophical as they are entertaining and ... as historically aware as they are immediately engaging.” Hopkins' works also maintain a mutual concern with the world at large, such as her 2013 production, *This Clement World*, which addresses climate change. Among Hopkins' many projects is also *A Living Documentary*, an experimental piece exploring the challenges of earning one's living as a theater artist in the twenty-first century.



Figure 43. *Must Don't Whip 'Um*

text & music: Cynthia Hopkins; set, video, & production design: Jeff Sugg & Jim Findlay
lights: Jason Boyd; sound: Jim Dawson with Jamie McElhinney; costumes: Tara Webb
choreography: Cynthia Hopkins, with help from Diane Madden, Annie B Parson, and Jordana
Che Toback; directorial consultation: DJ Mendel and Brooke O'Harra

Former GAle GAtes member and New York University doctoral candidate Beth Kurkjian has elected Hopkins as the subject of her dissertation, entitled, *Cynthia Hopkins: Theatrical Domestic Ethnographer*.⁹¹ Kurkjian, a veteran performer, choreographer and solo artist of the New York downtown and avant-garde, is also a board member of the *Women & Performance* journal and a peer-reviewed published scholar. During GAle GAtes, she performed closely with Hopkins, whose exactitude and inspiration as an actor she credits as remarkable. In our interview, Kurkjian describes a long term interest in solo performance which originated from a

⁹¹ Working title for Beth Kurkjian's dissertation, written and completed under the guidance of advisor Richard Schechner.

graduate course she took with performer Carmelita Tropicana, a class which she described as “liberating” in the interlacing of performance, fiction and autobiography. “Part of what I’m interested with Cynthia is the way she contorts and plays with those things,” says Kurkjian. “It’s a different iteration, but I think there’s similar impetus and playfulness around those boundaries of truth and fiction.” In her work, she writes that:

Hopkins authors performance texts that blend her autobiographical and familial traumas into elaborate spoken and sung narratives, so that she can become a semi-fictionalized surrogate of herself, of her mother Ann Hopkins (1944-1987) and of her father John Hopkins (1932-2011). Leading *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley characterizes Cynthia Hopkins as having “made a career of transmuting grief into art.” (3)

Hopkins is a magnetic performer. According to former GAle GAtes member Brian Bickerstaff, Hopkins’ “uniquely slippery, ‘otherworldly sort of presence’” would sometimes even cause him to forget lines (48). For Fruin, another GAle GAtes member who worked closely with Hopkins in their mini-ensemble, Transmission Project, together with Sugg and Barkan: “you end up being rapt with attention just watching her. She [just has] this energy,” noting how:

I remember someone pointing out—[Hopkins] had to step backwards on a stair unit—and someone saying, “we could chalk her footprints and I bet you every night she’d step right into them.” And I used to just check it out every night, watch her slowly back down these stairs and I think it was true. She’s just so amazing in her ability to prepare and keep it so tight. (qtd. in *Ethnographer* 49)

Hopkins addresses her delicate subjects through the veils of multiple characters and multi-media elements; at core revealing a brilliant storyteller. The form seems to reflect the

content: Hopkins' stories, full of opulent twists and turns and her continuous rapport with audiences through the breaking of the fourth wall, is reminiscent of a parent narrating stories by a child's bedside. Kurkjian notes that Hopkins' mission is to make a record of her mother, with each work within the mother/daughter paradigm:

A daughter searches for her mother (*Accidental Nostalgia*); tries to understand a mother who abandoned her (*Must Don't*); or listens to a mother tell her a story, a story the daughter rejects and decides to re-write (*Failure/Success*). And yet the narratives of *The Accidental Trilogy* performances are so complex that an audience member might not distill the mother/daughter relationship(s) as a central concern. (15)

In her manuscript, Kurkjian notes that Hopkins' dramaturgy employs a collision of fragments so as to create a sensory overload for the viewer, thus compelling him or her to explicitly cultivate a personalized spectatorship. Kurkjian specifically suggests that Hopkins' use of gaps in narrative, the manipulation of chronology, time and space in an "orchestrated collision of sound, image, movement, and text" is modeled after director Richard Foreman's abstractions and in the view that human mind seeks to create coherence out of the incoherent (32). As part of her mission, Hopkins thus seeks to speak to the personal narratives of audience members. "Thus as much as she is the author," writes Kurkjian, "she wants the audience to notice how they inscribe their memories and meanings into their experiential reading of the performance" (32).

Hopkins is married to designer Jeff Sugg, a former GALE GATES member who met her during their time together in the company. Sugg, a co-founder of Accinosco (together with

Hopkins and Findlay) and freelance artist is a premier award-winning designer.⁹² In our interview, Sugg credits his work with GAle GAtes and neighboring theatre companies such as the Wooster Group and Collapsible Giraffe as foundational experiences, and specifically cites collaboration with Hopkins as a turning point in his career:

My work now is mostly the result of what I learned working in these places as far as developing a worth ethic and aesthetic. A way of working. And you know it was really when Jim [Findlay] and I were designing for Cynthia, she asked us to come do *Accidental Nostalgia* and we did the whole trilogy and that's when getting those shows done at Saint Anne's opened my design work as a video designer, in addition to lighting design, to a much wider audience. I got calls for work – then we did the *Slug Bearers* at the vineyard, and that was a huge success for us. It was a very beautiful show; I was very proud of what we did. I think between these two things, it got Jim [Findlay] and me a lot of exposure. I started getting offers from places I didn't expect. Like Moises Kauffman called me to do *33 Variations*. And when he interviewed with me, he felt strongly I should be in rehearsals with equipment, so for the first round of that show I was able to do that and it was a very integrated design. At the Public I'm working on *Fun Home*, which is based on a cartoon novel. It's a musical. Sam Gold is the director; he was GAle GAtes assistant director back in the day [for *So Long Ago*]. Jim and I have co-designed the videos for this project, so it's full circle. *Bring it On* is running. And then a Broadway musical next fall. Through the work I've done with Cynthia and some of this work after I've been able to create an aesthetic that is my own. (19 September 2012)

⁹² Accinosco o-founder Findlay is also a freelance designer and director and his work is acknowledged later in the chapter.

Among his many accomplishments, Sugg is the recipient of the 2007 Bessie and Hewes Design Awards for *Must Don't Whip 'U* (together with Jim Findlay), a 2009 Tony design nomination for the Broadway production of Moises Kauffman's *33 Variations* [picture], and part of his set design for *Gravity Radio* was featured at BAM's 2010 *Next Wave* festival. Sugg also received a 2008 Henry Hewes Award, Obie, and a Lucille Lortel Award for his work on *The Slug Bearers of Kayrol Island* (also with Findlay) as well as a Hewes Design Award for his work on *El Conquistador!* Sugg has also worked with notable companies and artists such as but not limited to: Laurie Anderson, Richard Foreman, Collapsible Giraffe, Moises Kauffman and Pig Iron Theatre Company. Sugg is slated to design a Broadway production in fall 2013.



Figure 44. Jeff Sugg design for Moisés Kaufman's *33 Variations* Broadway 2009, La Jolla Playhouse 2008, Arena Stage (D.C.) 2007. sets: Derek McLane; lights: David Lander; costumes: Janice Pytel sound: Andres Pluess; wigs: Chuck LaPointe

In conclusion, Hopkins' work reflects an aesthetic of shared personal experience through the solo and ensemble form. Her company, Accinosco, seems to represent a uniquely text-song-and-spectacle driven form of performance. Hopkins presents both a vulnerable and hardened figure in the sharing of personal trauma, which she structurally veils through disrupted chronology, conflicting narration, and a continuum of poetic interruption, such as song or the infusion of media. Sugg has likewise garnered repute in his discipline as a designer. Sugg's work suggests an infinite spectrum of signature design; he (as many other former GALE GATES members) continues to work with significant artists in the collective expansion of theatre aesthetic.⁹³

The Wooster Group

The Wooster Group is considered one of the most important avant-garde theatre companies still working today. The Wooster Group was formed in 1975 with works composed and directed by Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte, who arrived out of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, and were later joined by other key members: Jim Clayburgh, Ron Vawter (1948-1994), Willem Dafoe, Kate Valk, Peyton Smith, Ari Fliakos and Scott Shepherd. Director Liz LeCompte functions as what Aronson describes as a "plastic artist," taking found material – at first Gray's autobiographical contributions and subsequently dramatic texts and deconstructing and arranging it into original work, often with an underlying (or multiple underlying) commentary on the performance medium and social constructs available within it, in a collage theatre aesthetic (Aronson 147).

⁹³Note that I am making no connection between the aesthetic works of GALE GATES, Hopkins or Sugg: my objective here is to show the chronological timeline and the continued collaboration of some of its former members.

The Wooster Group creates inventive multi-media and original work, often investigating and re-forging classical text and personal anecdote, manipulating audience perception through spatial play, introducing tremendous technological experimentation, and incorporating intensely quiet scenes with the manic (153). They have created multiple theatre, film and dance works, and the company's body of work is particularly unique in that its outpouring of productions is often self-referential in, as critic Arnold Aronson writes, an "evolving and integrated theatrical self-portrait" (152). They are based at The Performing Garage in New York, and tour both nationally and internationally. Their many works include: *The Three Places In Rhode Island Trilogy*, *Rumstick Road*, *Point Judith*, *Route 1 & 9*, *Fish Story*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Poor Theater*, *St. Antony*, *L.S.D. (...Just The High Points...)*, *Vieux Carré*, *To You*, *The Birdie! (Phèdre)*, *Brace Up!* and *North Atlantic*. The company and individual members have been the recipients of innumerable awards, such as but not limited to various Obie and Bessie Awards, as well as the 2009 Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative for Kate Valk, a 2007 United States Artists Fellowship for Elizabeth LeCompte, ongoing recognition from the Theater Communications Group and the National Endowment for the Arts, various Fellowships such as the Guggenheim and Rockefeller, and a 1991 National Endowment for the Arts Distinguished Artists Fellowship for Lifetime Achievement in American Theater for Elizabeth LeCompte.

The Wooster Group is considered by many to represent the seminal avant garde American theatre company. "We all come from the influence of The Wooster group," says Stern. "I would say that the Wooster Group has the strongest influence on the world of avant garde theatre. I would say they are the ground zero of that" (1March 2012). Both Findlay and Sugg worked closely with Wooster, as well as Fruin, Anderson and Stern. Sugg also worked as the company technical director and master electrician, while former GALE GATES performer

Annika Barkan taught movement at The Wooster Group's Summer Institute in New York. The cross-over between Gale Gates and the Wooster Group was significant. "We were good friends with the younger actors there," says Baker. "Kate Valk was a big supporter. Willem [Defoe] was a big friend, actually. So we were very close" (27 February 2012).

Around 2000 Stern was recruited by Valk to audition for the company, and was cast *in North Atlantic*. According to Stern, the integrated technology of the work allowed for a distinct performance vocabulary to take hold: "The beautiful thing about the Wooster group is they have their space, they have their gear. Everything starts together on day one. The sound is another actor, the light is another actor." Stern also credits LeCompte's working methodology and the atmosphere she promotes as a critical aspect of to the Wooster Group's success. "Liz is brilliant," she says. "This is the first time I got to know someone and I thought, *she is truly a genius*"[Original Emphasis]. Stern describes the process as highly collaborative: "Liz is the director, but anyone in rehearsal can try anything. And if it works, she keeps it." Another vital aspect of working with the Wooster Group for Stern is her collaboration with Kate Valk and Willem Defoe, who Stern describes as remarkable performers. "Working with them was like grad school or something," she says, "but ten times better. I learned so much" (1 March 2012). Stern also toured with the company:

It was unbelievable to me. Like a dream come true to work with them and to tour with them; you know to go to Paris as an actor to be with them. When you tour with the Wooster Group, it's like you're a rock star. They are such great and talented people. (1 March 2012)

When speaking about the Wooster Group, Stern's demeanor shifted from a warm and engaging attitude she had had in sharing her experiences with GALE GATES to radiant. When I pointed this out to her, she responded that the atmosphere of the Wooster Group was highly charged and playful:

Their process is so different from what GALE GATES was. It's so much fun there, which is a really important aspect of what they do. And not that it wasn't fun at GALE GATES, just the rehearsal atmosphere was much more serious. The Wooster group was wilder. (1 March 2012)

Stern also describes LeCompte's process as highly fluid and compassionate, which she explained as a prizing of the individual: "She wants to see you, the performer, onstage in these circumstances which are highly, highly manipulated," Stern also noted, "and from that, you get something." While the Wooster Group shares GALE GATES' anti-naturalistic aesthetic, the company seems more driven by political/sociological inquiry, authenticity of performance over stylization, and a deconstructive investigation⁹⁴ of the canon, embodied experience, and media:

You're onstage being manipulated by all this technology going around. Often you're watching a video screen or you have an earpiece in and your being spoken to or you're getting your lines through there or Liz will be actually be speaking to you live from a microphone. And you're just doing your thing with all this input and your interaction with people on stage. (1 March 2012)

⁹⁴ Note that on p. 185 of his book, Aronson defines the Wooster Group's relationship to deconstruction to mean a "literal dismantling of existing literary texts, characters, dialogue and images in order to reframe and reconfigure them." Aronson explains that the result is the emergence of new meanings and understandings, thereby "reintegrated into popular culture but always through the collective vision of the Wooster Group."

According to Dasgupta: “The collage aspect of Michael [Counts’]s works, the absolute sort of radical montage, shifts in terms of visual space and time, to me seems much closer to Wooster Group’s experiments” (22 October 2012). For others, the company’s mutual commitment to excellence is shared. “It’s a different aesthetic,” says development director Kit Baker. “What’s shared however between Michael and Liz is a very rigorous approach. The timing and the aesthetics are very precise. Liz takes it to a whole new strain with the Wooster group.” Baker cites his audience experience of the Wooster Group’s production of O’Neil’s *The Hairy Ape*, which he describes as:

The most faithful production of O’Neil I’ve ever seen, but on its own terms. It observed every single stage directions, but in its own way. For example, when the ship lurched, there were maybe 24 different monitors, small monitors, around the stage. And all the actors were hanging to one side, and you heard this big rumble and you knew the ship was going to lurch. And on each video screen there was this yellow orb, shaking, and they all crossed the screen, and you felt you were lurching on a ship. The Wooster Group pays extraordinary attention to every stage direction. (27 February 2012)

The visceral experience Bakers narrates is not dissimilar from GAle GATes’ immersive quality. What seems to me most striking between the work of Counts and the Wooster Group, two seemingly otherwise very dissimilar aesthetics, in the invitation for the audience to “fill-in” the narration. In his book, Aronson quotes LeCompte in describing some of her methodology:

[The painter Cezanne] doesn’t finish a line. He leaves the canvas showing here and there. It gives a space in the air; it doesn’t solidify into a form that’s not breakable. I

can't stand it when something becomes perfect, enclosed. I like to leave the system open.
(qtd. in Aronson 187)

This is reminiscent of Counts' view that determining the literal sequence and narration of a work can be limiting for the audience, but rather seeks to provide a veiled theatrical experience in which the spectator can determine his or her own meaning.⁹⁵

In conclusion, while the Wooster Group and Gale Gates worked from very different aesthetics, a shared interest in innovation and specificity highlighted much of the work process. The Wooster Group is considered to be the seminal American avant-garde theatre company, and many former Gale Gates members expressed deep gratitude and positivity in reflecting on their former work with the Wooster Group, who they considered to be elevated in its deep technical experimentation, collaborative setting and overall company skill, talent and historical import. Finally, while LeCompte and company members seem to promote an interest in the fluidity of text and a deconstructive contemporary perspective, Gale Gates' work was more the result of artistic director Michael Counts' visually driven otherworldly imaginings.

Pig Iron Theatre Company

Another major company in the arena of twenty-first century experimental theatre is Philadelphia-based Pig Iron Theatre Company, who has created over 24 original works and has toured to festivals and theatres internationally. Pig Iron was created in 1995 by co-founders Quinn Bauriedel, Dito Van Reigersburg and Dan Rothenberg during their studies at

⁹⁵ While the role of media in society lies outside the scope of this study, for further reading consider Marshall McLuhan's *Medium is the Massage*. This text essentially suggests that media helps disintegrate fixed points of view and encourages suspended judgment through the continued influx, often in fragmentary form, of both visual and auditory information relating to world events and entertainment.

Swarthmore College and constitutes a number of core actors, including Cassandra Friend, Sarah Sanford, Geoff Sobelle, as well as James Sugg, GAle GAtes former member Jeff Sugg's brother.

Pig Iron is an interdisciplinary ensemble, and according to their website, is dedicated to “the creation of new and exuberant performance works that defy easy categorization.” Pig Iron playfully describes itself a “dance-clown-theatre ensemble,” while noting that individual pieces have been described as “soundscape and spectacle,” “cabaret-ballet,” and “avant-garde shadow puppet dessert-theatre.” According to their mission statement the company creates:

Original performance works which test and break the boundaries of dance, drama, clown, puppetry, music, and text; to experiment with form while staying accessible; to develop a physical, theatrical performance technique that draws from many performance traditions; to re-imagine “classics” with both irreverence and a desire to make them relevant; [...] to reach out to new audiences by redefining theatre as an interdisciplinary art form; to form and maintain an international ensemble of theatre artists that are flexible and forward-thinking; and to pose the difficult questions of our difficult times. (“About”)

During our personal interview, co-founder Bauriedel describes the French notion of the word “jeu” or “play” as having “a special seat at the Pig Iron table” (13 March 2010), evident in the thematic playful sophistication of company works.

Pig Iron seems interested with exploring perception, people on the fringe, and frequently the figure of the artist. The company investigates and formulates characters both devised and actual: such as the asylum-based rock n' roll cabaret, *Lucia Joyce*, in a fierce re-imagining of

James Joyce's daughter, whom he had institutionalized; a radical re-cutting of *Measure for Measure*, which is set in a morgue and employs a rumination on individual loneliness through macabre puppetry; and the isolated autistic character of Dimitri in *Chekhov Lizardbrain*, whose artistic sentiments are expressed through the vehicle of Chekhovian themes. Always, it seems, Pig Iron advances character as the forefront of their aesthetic (versus for example, GAle Gates' extravagant vistas) which they sculpt with empathy, inquiry and idiosyncrasy. The human experience is very important to Pig Iron's works. Among their trajectory is also *Love Unpunished* (2006), a dance-theatre reflection on 9/11 and an investigation into the threshold between life and death. In this work, the performance took place on a 50 flight staircase in a combustion of vertical energy as descending workers and ascending firefighters met on the steps of the World Trade Center.

Pig Iron has not only garnered a significant local Philadelphia following, but is also the recipient of innumerable awards and recognition. *The New York Times*, among various spectacular reviews, has described Pig Iron as "one of the few groups successfully taking theatre in new directions," (Schillinger) and their work has been routinely featured by *Theatre Journal*, *The Drama Review*, *Theatre Communication Group's American Theatre Magazine*, and others. The company is the recipient of numerous Obies and Barrymores, and in 2010 was awarded a \$300,000 grant from the Pew Foundation. In 2010, company co-founders, Gabriel Quinn Bauriedel, Dan Rothenberg, and Dito van Reigersberg were also named USA Knight Fellows. Also in 2010 and 2008, the company received an Obie for James Sugg's performance in *Chekhov Lizardbrain*, a production which was also listed as one of the *New York Times Top 10 Theatre Events in New York (2008)*. In 2006, Pig Iron was named Theatre Company of the Year by *The Philadelphia Weekly*. Both *Hell Meets Henry Halfway (2005)*, an adaptation of Polish writer

Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Possessed*, and *James Joyce Is Dead and So Is Paris: The Lucia Joyce Cabaret* (2003) received notable awards. In 2001, Pig Iron collaborated with legendary theatre director Joseph Chaikin (1935-2003) in the creation of a whimsical and melancholy work in the exploration of sleep and consciousness in *Shut Eye*, which the Philadelphia Weekly described as “funny, haunting and poignant” and led the *Village Voice* to describe the company as a “prodigious talent and discipline” (“Press”).



Figure 45. Actor James Sugg in Pig Iron Theatre Company's *Chekhov Lizardbrain*

Among their many works are also *The Odyssey* (1995), *Poet In New York* (1997), *The Tragedy of Joan of Arc* (1998), *Gentlemen Volunteers* (1999), *The Snow Queen*, (1999), *Mission*

to *Mercury* (2000), and *Anodyne* (2001). The company created a mix of works both comical and macabre in *Flop* (2002), *Love Unpunished* (2006), *Isabella* (2007), *Come to My Fiesta, It's going to be Awesome, Ok?* (2008) and *Welcome to Yuba City* (2009), and begin to delve more intently into text and technological experimentation with *The Robot Etudes* (2010) *Canker Blossom* (2010), *Twelfth Night* (2011) and *Zero Cost House* (2012), the last of which was the result of close collaboration with Japanese playwright Toshiki Okada. This piece is a contemplation on identity and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear melt-down.

Pig Iron worked closely with designer and former GAle GAtes member Jeff Sugg during their early careers. Sugg designed Pig Iron's early works, such as *Dig or Fly* (1996), *Poet in New York* (1997), *Cafeteria* (1997), *The Tragedy of Joan of Arc* (1998) and others. "Pig Iron were all my college people," says Sugg. "I designed most all of the shows for the first four years. They came to New York for a little while I was in San Francisco when I was working with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and George Coates Performance Works. And when I came back they were in Philly, so it ultimately wasn't useful for anybody" (19 September 2012). Pig Iron maintained a positive relationship with GAle GAtes over the parallel trajectory of both companies, and occasionally visited the space for productions and festivities.

The company's aesthetics are very different: while visual lyricism and the exploration of spatial dynamics are important to Pig Iron's mission of play and spectacle, the Philadelphia-based troupe is more ensemble-centered than the auteur-led GAle GAtes. Additionally, though physical theatre and dance vocabulary are important to the process and execution of both companies' works, I would venture that Pig Iron is more invested in collaborative inquiry and the humanizing role of character, while GAle GAtes' works often served as an overarching visual

metaphor on those subjects of directorial interest to Counts, and which were in turn executed with poetry and precision by company members.

As a company, Pig Iron's structure operates more like a dance company in that it does not promote a singular season to a subscription audience, but offers projects carefully developed over a large period of time, often for up to a year. Members engage in a deeply embedded dialogue among performers, director and designers, optimally (and typically) leading to tour. The process is highly non-textual and collaborative and does not begin with a script, but rather generates text through physical and conceptual investigation so that the script arrives at the end of the process. Many core members have been in close artistic dialogue for almost two decades, so that "the artistic dialogue we're having as an ensemble is a long and rich one," (13 March 2010) says Bauriedel.

Arguably one of the most intrinsic aspects of the company is its extensive physical theatre vocabulary. The work itself, often extracted and refined from improvisational discovery, is informed by the physical methodologies of the LeCoq School, where both Bauriedel and Rothenberg studied, as well as the elaborate modern dance training of Reigersburg. Thus the spark of the work begins with the actor and the body. Likewise, the students and ensemble members that Pig Iron attracts are invested in movement vocabulary and somatic training. Collectively this awareness and methodology allows the texture of each piece to reflect what scholar Nick Salvato describes as "a real poignancy [of] approach ... counterpoised with ... rambunctious physicality" (16).



Figure 46. Pig Iron Theatre Company Media Photo for *Twelfth Night*

The company sources various materials for its subject matter, such as classical literature, scientific progress, or political questions of the day, which members respond to both in discussion and through the intuitive physical process. According to Bauriedel:

The word “perpendicularity” has become important to us in our process. There are always initial impulses but we are often looking for ideas that cut across the main lines of inquiry. These perpendicular themes tend to create an interesting spark in the rehearsal room and they tend to deepen the main research In *Chekhov Lizardbrain* [for example] there were a number of happy accidents. We had been doing improvisations for several years on buying and selling, examining what is really going on in these transactions. This naturally led us to Chekhov. Dan Rothenberg and Dito van Reigersberg happened to be reading Temple Grandin’s book *Animals In Translation*

in which she talks about the triune brain theory, detailing a somewhat outdated notion of the brain in which the human brain is composed of a brain stem (lizardbrain), the paleomammalian brain (dog brain) and the neomammalian brain (human brain). She writes that each has its own memory. We began some open investigations of these different brains, imagining an acting style that was distinct to each brain region. Simultaneously, we were staging a reading of *The Three Sisters*. Somehow, in this moment of alchemy, our play was born. This is often how projects emerge. (13 March 2010)

In 2009, Bauriedel directed *Welcome to Yuba City*, “a piece about stupidity, pleasure, silliness and the wildness of the human spirit,” which took place in a 14,000 square foot warehouse in North Philadelphia and was set at the end of the earth in the western desert, “populated by eccentrics and ones-of-a-kind” (13 March 2010). *Yuba City*, which received acclaim and was even featured on the cover of *American Theatre Magazine*, caused an eruption of political upset among the far right, who (perhaps willfully) misinterpreted the promotional discussion of the show, landing it among a list of 100 most wasteful stimulus grants of the year. “We had advertised the piece as part clown show and I believe the word clown really tickled these folks and must have sounded particularly silly for the government to be supporting clown jobs,” says Bauriedel. Despite the backlash of the far-right media, the production was a success.

Philadelphia-based Pig Iron Theatre Company is perhaps one of the most important experimental theatre companies working in early twenty-first century America. The company’s trajectory of works reflect an increasingly popular interest in physical theatre methodology, which ensemble members articulate in performance and arrive at through lengthy organic

rehearsal process, sometimes taking up to a year. Unlike GALE GATES, Pig Iron works from a more ensemble-based atmosphere, and allows for linear story to take hold, at the very least often suggesting a more accessible context for audience. The figure of the clown and the energy of “jeu” play is integral to company aesthetic, and it continues to animate the performance landscape through inventive works, often re-working classical literature through Pig Iron’s sensitivity to character, spatial exploration, and smart humor. “We are trying to forge new rules about live performance, to wake up the new generation of theatre-goers and to crack open where theatre sits in our culture,” says Bauriedel (13 March 2010)

In summary, the theatre landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is remarkably rich for its versatility of style, innovative content, and mix of social and environmental awareness. GALE GATES promoted a distinctly esoteric and exciting aesthetic; many who share its experimental terrain and who are still active continue to create works with many of its former members. Among these artists are Cynthia Hopkins’ Accinosco, which formed shortly before GALE GATES’ close and incorporates many of its former members, including Hopkins herself; The Wooster Group, which is considered a landmark experimental theatre company and whose trajectory surpasses many other companies developed since its founding, and Philadelphia-based Pig Iron Theatre Company, who formed the same year as GALE GATES and who early on collaborated with its associate designer Jeff Sugg, now a major freelance designer.

The Arts and Sustainability for the Twenty-first Century

For GAle GAtes, networking resources, grants and spatial support from the Walentas' Two Trees family development company played an invaluable role in its sustainability. However, ultimately the company's inability to tour and the increasing challenge of maintaining quality of life at New York's increasingly expensive cost led to its collapse. An important question for the experimental and fringe artists working in the twenty-first century may be one of sustainability, and the means for both artistic and financial independence.⁹⁶

For fringe and experimental companies, finesse often exists between the negotiation of artistic integrity and personal entrepreneurship. The romantic notion of the starving or struggling artist seems to be gathering dust as generations of artists mature into a nation wherein the arts alone often cannot subsidize a reality of skyrocketing expenses. This is doubly true for those artists seeking a quality of life that includes family, and the necessary provisions one must share amongst dependents. According to scholar Arnold Aronson, a large contributor to the decline of the avant-garde is related to these economic dilemmas, namely among artists living in New York, the historical epicenter of experimentation. "Perhaps the single strongest force at work transforming the avant-garde was the changing economics of living and working in New York," he writes (198). Indeed, gentrification plays a cyclical role in the dissemination of artistic communities: as struggling artists move to lower income neighborhoods, property values rise, often in response to the magnetism of a thriving arts community. In effect, artists can no longer afford to maintain basic living expenses and previously affordable rent.

⁹⁶ A deeper look into fiscal landscape of the arts is outside of the scope of this study.

Historically, there has always been a tension between the experimental performance world and sustainability. Living Theatre founding member Julien Beck's personal financial resources for example, allocated to him the time and resources needed to devote himself to the company (49). He was not alone in this in that according to Aronson, "many of the leading artists in all fields [postwar avant-garde] had a degree of financial independence that freed them from the constraints of time and energy faced by most working-class individuals" (49). Aronson shares an anecdote wherein the Living Theatre showed design sketches to designer Robert Edmund Jones, who felt that their finances had trapped them into too conventional thinking. "He wanted us to build sets out of sound, out of dreams, who knows what. He wanted something 'totally new,'" said co-founder Judith Malina (qtd. in Aronson 51).

Director Robert Wilson was forced to be imaginative in his resources during his early career in ways that Jones may have appreciated: he financed his production of *Byrdwoman* (1968) for example by writing checks on nonexistent bank balances; although the checks bounced, he was ultimately able to pay the money back through ticket sales (Tomkins). For his production of *The King of Spain*, Wilson became committed to the vision of a giant cat walking across the front of the stage, so large that only its legs would be visible. The problem again was that of financing. Jerome Robbins, who assisted the production recalls Wilson saying, "I've got the fur," noting, that "[Wilson] had gone out and bought 40 yards of imitation fur, with the idea that you have to start somewhere. One of the inspiring things about Bob is his complete trust in his own images. The cat legs were built" (Tomkins 67).

Discussion of the friction between the arts, commercialism and sustainability thematically surfaced among many interviews with GALE GAtes members. For Kurkjian, for example:

[Gale Gates] was crazy, totally insane and time consuming. It wasn't a cult, but you had to give yourself over to it. I resisted that. I was working full time in a banker's office so I could get health insurance. I then got a job at Lincoln Center I think that when we look at the predecessors, like Anne Bogart and Robert Wilson: you give yourself over to everything all of the time. I didn't have the financial means in a way that I felt comfortable. (29 January 2013)

For Walker, social progress and economic needs of the artist remain at odds. This concern is expressed with many artists working today.

Walker devoted his life to the Living Theatre after encountering them at Yale during his undergraduate studies in the 1960's, and traveled with the company world-wide. The actor continues to maintain a rich legacy of performance through his continued work with the company. In our interview, however, he was very open about his financial struggle as an aging actor:

I'm 65. I'm on Medicaid at the moment. They took me off Medicaid. Then they put me back on Medicaid. But the card doesn't work. It gives you such a feeling of insecurity. The Living Theatre never paid into social security. Some could use that as a criticism: The Living Theatre has all this wonderful political idealistic talk, and yet it's totally oblivious to the real world Most of the people who work [for The Living Theatre now] are under 30, so they are footloose and fancy free. Maybe their parents are helping them, or they're walking on the wild side, which I certainly did. We [the Living Theatre] actually made \$15,000 last winter at the box office, but that money went to the rent, not

to the actors. So it's all very nice, this great commitment, but it's at odds with the real world. (18 September 2012)

Walker is a living representation of the iconic American avant-garde and has committed himself to a lifetime in the theatre: despite this he appears to have no foundational safety net. His statement suggests a need for forward-thinking and practical structures among artists and companies towards a goal of sustainability. Certainly a deeper and more lasting conversation needs to exist regarding national support for the arts. "The budget of the National Endowment for the Arts right now for all the arts is less than [most] theatres in Germany or the opera house of Belgium. Just one theatre has more money," notes Dasgupta. The answer for America at this time, he notes, maybe that theatre artists "have to scale down" (22 October 2012).

For Pig Iron, self-empowerment and entrepreneurship do not need to be in conflict with the artistic spark, but can rather help one navigate and endure the increasingly challenging landscape of the twenty-first century art world. "We've had to learn how to articulate why we need so much rehearsal time, why touring is important artistically, why we reject having a traditional season," says Bauriedel. In 2010, the company opened its Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training in Philadelphia. Within its structure is a focus on helping the student artist explore his or her means of personal artistic sustainability. "I think that a by-product of making our own work is learning to make our own system of distribution, payment, etc.," says Bauriedel. "As we launch our school, one of the key lessons will be how to sustain a creative life in this industry by carving out space for yourself ... [to] help students create their own systems for survival" (13 March 2010).

Bickerstaff, a highly regarded actor who has performed not only with GALE GATES but also under the direction of Richard Foreman and Young Jean Lee, spoke in-depth about his impetus and struggles as an actor:

As you get older I think everyone has a chip on their shoulder but when they first start off they think, “I’m going to make it.” I don’t think I’m ever going to make a ton of money being an actor. I’ve accepted that. That’s not what really interests me. The thing that I really am is an actor. I can’t just go somewhere and “act.” It’s hard to hone that skill without a project. I’ve come to a place where I really enjoy and appreciate what it is I do. There is a long time between projects as I’ve gotten older and it’s hard to navigate that time. You feel, “Am I a failure? Did I not do those things I should have done?” But when you do get asked to do a project, it’s a project you really believe in and really want to do and the people involved are really lovely people who want to do the same thing. It’s almost enough for me to have those moments. Really I don’t have many creative outlets at the moment. Now when I’m on stage it’s about a relief. It’s about a sharing of something. It’s an essential part of my life that isn’t there for monetary gain. It’s certainly not about that. It’s about something else I’m not even sure if I can even describe. (17 October 2012)

In other words, the path of the actor can be a difficult one to carve, particularly in a landscape that advances commercial work over that of the experimental (with some exception.) Ultimately the path of the actor is a complex one and deeply personal for each individual. When asked to provide guidance to the young actor from an artistic viewpoint, Moran replied:

I love what I do and respect and am inspired by those I work with. Always putting the work first, as the most /only important thing, setting aside individual pride, insecurity and ego to allow for openness and risk taking is when I experience the most freedom on stage or in collaboration. Obviously sometimes easier said than done, but something I try to keep in my mind. I believe that holds true for any time of artistic endeavor, experimental theatre or not. (17 March 2013)

Touring is not only helpful for many companies' subsistence (which GAle GAtE's large scale and site-specific work limited them from achieving), but also helps maintain a global dialogue on performance. For Bickerstaff, the joy of international touring and performance and the ability to touch lives across continents superseded personal financial struggles. Bickerstaff shares the impact of his first tour with Richard Foreman in 1999 as well as the inspiration he experienced when touring with Young Jean Lee's company in her production *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*:

In *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, we knew we weren't going to get paid. But we chose to not get paid. There was no surprise. We actively went into it. I had talked to Richard in his apartment in Soho. And he had said, look, there's virtually no pay. And there's a chance we could go on tour, but I can't guarantee it. There's a possibility of Europe." At the time I had never been outside of the United States. I didn't come from very much money and I had been in school. The prospect of going overseas doing theatre was astounding to me. So you just put your head down and you did it. We ended up going to Brussels, Berlin and Tokyo with the show. And it was worth it... After *So Long Ago* this Japanese couple came up to me to the bar and they said, "We saw you in Richard Foreman's show and we met you after and you told us about GAle GAtes." And they were in America at

the time and came to see the GAle GAtes production. Making that connection across the world was the best gift....

I went on tour with [playwright] Young Jean Lee as well. To travel, and to share your art, it transcends language. Sometimes the text might get projected above the stage or on a TV so the audience can read it. But just being able to share it -- the reward it gives you, and the feeling of travel, and how it opens your eyes. A lot of time you work at festivals and you get to see what other people around the world are working on. It is invaluable. It's not something you could prepare yourself for. The sheer amazement. It's a gift to be able to do that with other people across the world. (22 October 2012)

As we launch into the new century, the fiscal sustainability of the actor and theatre artist working outside of the commercial venue are all important questions to explore. According to various members, one of the core factors in the collapse of GAle GAtes was the sustainability of not only company work but of its membership, who were combatting rising New York costs. Grants and tours also play long-term invaluable roles in the sustainability of the arts; the latter is important not only for the fiscal benefit it can provide but also for the opportunity for world-wide dialogue in the theatre's graduation from the national stage to one of global discourse. In the following conclusion, the trajectory of GAle GAtes, theoretical models and frameworks for discussion of its work, and its contemporaries and historical precedents will be revisited.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

***“This Has Been A Very American”*: GAlE GAtes Et Al. and Avant Garde Theatre of the Early Twenty-first Century**

GAlE GAtes et al. was an experimental theatre company that held a rich but short-lasting trajectory through the end of the Twentieth century. Through significant sacrifice, flexibility and imagination, as well as a heavily driven visual-arts spirit, GAlE GAtes et al. borrowed from the Wagnian notion of Gesamtkunstwerk in the creation of immersive dreamlike works. The company represented the historical lineage of the avant-garde: such as the Futurist, Dada and Surrealist movements, the theories of Antonin Artaud, the development of the American experimental theatre, the chance practices and collaborative ideology of John Cage and the visually-driven hybrid works of the 1960's that arguably culminated in Bonnie Marranca's concept of the Theatre of Images, further embodied in American directors such as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Reza Abdoh. To this end GAlE GAtes' works were spatially dynamic and site-specific in architectural design. The company, led by the vision of artistic director Michael Counts, subverted traditional dramatic structure in the championing of visceral worlds and the visual/aural/kinetic experience over the textual. While GAlE GAtes' incorporated language into its works, and collaborated with established playwrights Ruth Magraff and Kevin Oakes, text often functioned as a poetic layer rather than narrative guide.

In 2003, grant writer Kit Baker wrote a letter to the Greenwall Foundation, whose generous support over a series of years allowed for dramatic company growth. The mission of the New York Greenwall Foundation is to nurture emerging artists and companies such as GAlE GAtes, and has aided the growth of many artists and companies who by the early twentieth century were considered vital figures to the experimental performance scene. In his letter,

Baker effectively describes the significance of company work over its short life time and the continued success of its major players. He notes that although the company began its operational model on a shoestring budget, its production scale was able to grow to elaborate lengths through the innovation of its members and select following of a sizable younger crowd “not hidebound by conventional categories” (60). In the letter, he describes Counts’ installations as “performance works in which notions of time, narrative, spectacle and mythology were drawn from the dynamic of visual art” and a prominent visual arts model based on innovation and joint effort.

Gale Gates et al. was able to operate and actualize its vision through a combination of foundation grants and the support of patrons of the experimental arts. Among these many supporters were the Asian Cultural Council, whose support allowed early Gale Gates members an invaluable opportunity to study under the guidance of Butoh master Min Tanaka at his Body Weather Farm in Japan, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council whose generous residence allowed the company use of two separate spaces in remote areas of Manhattan’s financial district, leading to *90 Degrees from the Equinox*, a promenade experience that transformed the 50th floor of a Wall Street building into a fantastical marshland, and *wine-blue-open-water*, an elegant high-rise production based on Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In 1997, Two Tree Management, led by the father-son Walentas development team, allocated the warehouse to Gale Gates in exchange for the company’s enrichment of the desolate DUMBO waterfront area, which the company is considered to have successfully provided through ongoing art exhibits, performances and festivities. The Greenwall Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation and many others also contributed to Gale Gates’ support.

In order to fulfill their bargain with Two Trees, GAle GAtes, (predominantly led by Michael Counts in a shared exchange of administrative and artistic responsibility with other key members, namely co-founder Michelle Stern and resident artists Michael Anderson and Tom Fruin, as well as the integral work of development director and former producer, Kit Baker and Karen Dalzell), promoted the space through ongoing events. Counts' annual productions, as well as continuous exhibits, such as the *Emerging Curator Series* (supported by Brooklyn Academy of Music Executive Producer and Assistant Joe Melillo and Bob Bangiola) and the *Sonic Adventure Series*, spearheaded through resident composer Joseph Diebes, collectively served to promote the area. The company also garnered revenue through space rental, staged readings, and the volunteering and generosity of friends and supporters. In this way, GAle GAtes contributed to the cultural growth and revitalized atmosphere of the DUMBO area.

Arguably the most important factor in the rise and success of GAle GAtes was the immensity of talent and dedication on the part of its core and resident artists, who many former members described as the life-blood of the space over the course of our interviews. Resident artists Michael Anderson and Tom Fruin set up a partnership in which they helped execute Counts' complex and arresting designs in exchange for free studio space, allowing them the time and resources to cultivate signature work and careers. Designer and mechanical engineer, Jeff Sugg, who free-lanced with the Wooster Group during his time with GAle GAtes was an invaluable company resource, as was the visiting insight of neighboring director/designer Jim Findlay. Lighting designer Jay Boyd provided atmospheric lighting through advanced technology, while Manju Shandler contributed to company productions through artful large-scale puppetry. Core performers Brian Bickerstaff, Beth Kurkjian, Kate Moran, Josh Stark, Michelle Stern, as well as John Oglevee, Tom Walker, and an extensive cast of actors that worked with

Gale Gates over its lifespan were integral to its development; while resident composer Joseph Diebes and later choreographer Ken Roht contributed to the sonic and physical life of productions. The company as a whole worked from a “DIY” aesthetic, balancing work outside of the company with shared administrative, upkeep and production tasks. While Counts’ charisma and ingenuity drove the vision of the company, Gale Gates remains indebted to the dedication and hard work of its talented membership.

Among company productions, *Field of Mars*, *Tilly Losch*, *1839* and *So Long Ago I Can’t Remember* signify Gale Gate’s most significant works in the DUMBO space before its close in 2003. *Field of Mars* was a promenade installation-performance inspired by Tacitus’s account of the burning of Rome, and it borrowed from the dance-club aesthetic in the creation of an exotic and dangerous liminal atmosphere. It was the first production to introduce audience to the expansive warehouse space through various receding false prosceniums and the integration of natural and artificial vistas. *Tilly Losch* borrowed from iconic Americana such as Joseph Cornell’s sculpture box of the dancer of the same name, the classic film *Casablanca*, and Andrew Wyeth’s portrait, *Christina’s World*. This production, more than others, utilized cinematic technique through the use of large-scale moving sets, suggesting a world in flux through the creation of literally shifting perspectives. *1839*, named after the year the camera was invented, abstractly represented a family divided through grotesque and macabre imagery, such as enormous roaming armadillos and the figure of Oedipus, all set against Diebes’ eerie score. Finally, *So Long Ago I Can’t Remember* represented the company’s highest success in the contemporary re-imagining of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* through an extensive installation-opera-performance which unfolded over the company’s large playing space.

Company aesthetic thereby reflected a century of avant-garde experimentation relating to spatial re-design and a focus on the subjective, in many respects realizing Gertrude Stein's concept of landscape theatre and Jacques Ranciere's theory of the emancipated spectator. To this end GAle GAtes crafted an artistic sensibility that overlapped with opera, sculpture, theatre, (and arguably dance) in scenic designs of massive architectural scale throughout its warehouse. In some respects, GAle GAtes' lack of easy adherence to tradition or to a particular category allowed an expansive freedom of imagination, and thus the potential for groundbreaking work.

The irony of GAle GAtes perhaps lay in the tension between a pioneer spirit, intrinsic to the American avant-garde, and the issue of sustainability. The highly wrought detail of company work was constructed specifically for the dimensions of the DUMBO space, whose quirky architectural design did not lend itself to replication and tour. Among these designs were 80 feet false proscenium walls, a serpentine steel bridge, an artificial forest and many other such intricate works. While the company garnered high level reviews and funding (peaking near the end of its career), the rising cost of living in New York and the administrative toll of maintaining the space led to its collapse. Despite the personal difficulty surrounding company close, many former company members have continued forward in the cultivation of highly regarded, if not internationally celebrated careers in the arts. Despite GAle GAtes' demise, the experimental theatre world of early twenty-first century America also continues an upward trajectory. Among those many leading artists are performer/musician Cynthia Hopkins and her Accinosco band, landmark avant-garde theatre company, The Wooster Group, and Philadelphia-based theatre company, Pig Iron, who each in some way mingled with GAle GAtes during its time and in collaboration with former members.

The essential visual arts foundation of Gale GAtes lay in various sources, such as company mission to create immersive, visceral works, as well as the foundational input from its contributing resident artists. GAle GAtes' dramaturgy was largely non-narrative, and hinged on Counts' largely visually-art centered inspiration, which was given foundation by resident composer Joseph Diebe's electronic scores and total audience landscape. The physical vocabulary of the ensemble, informed by early butoh and viewpoint study, and developed further by later collaborator, choreographer and dancer Ken Roht, allowed for a polylingual dream world to develop based on operatic scores, detailed gesture and evocative imagery. Company aesthetic and dramaturgy was finalized in surreal spatially-reconfigured performance throughout the vast 40,000 square foot playing space of the DUMBO warehouse. The visual arts groundwork laid out by Counts and company associate designers and resident artists allowed for a more sensorial-based dramaturgy to emerge based on the private narrative created in the mind of the viewer, not unlike that of a gallery or museum goer. To this end, together with GAle GAtes' commitment to emergent voices in the fine and sculptural arts, a unique company signature was cultivated. Despite the upset of company official close in 2003, various company members have continued to launch personal careers in their respective fields, and have garnered significant recognition and success on the both national and world stage of performance and visual arts. It can be argued that GAle GAtes contributed to the theatre landscape of its day through not only the integration of vitally important artistic and performance voices, but also its poetic form.

Findings: GAle GAtes et al and the American Avant-Garde

While this study is based on the trajectory of late twentieth century experimental company, GAle GAtes et al., the story of GAle GAtes is itself enmeshed in the context of the American avant-garde. In some vital respects, the company seemed to have represented the definition of the American avant-garde as set forth by Aronson, who suggests American identity and the avant-garde as intrinsically related. The mutual frontier spirit of American heritage and the avant-garde as well as a celebration of the new and the unique is embedded in GAle GAtes' history and mission.

GAle GAtes' roots lie in a pioneer spirit; early company members traveled around the globe in the creation of site-specific art, in obscure areas such as the castles of Prague, the Body Weather Farm in Japan, Thailand, the Manhattan financial district and the DUMBO district of the late 90's. The physical lay-out of most GAle GAtes' productions invited the audience to experience a physical promenade through the space, resulting in the cultivation of a sensory-charged and subjective experience. The artificial landscape of GAle GAtes' theatre and its promenade aesthetic thus evoked adventure, mystery and the geographical unknown, all elements embedded in America's own frontiersman history. Its mission of hybridity and site-specific dimension contributed to an identity innately avant-garde, as the work could not be reproduced or commodified.

In sum, GAle GAtes could have represented an avant-garde ideal: situated in an obscure and site-specific locale the company drew a specialized and elite public. The company was neither opposed to the mainstream nor working from an ideological vantage point: rather it was led by the fire of artistic intuition and an overwhelming impulse to create, often resulting in the

deeply personalized vision of artistic director Michael Counts, which was in turn informed by not only his visual arts background but also the insight of fellow company members. To this end, the company was largely unique in its company model, sensibility, and aesthetic, that being a hybrid of site-specific and immersive performance/installation/opera and a mission towards the sublime.

The company did not set out to be political. However, the nature of its fringe aesthetic landed it in what I deem “the black sheep territory” of critical response. As an outsider of the mainstream, the company automatically fell under the category of subversive, and by its very nature of perseverance of form and sustainability, it became an enemy of the conventional. According to scholar Gautam Dasgupta, however:

The avant-garde is always important to any culture at large because that’s what the culture is. When we talk about any civilization and its contributions to humanity we are certainly talking about the contributions of the age that have been assimilated into the mainstream. (22 October 2012)

Thus, the avant-garde and continued experimentation in the arts is fundamentally important to social and cultural progress. If the values of the avant-garde are indeed always ultimately swallowed up by the public at large, it can be argued that GAle GAtes’ dialogue between the arts (namely visual) and immersive paradigm are popularized in early twenty-first century theatre. For Counts:

All the forms are merging now and the distinctions between things are fuzzy. It’s a beautiful thing. It’s an excellent progression. We were a part of that. I want to continue

to be part of that. Many of the artists from GAle GAtes are still a part of that. It's a function of the times in which we grew up. (6 February 2013)

It seems to me that GAle GAtes promoted a unique level of abstraction. It is this "mystery" however that allowed GAle GAtes to promote a physical and intellectual ownership among its spectators, which in turn advocated for a democratic sensibility in the recognition of and respect towards differing views (both literal and figurative).

Acceptance and non-judgment are critical aspects of the spectatorship experience in non-linear work such as GAle GAtes: the practice of these attributes through the embodied process of spectator transfer into future collaborative artistic dialogue, as well as into an empathetic view of the world itself. "A true avant-garde theatre," writes Aronson, "must seek an essential change in audience perceptions that in turn will have a profound impact on the relationship of the spectator to the world" (6). Ironically, the immersive quality of these works did not promote a sense of isolation, but rather the knowledge of personal experience within the context of community. At the same time, Boyd's artful lighting and intricate design often highlighted the visual aspects of production so as to leave fellow spectators in shadows thereby allowing for a visceral experience to still take hold.

An area that merits future study is the activity of the American avant-garde. For decades, its survival has been called into question. In 1981, for example, Richard Schechner declared the end of the American avant-garde (Aronson 180) while in her 1995 *Theatre of Images* Afterward, scholar Bonnie Marranca cites the Theatre of Images as marking "a point of closure in the American theatre as the last manifestation of its utopian, universal spirit" (165).

In Aronson's *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, he describes various factors that contribute to the disintegration of the avant-garde. Among them he lists the economic struggle of artists living in New York in the context of its high prices, the subsequent dependence of companies on corporate sponsorship, and the (delicate) status of arts funding in an increasingly hostile conservative government context.⁹⁷ He also notes that the gulf between practitioners and theorists potentially undermines appreciation for the avant-garde, as various scholars writing on it may lack an embodied understanding of the dynamism inherent to performance. This results in "an ever-widening gulf between scholarly critics and practitioners," while "popular journalism ... often lacked the tools and vocabulary to deal with non-traditional forms of theatre in a meaningful way" (201).

Aronson also suggests that the growth of technology in our daily world has factored into the decline of the avant-garde (201). While the advent of film and television initially served to stress narrative structures (25), "hypertext and the world-wide web have transformed the perceptual process so that we are now accustomed to leaping from idea to idea through associative links" (201). In this way, the avant-garde's longstanding commitment to the undermining of linearity and objectivity has been erased by an increasingly autonomous and image-driven web-based world view. Avant-garde structure thus frequently mirrors the everyday existence of the technologically driven society. The state of the avant-garde itself is also in question as ideologies once considered radical find entry into the mainstream, wherein experimental theatre increasingly appropriates the disjunctive and imagistic style of the avant-

⁹⁷ Note, however, that the avant-garde is not exclusively limited to the New York or East Coast landscape, and that Aronson's observation of the fiscal challenges of the avant-garde artist can be applied to other urban centers as well. Consider, for example, Todd London's March 2013 NoPassport Keynote speaker address, One for All and All for One and Every Man for Himself, on Chicago theatre, and major festivals such as Under the Radar and others

garde with “no theoretical underpinnings” (Aronson 209). Rather, “the quirky, the shocking, or the merely offbeat” are mistaken or even paraded as the nouveau avant-garde.

The sustainability of the arts through corporate sponsorship, an increasingly popular form of fiscal support, is problematic: Notes Aronson: “Corporations fund the arts because this provides them with a kind of cultural legitimacy Theatre that is part of the established culture cannot, [however] by its definition, be avant-garde no matter how subversive it may try to be” (200). For those artists working towards the cutting edge in an ideology consistent with the avant-garde, there is a sense of impending check-mate, where rising cost requires work in the commercial or professional sphere which may conflict with the scheduling and energetic needs of maintaining a company. In addition, corporate sponsorship, an increasingly popular form of funding, can undermine its core tenants.

Perhaps the last frontier of the avant-garde is then site-specific work. This relationship can allow for the fruition of work unique to its geography and architectural needs, which inscribes new history in the act of palimpsest, garners new and select audiences, and can be neither replicated nor commodified. In this way, site-specific work and the avant-garde are deeply embedded, situated both literally and figuratively outside the fringes of the mainstream. At the same time, GAle GAtes was an iconic example of the site-specific, and flew and died out of a deep connection to the DUMBO space. In some ways then, the company died from the weight of its genius and its subsequent limitations.

I acknowledge that I myself am not in the midst of the avant-garde crisis: I live many states away from New York (which seems to me to continue to represent the epicenter of American art innovation), nor am I currently immersed in any other major metropolitan --- and

thus can neither observe nor contribute to the hub of experimental work from an ongoing embodied practice or scholarly view. From this study, however, it seems to me that until we arrive at a truly egalitarian society of utopic proportion, the avant-garde will always be necessary towards the questioning of the status quo and as a champion of the truly original. In an increasingly commercialized global world view, the avant-garde stands apart as rebel faction. Its politics may or may not be overt, but by its very iconoclastic being, the avant-garde is innately political. It disrupts the norm and suggests new modes of seeing. Indeed, if the basic humanitarian purpose of the arts is to expand perception, then the arts must in turn be ever fluid and evolving.

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