

Dramaturgical Text and Historical Record in the New Theatre: The Case of *Rumstick Road*

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In the process of diagnosis, the physician speaks of the way a patient *presents*. "The patient presents with fever, difficulty in sleeping, slurred speech, etc." The verb in this situation is intransitive, taking only an indirect object. Presentation is neither entirely voluntary nor entirely involuntary; one presents by being afflicted, and by speaking from and to the affliction. It is neither entirely active nor entirely passive; one might say it is grammatically in the middle voice. Presentation is the exposure of suffering or a wound—the *pathos*—to the process of pathology, which has evolved to address that suffering.

The medical sense of this term is useful, I think, to the critic of the theatre, who faces the contingencies of a living, time-bound art, including those scenes of *pathos* that Aristotle termed indispensable to the tragedy, and engages in a sort of diagnosis that situates the work in a discourse. The wound that is always already sustained by the theatre comes of its passage in time, and the critic seeks, by writing, in some fashion to close that wound. The historian of the theatre does not always have the advantage of direct exposure to the work—Irving's one calamitous performance as Coriolanus, for instance—and for that reason must ponder with great care the question of how, or if, the work *presents* to the historical process at all. The documentary trail shapes the discourse. It is no accident that the history of theatre in some periods traces closely the path of theatre criticism. The history of medicine, after all, records the progress of pathology, not disease. The critic or historian

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is, of course, secondary or even incidental to the presentation of theatre, and yet the written record holds great allure, along with other documents, such as box office receipts, attendance records, audience surveys, advertisements. All these would seem to have issued from the production, as direct objects from a transitive verb, and yet their relation to the experience of the performance is rarely clear. That is, it is not easy to determine, or even to suppose, that these documents will tell you what that experience was. If theatrical presentation is, as in the medical sense, intransitive, and neither active nor passive but instead suggesting a verbal motion interior to the agent or event, then the historical process that relies too heavily on those documents must misrepresent the work.

In traditional drama, of course, the presentation of a performance is compounded with the presentation of a play. The priorly existing literary work often survives amid the other documents—or alone—and can shape historical speculation about the performance. However, much of the theatre of recent years has come to eliminate or subvert the authority of a literary text and instead draws attention to the performance itself as an end. This reflexive, non-literary sort of theatre has challenged the historian in new ways. Conventional ideas of authorship no longer apply in works that are created collaboratively, or in improvisation, or in open defiance of the literary theatre. Works, such as Robert Wilson's, that insist upon experience of the performance itself as the only means of access to their meaning or aesthetic value, *present* to the critic and the historian quite differently from conventional works.

It is my purpose in this essay to look into the question of how this recent sort of theatrical work, based in performance, is becoming historical. I do so by examining various writings about one such work, the Wooster Group's *Rumstick Road*. I hope to spell out the grammar of this work's *presentation* by analyzing the rhetoric of its record. The new sort of dramaturgy that is at work in this and other works of the new theatre supplies a significantly different set of documents to history. While the scripts themselves tend to function less as coherent literary versions of the work, and so prove less fruitful as objects of historical study, many other documents help bridge the gap and attest to the process of creation and the experience of the work. These intertextual documents, I would suggest, are expressions of an emergent voice from within the process of creation, but addressed to an ultimate audience far beyond the confines of the theatrical space and beyond the moment of the production. I want to call the network of these documents the dramaturgical text and suggest that they are expressions of the dramaturg, even, as in *Rumstick Road*, in situations where no dramaturg was employed as

such. The dramaturg (or drama doctor) in practice addresses the work at the scene of presentation, offering the first effort at diagnosis. Often, in the new theatre, the dramaturg will write about the work as it evolves—in a diary or in a series of notes to the director. The dramaturg will also often keep a dialogue going with designers, performers, producers, and others, and might take the opportunity at some point to report on this discourse or at least to collect and integrate the director's coffee-stained notes or a list of books sent to a designer or a performer's diary. All of these sorts of internal document, whether formally sponsored by a dramaturg or not, make up the core of what I am calling the dramaturgical text. In practice, the compounded writing of the dramaturgical text in the new theatre far outstrips the capacity of any production dramaturg. And yet one finds among many of the creators (performers, directors, writers) of the new theatre a collective effort to represent the scene of presentation diagnostically. The metaphor goes only so far, though. While pathology aims, through the process of diagnosis, to define the patient's wound, the scene of dis-ease, so as finally to close the suffering and end the presentation itself, theatre history, on the other hand, might seek to define precisely the presentation or radical contingency of a performance in order to keep the wound open and fresh. God spare us from the doctors. And the dramaturgs, some would add.

The dramaturgical text I would therefore define as the set of documents directly pertinent to the scene of presentation of a theatrical work, including the testimony of all of the creators and all of the spectators. Of course, rich dramaturgical texts can be assembled for many theatrical works of an earlier period (I think of Gielgud's *Hamlet*, of Stanislavski's *Seagull*), but contemporary works such as Robert Wilson's *Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* have given unprecedented authority to the variety of unauthorized descriptions, photographs, and other first-hand testimony. Without this dramaturgical text, such a work would barely come into history at all, if for no other reason than that so few were able to stay awake or alert throughout its twelve hours. As a collection of fragments, the dramaturgical text implies the idea that all representative texts are fragmentary, that there can be no complete and authoritative account, no text to stand for or as the work itself. The dramaturgical text can only be organized, like the drama itself, around interstices, questions and conflicts—difference.

Natalie Crohn Schmitt's recent book, *Actors and Onlookers: Theater and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature*, offers a convenient and, I think, necessary entry point to this discussion. Her chapter on *Rumstick Road* clearly exhibits the tension which the new theatre places on critical discourse. Her analysis of the aesthetic of this new theatre is keen, but her discussion of the

particular case shows the limitation of her approach. Schmitt draws out the parallels between postmodern aesthetics of theatrical performance, most elegantly represented by John Cage's writings, and the scientific view of nature taken by twentieth-century physicists. As the latter deeply undermines the principles of the empirical tradition that begins with Aristotle, so the former rejects the traditional aesthetic principles that also begin with Aristotle. The positivist scientific tradition relies on the establishment of the facts of nature by means of experimental method, whereas the relativistic viewpoint recognizes distortion and uncertainty as the inevitable byproducts of the very process of observation. The truth of nature can thus never be attained in an absolute way. In aesthetic terms, this contemporary view of nature undercuts the idea of the artist as an authority and the process of representation itself. Instead of accepting the perceiving subject and the perceived object as categorically separate, this view shows them to be deeply implicated in one another. The artistic object is seen as necessarily incomplete, requiring the act of observation to make it complete and yet repeatedly thwarting the effort of the observer to attain a whole understanding. Representation of the world must needs be pluralistic, as in physics light must be seen as a wave and a particle, despite the contradictions and conflicts that will exist among the different views. In the arts, Schmitt point out, this radically different set of assumptions about nature gives rise to different ways, such as the rejection of old mechanisms of coherence in the object (plot, melody, verisimilitude, etc.) and the de-deification of the artist. She lays particular stress on Cage's notion of the interpenetration of spectator and artwork in a process of observation, similar to the tenet of relativity, as expressed by Jacob Bronowski: "The basis of the world is the observation" (Schmitt 8). This aesthetic interpenetration is not based on sympathy and catharsis, as in traditional art, but on a process of disinterested or "no-minded" (Cage's term, derived from Zen Buddhist writings) inquiry with the aim of increasing awareness.

Schmitt sets *Rumstick Road* in contrast to *Long Day's Journey into Night* as two works that address the lives of their creators, the one from a relativistic, the other from an Aristotelian, viewpoint. O'Neill's play, as she puts it, "makes an artwork out of his family history, which provides us with the perspective on his family he intends for us to share with him" (Schmitt 41). She regards his play as a self-contained literary work that can provide the occasion for presentation but that even on stage remains contained, framed, not extensive to the audience. The audience's involvement with this work is a matter of honoring the superior perspective of the deified author, represented by Edmund, whose participation in the play's emotions can be shared. She compares the autonomy of this piece with the relatively fragmentary,

incomplete, and uncontrolled viewpoint on his own family history, offered by Spalding Gray, the co-creator of *Rumstick Road* and literally its speaking subject. Like O'Neill, Gray deals in this work with the troubled history of childhood among his New England family, especially the plight of his mother who suffered mental illness and committed suicide. His work, by contrast with O'Neill's, functions only "with our help," inviting "our participation," to attain completeness. Always Schmitt's metaphor is cooperative, a joining of forces, whereas the artist hero of the realist tradition does all the work and, as it were, takes on the added burden of the sympathetic suffering of the audience as a sort of martyr.

A glance at the text of *Rumstick Road* shows how much is left to the audience. A variety of raw documents, mostly taped transcripts of interviews with Gray's family members, are loosely linked by bits of narration. Gray and other members of the Wooster Group improvised with these documents: Libby Howes took on aspects of the mother; Ron Vawter took on aspects of several other family members, including the father, and the psychiatrist who treated his mother; Bruce Porter controlled the mechanical aspects of the production from onstage; and Elizabeth LeCompte stood apart and acted as director. The published script, labelled "Play," says the work was "composed" by Gray and LeCompte "with" the others, adding that LeCompte directed. Porter is mentioned again under Technical Direction, with Howes as his assistant, while LeCompte also shares credit for the design of the "Environment." All except LeCompte are listed among the cast, headed by Gray. Thus, the artistic contribution of each appears to be precisely defined, even as the layering of types of contribution appears complex. The names and biographical data of all the actual people whose voices and letters figure in the performance come beneath the cast list, one of them (the psychiatrist's) fictionalized to conceal his identity. All of this seems to imply an exact accounting of authorship, and yet further inquiry shows that even this most basic of historical facts, resists definition.

In the narration of the piece, the character Spud (Gray) gives information on the source of these documents, including the fact that one of the interview subjects asked that the tape not be used in his piece. Gray overruled this request and later, when this decision sparked a public controversy, defended the violation of privacy as his prerogative. Gray was explicit about his sense of proprietary rights in the case:

The tape of my grandmother's voice was a gift. She asked me to keep it as something personal. I chose to give it away. A brutal act perhaps. . . . We live in a brutal time that demands immediate

expression. By using private words and documents, *Rumstick* employs the painful and "exploitative" mode common to modern autobiography. (Savran 95)

The point is, Gray claims a sort of authority over the material of the piece, and yet the authorship of the piece is made complex by his giving it away, both to his collaborators and to the audience who, Schmitt presumes, will lend it their help and participation. Gray himself, and the other members of the Group, seem to have held no illusion that the "brutal act" of using another's personal life would necessarily cease with his passing on of the "gift" to them. In the process, he could well become subject to the "painful and 'exploitative' mode" in turn. The story is told that it was LeCompte who insisted on Gray's public admission that he was defying his grandmother's wishes. When asked about this, she said:

That's a tactic I often take. I needed to state the facts. Like in *Dragnet*. Just the facts. Not so much to confront the audience but to confront the material. Sometimes it's hard to tell from the way I work whether it's a confrontation of the audience or the material. It can be both. That's why I'm labelled . . . that's why it's aggressive. It's an aggressive attack on the material. Spalding tends to circle around it, while I go all the way into the middle and try to explode it. Yes, I think he's uncomfortable with that. It's not his way. And he wouldn't have done that. . . . I wanted to be true to the facts, to the relationships, and I think explaining her view and then watching Spalding countermand it showed important things about Spalding, the character, and our way of making theatre. (Savran 91)

The structure of composition in this work is nicely described by the image of Gray circling around the periphery and LeCompte exploding the middle, a perfect inversion of the actual configuration of director and performer. But both center on "the material" under examination, and the process of examination is among those facts.

Schmitt's understanding that the piece reaches a completeness or union, though this unity is carefully and exhaustively defined by her as a montage of inconsistent, unfinished, divided, and unyielding bits, and though she details its multiple authorship, shows an underlying organicism in her viewpoint, quite inconsistent with the relativist view she attempts to adduce. Schmitt's univocal essay turns *Rumstick Road* into an agreeable example, cleverly posed opposite

the O'Neill play and declaratively speaking its aesthetic misalignment. She overlooks the unmasked brutality that pervades the scene in the conflict of variously unresponsive and irresponsible authorities.

The title page of O'Neill's play in its standard edition is relatively simple. Only his name is mentioned. Original cast members are not, as is often the custom, listed on the following page. Of course, the famous inscription to his wife, Carlotta, intervenes between the title page and the text of the play, in which he gives her the original script (as Gray's grandmother gave him the taped interview) and signals his involvement in the play, as one of the "four haunted Tyrones," in its project of delivering "deep pity and understanding and forgiveness" upon them. The inscription of his family's lives and personalities into this play becomes nearly overwhelming in the minute portraits he gives of each of them in his character descriptions. After O'Neill's death, Carlotta chose to have the play released early, against his instructions, and with the personal inscription he delivered to her attached. Her deed might be seen as the next link in the "chain of brutality" (as Gray calls it), which O'Neill had delivered to her, an act akin to Gray's exposure of the private circumstances of his mother's suicide and of the private contents of his grandmother's words. Its brutality, though, accompanies her determination to protect his authority over the work from the possible rival claims of the living and the dead—those who contradict or undermine or violate its viewpoint. This might be seen as another sort of brutality, from the point of view of those other claims. In her dealings with Jose Quintero, who was to direct the English-language premiere of the play, it becomes clear that Carlotta assumed the responsibility of insuring that access to the play would be restricted to those who shared that "deep pity and understanding and forgiveness." The posthumous will of the writer thus continues to exert authority over the work, vesting in its inheritors the duty to protect his original prerogative in the family's representation.

Rumstick Road throws open the question of who holds authority over the work. Gray indicates that the piece developed from "group associations around facts in my life," such that it was "the autobiography of the four of us" (PAJ 90). And yet the published essay from which these words were quoted was entitled "Playwright's Notes," and here and elsewhere Gray asserts his centrality in the process, if not his preeminence. In another essay, Gray wrote about the compiling of the tapes:

As I look back on this process, it seems that I was trying to develop some meaningful structure into which I could place the meaningless act of this suicide. Perhaps it was the hope that this newly created structure would somehow redeem and put in order the chaos of my

mother's world. (TDR 38)

This goes far toward suggesting the deified artist-hero who consolidates a unified view of the world, but Gray was willing to subject himself, and this mission, to the cross-purposes of his collaborators.

LeCompte called Gray (or the character Spud) "a device to focus the material," and also said: "The piece was so delicate, the material so private, that I always felt a little embarrassed that I came in and took it over, that I objectified it" (Savran 84, 89). From her point of view, *Rumstick Road* and the other pieces in the trilogy were "about Spalding's love for the image of his mother, and his attempt to re-possess her through his art" (PAJ 86). LeCompte thus stresses the subject (Spalding) more than the object (the mother)—or, more precisely, she directs her attention to Spalding's act of predicating his mother and his pain at her loss. In contrast to the "gift" he received from his living relatives (the tapes), Gray has only an absence from his mother, and so he attempts to "re-possess her through his art," objectifying that loss. But LeCompte and the other collaborators can offer him no actual transcendence of that loss. For them he becomes the figure of an artist in quest of transcendence, an obsolete, Romantic type, perhaps, yet an important subject for the newer artist on an uncertain quest. Despite the affection that one presumes (indeed knows) existed between LeCompte and Gray, her association with him in this work does not by any means extend to her protecting his authority as artist-hero or sentimentalizing his deep pity, love, or forgiveness. Indeed, her contribution tends to lay bare the presumption of his aspiration to redeem, the selfish cheek of his seizure of other people's privacy, the masturbatory subtext of his confession. Unlike Carlotta O'Neill, she offers no shield against others who would presume to challenge the creator's authority, instead firing the first thunderbolt herself. On the other hand, as the absent director/mother figure to this work, LeCompte puts Gray into untenable positions, positions that he perhaps dearly enjoys assuming, such as beneath the table, wrapped in a sheet, as Libby Howes is given a kissing massage overhead. The compounded brutal masochism of this piece, its flailing quality, mirrors the clenched-fist sadism of O'Neill's. The latter wants to be known as "powerful"—a masterpiece—and to engage the unified emotions of crowds in a memorializing effort. The former prefers to show that an artistic quest of that sort can prove more a grave robbery than anything else. That effort to muster "deep pity" and so on can prove a screen to the attempt to relieve guilt. *Rumstick Road* implicates Gray in that motive; LeCompte zeroes in on that mercilessly. Schmitt brings out little of the brutal aspect of this conflicted collaboration, instead assuming a cooperative effort

toward unanimity. Neither Gray nor LeCompte avoid talk of what the piece is "about"; both express faith in the possibility of such a definition. Only they cannot and would not have the same perspective on it. In the difference between them lies the matter of this piece.

It is, finally, impossible to apply a traditional critical frame to a work of such conflicted authorship. The concept of the artist and the artwork as an organic unity pervades the discussion. If the critical discussion of such a work is to begin the process of placing it in history, as has traditionally been the case, then a special burden falls on that criticism to reflect its dynamic. Not long before the Wooster Group developed *Rumstick Road*, Michael Kirby, who was later to be affiliated with the Group, became editor of *The Drama Review* (TDR) and incited controversy by his attack on traditional dramatic criticism. In "Criticism: Four Faults," he took critics to task for their concentration on value judgments, which in his view were inevitably subjective, reflecting the taste of the perceiver not the qualities of the object. Taste is a conditioned response, reflective of one's cultural background, and its public expression therefore will likely have the effect of imposing the normative position. But along with this ultimately political problem, he argues that the emphasis on value judgments tends to undermine the historical function criticism performs: "They frustrate historical need" (Kirby 66). Therefore, he prescribes for critics the model of the scientist, who does not let personal impressions distort the data. Criticism might thus provide history with an accurate and objective record of the ephemeral performance, and indeed this more or less describes the sort of documentary criticism that has appeared in that and other theatrical journals since then.

TDR covered the Wooster Group's Rhode Island trilogy, including *Rumstick Road*, in 1979. James Bierman gives a highly detailed description of what the audience saw and heard through the performance. Value judgments are certainly not in evidence in this dry account, but byproducts of his observation, such as corrected first impressions and comparisons from his own experience, do arise. His most definitive statement about the piece suggests the problem: "*Rumstick Road* is a theatre piece concentrating on the suicide of Spalding Gray's mother on July 29, 1967" (Bierman 18). How much interpretive distortion does that word "concentrating" introduce? A year earlier, the *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ) did a Special Section on "The Making of a Trilogy," which began with Elizabeth LeCompte's introduction to each of the pieces. This, too, reads as a bare bones account of the physical circumstances of the performances, somewhat more like a set of stage directions than Bierman's phenomenological exercise. Her piece concludes with the words already quoted, defining the trilogy as "about Spalding's love

for the image of his mother, and his attempt to re-possess her through his art." (Again, the implied concentric geometry of that preposition "about" raises questions about interpretive distortion.) These two documents, along with the text of all the words spoken or played on tape in the performance (also printed in the *PAJ* issue), do enable a reader to envision pretty accurately the sequence of happenings in the work. But it is far from clear that these documents alone, even with all of the photographs that accompany them, provide anything quite like the experience of watching the piece, or that they provide a firm foundation on which critical or historical interpretation might rest. The discrepancy between LeCompte's and Bierman's definitions of the work actually has the salutary effect of upsetting any hasty impulse to draw a conclusion. What is missing, of course, is exactly the inevitable implication of the onlooker, with all the distorting passions, prejudices, and, yes, evaluations that, Schmitt reminds us, are part of the relativist perspective.

Schmitt herself draws on the experience of having seen *Rumstick Road* at least once, and her account by no means adheres to the strictures laid down by Kirby, which are at base Aristotelian in their attitude toward empiricism, though, of course, Aristotle also did much to promote value judgments in criticism. Her essay will undoubtedly prove more satisfying to a student of theatre history than the relatively unadulterated documentary record. Her interpretive engagement with the work at least demonstrates that it has great argumentative capacity. She relies heavily on two different autobiographical prefaces to the pieces that Gray wrote, which also appeared in *PAJ* and *TDR*. These collateral documents have proved very influential in most discussions of the piece. Indeed they are rich documents, giving a vivid sense of the intuitive, exploratory impulse behind the trilogy. They resemble, to some degree, Gray's stage monologues, to which he has turned his attention in recent years. These kindred theatrical works—mythic autobiographical weavings—present to history quite differently from the collaborative works, because they translate so marvelously into literary form. Also, they return the reader or audience member to an idea of authorship which, if not heroic, at least intimates a transcendence through the modernist device of the anti-hero. His prefatory pieces to *Rumstick Road* also evoke authorship, though they are also straightforward in assigning credit for the piece to all the collaborators, with the idea that the piece had become a "group autobiography" (Gray 1979 34; also Gray 1978 90). Nevertheless, they inevitably tend to throw emphasis upon his vantage point within the performance. As he puts it in one of them, the performances became a public confession of his narcissism and reflectiveness: "Look at me, I am one who sees himself seeing himself" (Gray 1979 34). These essays speak directly of the origins of *Rumstick Road* and of Gray's

position or role within it, both of which are indirectly addressed by the work itself, so it is only natural that they would be regarded as articulate extensions of it in the historical record.

Schmitt also makes use of another important set of documents, contained in the first book-length history of the Wooster Group, David Savran's *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, originally published in 1986. Savran takes an aggressive approach to the problem of how to represent a work like *Rumstick Road* and other pieces by the Group. He weaves his argument around a great many quotations, some of them very long, from the sixteen formal interviews he held with Group members in 1984-85. These have several useful effects. They give insight into the collective creation of the piece, including differences of opinion on certain unresolved issues. Since the interviews were mostly retrospective, however, looking back over as much as ten years, one often has the sense of hearing opinions that have been developed after long years of debate. To counteract this, Savran questions boldly and invasively, sometimes openly disagreeing, in an effort to build his own critical analysis in the scene of the interview. For the most part, he couples these quotations with the relevant sections of his study, and makes reference to them in the usual way, but they are lengthy and numerous enough to evoke a parallel scene of discourse where the same issues receive different emphasis. Savran's voice is more or less subsidiary in the interviews, making early attempts to synthesize the ideas, and then the Group's voices are subsidiary in his essays, where their words exemplify or illustrate his argument. This interesting binary organization is further multiplied by another set of quotations, included as vignettes, which are interspersed throughout the book and have the effect of further disrupting its linearity, helping to give the effect of what he calls "a fractured history" (Savran 5). The analysis is written in the present tense, as is customary in critical discussion, but the quotations consist mostly of reflections or reminiscences in the past tense. He admits that he has "interwoven description, analysis, biography and memory in imitation of the Wooster Group's work," specifically their piece first performed in 1983, *L.S.D.* (Savran 5,6)

Savran's is an inspired solution to the question of how to represent this work to history. The polyphony of the structure mimics the layering and juxtaposition of different documents and stage images in a piece like *Rumstick Road*. Although he declares that the book takes as the limit of its scope the pieces that were directed by LeCompte, he is on guard against implying that she is the master creator and the others her pawns. He is scrupulous about referring to both Gray and LeCompte as the authors of *Rumstick Road*. It is on the subject of his own, earned authority that the book is vulnerable.

Savran's immediate experience with the Group began only in 1982, so one has the sense of his earnest struggle to find enough information to give him access to the making and initial presentation of many of their pieces. But finally, however sharp many of his insights might be, his late-coming to a work like *Rumstick Road* leaves him at a loss on the crucial point of what made the work a performance in the first place. As an "authorized" chronicler, Savran has had access to unpublished scripts, videotapes of productions he never saw, and the artists themselves in the interviews. These he has studied closely and well, and his analysis of them will always stand as an early and largely successful attempt to interpret the work. But as a history, his book will always grow cloudy at its central point, which is the point of his absence from the scene. To compensate, he must rely all the more heavily on the retrospective testimony of others. In the case of the interviews with Group members, who have long been in the habit of thinking of their work self-consciously and historically, this testimony bears the grain of their revisionary process, the very self-modifications that the development of their work has dictated.

Another sort of modification takes place between the interviews and the essays, as Savran's early, soft hypotheses, which tend to spring from hints given by LeCompte, transmute into settled conclusions. At one point, the Man (Vawter) projects a slide of Gray's mother onto the Woman (Howes), who then talks for the only time in the piece, speaking the text of a letter from the mother. LeCompte reports that she "didn't really like Libby's voice and . . . wanted to obliterate it with Spalding's." At the end of the letter, Gray violently knocks her down. Of this moment, LeCompte said: "But that was all my thing, it had nothing to do with Spalding or his mother, initially. I did it really as a final 'beat' to that scene, to end it musically" (Savran 82). Following this, the Man, as a quack therapist, subjects the Woman to an "examination," in which she is tickled to the point of hysteria by a kissing massage on her midsection. Through this scene, Gray crouches beneath the examination table. Savran's discussion of this section of the piece leads to his interpretation that the Man is the active or "transitive" figure, while the Woman is passive. Savran then takes this a step further:

By providing a structure for personal material, *Rumstick Road* transforms a private experience into a public theatre piece. Elizabeth LeCompte's equivocal attitude toward the transformation is in part the result of her realization that the *mise en scène* submits the raw material to the same process that the piece is examining. It uses the tapes as the basis for the construction of associations, images and roles. It objectifies them, dividing Spalding's dead

mother (in LeCompte's interpretation) into a spiritual female component and a material male one or (in my interpretation) into a passive one and an active one. Rather than attempting, however, to cover up this objectification, the *mise en scène* underscores it by placing the recorded voices in an environment which baldly exposes them to examination, under white lights as glaring as those used in an operating room theatre. (Savran 90)

What, we might ask, is the "raw material" to which he is referring here? How do we know what has not been cooked? Savran's construction of "LeCompte's interpretation" (which is not documented), along with his own, drifts perilously away from the "raw material," if by that we mean the circumstances of the performance. This results from substitutions, the importing of classic thematic binaries—male/female, material/spiritual, active/passive—in place of the subjects: LeCompte, Gray, Howes, Vawter. Replace the term "*mise en scène*" in the above quotation with "LeCompte," and substitute "Gray" for the direct objects of the verbal actions that are said to be performed by the *mise en scène* and you come closer to what is occurring in this work. The fundamental structural fact of this piece is that LeCompte remains unseen and in control, while Gray and all the material he supplies goes under the lights.

The point is not to create an emblem of the "components" of Gray's mother through formal and symbolic manipulation, as in a late Ibsen play, so that . . . what, one emerges with a deeper understanding of mental illness? Rather, it is to examine Gray's impulse to make public use of his life, to reflect on the exploitative aspect of his artistic desires, and on the counterbalancing impulse of LeCompte and the others to exploit such an artist in their midst. Gray (this very specific object and subject before us, not the "artist figure" or any such abstraction) can be made to strike the Woman to end the scene "musically." LeCompte insisted on that, even though it proved almost impossible to get Gray to do it convincingly. The levels of psychological transference that are brought out in that moment have to do with the operation of a performer—not any performer or "the performer" but *this* performer, who can only be this performer—in a scene created by *this* director. Of course that reflects on Gray's personal history, his interest in comprehending his mother's action and perhaps breaking through his guilty passivity, but the piece does not presume to tell that story (if indeed it could ever accurately be told in the form of a story). The piece concerns an immediate configuration of LeCompte, Gray, Howes, and Vawter. Savran's injected presence into that configuration, as thematic analyst, is at best irrelevant and at worst tends to obstruct the view of the markedly

ungeneralized operation that is being performed.

At one point, in an odd sentence that exhibits his habit of personifying abstractions, as seen earlier in the passage about the *mise en scène*, Savran might be seen to characterize his own interpretive intervention into the work. He describes the "House Dance" performed by the Woman (Libby Howes), in which she repeatedly flails her long hair against the projected image of Gray's childhood house on Rumstick Road, calling it a "beautiful, formal dance that suggests a kind of corporeal wail or keening." Then he remarks, parenthetically: "At this point interpretation is heard in its masculine voice, aligned with he who violates, objectifies, justifies, pins down" (Savran 88). I suppose he means to suggest by this puzzling statement that she seems to break at this time from her usual passivity, striking out at the Man, who had earlier projected a slide of the mother onto her face. But she is, as Savran later puts it, "being 'worked' by the Man" in this instance, and so, in his dualistic scheme, we are seeing here the masculinist definition of the mother. This is, at best, unclear. It is possible, though, to take this parenthesis as a reflection on his own interpretation. Whether consciously or not, he here expresses doubts about the effect of his own analytic scheme. Is it a violation to refer to this "corporeal wail" as "beautiful," or to insist that a woman in such violent outburst represents passivity? The imposition of an interpretive scheme can have the effect of depersonalizing and abstracting its nature, and this highly disturbing image resists the effort to define or objectify it, which would be to violate it. On the other hand, the action might also be seen as a resistance to the role that is being projected upon the performer—by LeCompte, who dislikes her voice and will not let it be heard, by Gray, who types her as the enigma of his dead mother, and by the likes of Savran, who would find in her the substance of an argument that her part "involves no pretense": "She never actively takes on a role but stands passively while one is projected upon her. She is denied control over the roles she plays and can choose only silence and passivity" (Savran 89). For the performer, Libby Howes, that might in a sense be true, but the "group autobiography" method of creating this piece allows her to pull focus and act in a way that suggests silence and passivity are hardly a choice.

How should one describe the "House Dance"? Bierman gives an unassuming description: "She stands in profile, her feet rooted, throwing her head and body backward and forward. The slide projection covers her and camouflages her, but her shadow, enlarged on the wall, reveals her form in black—in particular, the flow of her long hair, which she whips backward and forward" (Bierman 21). Schmitt, in contrast, uses this moment as an example of how the performers evolved their personal contributions to this production.

She has no hesitation in assigning her interpretation to the image, even as she makes a point of defining its oblique relation to the representation of the mother:

. . . Howes provides an image of the mother's madness by standing and repeatedly throwing the upper half of her body forward toward her knees until we think she and we cannot tolerate the action any more. There is no intimation that this repetitive masochistic behavior literally represents the form that the mother's mania took; instead the actress provides a correlative action, which, we are aware, inflicts discomfort, if not violence, on the actress's own body. (Schmitt 56)

Schmitt also cites this moment to show how a performer in the new theatre can represent a psychic or emotional state without experiencing it, as the Stanislavskian actor or even Richard Schechner, early mentor to both Gray and LeCompte, would insist. LeCompte declared her independence from that attitude, preferring instead to construct images abstractly, so that, Schmitt writes, "Libby Howes . . . does not have to feel mentally disturbed in order to convey the mother's madness" (Schmitt 72). In the new theatre, in other words, one can be more clinical about the *pathos* or pathology of the scene. In a piece that centers around an examination table, inspired, LeCompte told Savran, by Renaissance pictures of anatomical demonstrations, the medical metaphor is frequently invoked. Savran compares the whole piece to an autopsy of Gray's mother, in which the encounter of two people, subject and object, is as radically alienated from the personal as is possible.

Schmitt, too, appears struck by the way the performers keep action and affect separate, the better to encourage unsentimental participation on the part of the spectator in completing the work's process of analysis. For her this is a programmatic part of the non-cathartic, anti-Aristotelian aesthetic of which *Rumstick Road* is, perhaps more than anything else for her, an example. Of course she would also remind us that the process of investigation involves the spectator more deeply than the spectator can know. She recurs frequently to Alfred North Whitehead's idea that "in the act of perception, the person involved is neither merely a passive reflector nor a dominating actor who imposes his preconceived scheme of things on his surroundings, but is instead a knot or focus in a network of to-and-fro influences" (Schmitt 65). Schmitt, I think, sees this characterization of the perceiver as a liberation, because it spares her from the cold discipline of the Bierman/Kirby school of performance analysis and also from such adventurous and ambitious incursions

as Savran's. She can remark the disturbing impact of the "House Dance," importing her own feeling and even evaluation to the scene, at the risk of distorting its nature, while at the same time she addresses nothing more specific in it than its detachment from the madness to which it points. This can hardly be the proper diagnosis for the way Libby Howes *presents* in this scene. Savran's "performance" as a spectator/historian, however limited in some ways, finally engages *Rumstick Road* and the reader of his book more deeply. He, in fact, associates the audience/reader with the passive and silent Libby Howes' character, as he has analyzed her. He writes that the piece "draws attention to the invasion of privacy, not for sensational ends, but to make the passive and silent spectator aware of his complicity with the act of violation, to implicate him in an exploitative and voyeuristic act" (Savran 96). Schmitt would like to admit the complicity but deny the associated brutality; Savran would rather dissociate himself from the passivity or *pathos* and silence, the Woman's role, and instead take the pathologist's approach. Finally, though, the specific object of his anatomization demands closer treatment. The usual phrases of diagnosis and succor will not help this case, not when the pathologist knows himself to be part of the disease. The disease is acting upon impulse, and the prognosis is madness and death.

Howes, who left the Wooster Group in 1980-81 to begin performing on her own, was not interviewed by Savran. Her absence from the history of this piece ironically mimics her assumption of the "role" of the absent mother, which she had filled with the action of a victimized performer, which in turn was partially effaced by the director. I heard a rumor, from someone who might be expected to know, that Howes, with whom I myself was acquainted before her involvement with the Group, had more or less dropped out of society, lost touch with reality. The madness and masochism of this "House Dance" perhaps require closer examination in light of this revelation (if it be so). The fact that we have no documents to establish the "truth" of this situation does not make it radically different from Gray's situation, where the numerous documents lead no more clearly to a "truth." If the circumstances of Gray's early life, however private and even sacrosanct, can be said to figure in this piece, then wouldn't the private circumstances of Libby Howes in this "group autobiography" also bear on it? *Rumstick Road* stakes out relatively new territory at the border between theatre and life, where the guidelines become hazy. How far must (or should) the historian go in representing this event?

The audience leaves at the end, as Libby Howes left one day. The audience always leaves, and it rarely leaves any documents behind, and so the question of history is always open for a boy underneath the examination table,