

You can blame Romeo Castellucci for many things, and now you can blame him for this article too. A few months ago, I wondered in my blog why we New Yorkers don't get to see more shows like *Tragedia endogonidia: L.#09 London*, which Castellucci's company, Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, brought to Montclair University in nearby New Jersey in October 2005. Quickly, I got an incensed comment from a Portuguese reader, who counterclaimed that Castellucci basically is a nihilistic fraud. We started dialoguing and the idea for this article was born.

At the origin of our difference is the fact that Castellucci may feel tired to some European audiences, but here he is a breath of fresh air. As a French woman living in America, I am starved for anything that breaks from the terrible straitjacket of naturalistic theater. New York fares better than America in this regard, but even here the situation can be frustrating. The majority of American productions is devoid of intellectual sharpness: They are either well crafted but empty of meaning or postmodern exercises in self-congratulatory irony. While we do see some productions from the rest of the world, they are overwhelmingly British and Irish, and most of them belong to a relatively safe tradition of well-made theater: at best, shows directed by Nicholas Hytner or Deborah Warner; at worst, shows written by the overrated Brian Friel. To give you an idea, the Catalan company Fura dels Baus has made only two NY visits since 1991. Germany's Thomas Ostermeier made his NYC debut in 2004, and René Pollesch is coming soon to New York Theater Workshop; forget about seeing productions by Frank Castorf or Christoph Marthaler though. Árpád Schilling's *Krétakör* made its local debut only last year. Like Castellucci's piece, it was at Montclair University's Kasser Theater; while the Kasser is more daring in its programming than wealthier NYC institutions like Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (which keep hiring Robert Wilson—what a joke!), it's handicapped by its New Jersey location.

Now reverse the situation: It's not any better. If you don't count musicals and *boulevard* plays, what American theater do you see on continental Europe? Little interesting conceptual work, that's for sure. Among the only companies touring regularly abroad are the Wooster Group, the Builders' Association and—on a lesser level—Caden Manson/Big Art Group; typically, they all do heavily technological multimedia pieces. This does not bode well for the health of the American stage, because it also means that since Americans tend not to travel much, American directors are not exposed to a different theater.

But let's come back to New York.

Culture receives very little public funding in America, and although New York does better than most, subsidies are still largely inferior to what they are in Western Europe. This is due to several factors, one of them being the American belief that art should pay for itself: if ticket sales can't cover it, that means people don't want to see it, right? Of course small nonprofit spaces exist, and as Frédéric Martel shows in his recent book, *De la culture en Amérique*, a lot happens in universities, but this also means culture gets ghettoized and the consumption of art becomes determined by class. Just like Hollywood is synonymous with cinema for many Americans, when it comes to the stage we end up with a crazy situation in which Broadway becomes shorthand for theater: theater equals Broadway and Broadway equals theater. Even though too many of the shows are brainless twaddle directed by men of limited talent such as Scott Elliott or Walter Bobbie. And that crap is expensive! At hit productions, good (and, increasingly, not even that good) seats cost between \$250 and \$300 (193-232 euros). Even a Broadway-friendly columnist like Michael Riedel, from the right-wing paper *The New York Post*, is fed up, writing that "Broadway has become like the rest of Manhattan: If you're not rich, you don't belong here. Middle-class and working-class families have pretty much been priced out of the market."

Most of these audiences are not interested in art but in entertainment. While entertainment can often be art, and vice versa, the bigger issue is that for too many Americans theater is not part of daily life; the cost makes it a rare event, and so audience expectations—and what producers do to accommodate them—have completely warped the entire scene. While worthy shows occasionally make it onto Broadway (like, for instance, the weird time Deborah Warner's splendid *Medea* transferred from the Brooklyn Academy of Music), way too many of them are irremediably mediocre; worse, way too many lack ambition. And while it's fine if a creative team aimed high and failed to achieve its goal, it's much less forgivable when there is no ambition to begin with.

Too many local critics don't do their jobs either. When the Netherlands' Ivo van Hove directed a bracing, revisionist version of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* with an American cast at New York Theater Workshop, the reviews ranged from nasty to derisive, marked by

relentless anti-intellectualism and sheer stupidity. At least New York Theater Workshop persevered and brought Van Hove back; a few years later, his *Hedda Gabler* was a critical and commercial success.

This is not to say that New York creators don't do anything interesting and that we have to rely on imports for our thrills. The Wooster Group remains able to constantly seek and prod (a riveting revival of *The Emperor Jones* last year showed that the 1998 production had not lost one bit of edge); Richard Foreman and Mabou Mines are still around and still provocative; Anne Bogart can still alternate between utter brilliance and terminal boredom; Richard Maxwell continues to exasperate audiences (there was a veritable exodus during his *Henry IV, Part I* at BAM). While few in the younger generation reach that level of intellectual and performative sophistication, companies such as the Civilians, Radiohole, Les Freres Corbusier, Elevator Repair Company, the National Theater of the United States of America and Collapsable Giraffe at least attempt to challenge naturalistic-theater conventions, supported by new progressive-minded spaces such Collapsable Hole, Soho Rep and HERE, as well as long-running institutions like the Kitchen, New York Theater Workshop, Dance Theater Workshop, St. Ann's Warehouse, PS 122, and, occasionally, BAM and the Lincoln Center Festival.

The Civilians is probably the most accessible and audience-friendly of the new companies. Led by artistic director Steve Cosson, the troupe specializes in documentary plays based on thorough interviews conducted, in a long preparatory process, by the actors themselves. In their deceptively simple manner, the Civilians are painting a pointillist portrait of America, its inhabitants and what makes them what they are. It's a fascinating communal project related to the work of Germany's Rimini Protokoll (at least I think, since of course we don't see Rimini Protokoll in the US!) and in which politics are always present, if not always obviously. Several of the group's members, such as playwright Anne Washburn, director Anne Kauffman, composer Michael Friedman, and actors Christina Kirk, Colleen Werthmann or Nina Hellman, also contribute exciting non-Civilians work to the NY scene.

Music plays a big role in the work of the Civilians and several other groups, linking them to a specifically American tradition—except this is quite different from what you would find on Broadway. You often hear songs in productions by Les Freres Corbusier, for instance, but no

Broadway crew would dare claim, as Les Freres do in their mission statement, that it “creates aggressively visceral theater combining historical revisionism, multimedia excess, found texts, sophomoric humor, and rigorous academic research. A theater that is continually conscious of the apparatus, but which simultaneously reaches beyond mere ironic deconstruction of a subject towards a more sophisticated form of positive analysis, is the only sort of contemporary theater that can truly provoke, edify, and inspire.”

Sounds ambitious, doesn't it? Concretely, this means that the shows, usually staged by artistic director Alex Timbers, are built on high concepts that can handily be described in short, attention-grabbing sentences: *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant* is a history of scientology acted out by kids. *Boozy: The Life, Death, and Subsequent Vilification of Le Corbusier*, and, *More Importantly, Robert Moses* is a Brechtian musical about city planning. *Heddatron* is *Hedda Gabler* with robots. *Hell House* is a haunted house devised by fundamentalist Christians. Timbers and company have found a way to make experimentation accessible, and to bring to the theater young, hip audiences (believe me, this is a real achievement in New York). Like the Civilians, Les Freres Corbusier's shows are light fun on the surface, but they brim with ideas and it's often only afterwards that you realize how politically astute they are. To me, this is real action theater: It reflects on the medium of theater itself and engages the world we live in without being heavily dogmatic (a problem frequently found in the British and Irish imports we have to suffer through, such as *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*).

This approach can be traced back to the great Mabou Mines, so it's not that surprising that a new company doing such work, Trick Saddle, is jointly led by Clove Galilee, the daughter of Mabou pioneers Lee Breuer and Ruth Maleczech, and visual artist Jenny Rogers. Recently I was lucky to see a work-in-progress production of Galilee and Rogers' *Wickets* at HERE. The team brilliantly transposed the action of Maria Irene Fornes' 1977 play *Fefu and Her Friends* from a New England estate in 1935 to a flight between New York and Paris in the early 1970s. They transformed the entire theater into the plane's cabin, with ambient engine sounds and stewardesses in period uniforms distributing snacks and pillows. The inspired art direction and staging made for convincing immersive theater, but it was also a thoughtful, openly feminist work about the

fragmentation and pain in some women's lives. Seeing that show reminded me that being a theater lover in New York isn't so bad after all.