



Review: "Dionysus in 69", from Euripides' "The Bacchae"

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THEATRE REVIEWS

Dionysus in 69, from Euripides' *The Bacchae*

The Performance Group

STEFAN BRECHT

SPRING, 1968

The Performing Garage: a beautiful cube of space, sprinkled with high platforms & towers made of raw two by-fours which but for their air of negligence would announce an acrobatic show. Individual gymnastics, each gymnast sole, randomly distributed. Their relentless contortions get them into a sweat—physical translations of introspection. Here & there a little acrobatics, action.

From this laborious anarchy the play powerfully emerges on a natural free rhythm. Couples form, the chance proximities of gymnasts turn into the interaction of performers. The timing of several trigger actions cuing others. Progressively assembling the play has been left up to the individual performers. Barely audible, mumbled chanted lines from a translation of Euripides sound out here & there, are repeated, taken over by others. Though they belong to parts they are not the property of any individual actor. The lines are metric, their delivery is amateurish & affected—false speech. A head-on encounter of body & mind. As the action gets going, the text is extemporized into cool slang (by which, as substitute for communication, off-hand reference to experienced intuitions presumed available to all is nowadays at-

tempted). The play keeps up the ambiguities of individual physical exercise & of an intensive experimental rehearsal, an air of multiple physicality inwardly individuated.

With considerable skill the play has been so interwoven with something at least seeming private interaction between the performers & pseudo-personal approaches to the audience that the tension between them comes to seem a legitimate subject of primary attention. Almost so that the play seems a supplementary instrument chosen by the performers to work out their personal problems. In fact this does not quite come off. The personal stuff seems cleverly brought-up commentary on the play.

A "birth ritual" intervenes as overture. Men form the floor of a womb, standing girls' spread legs its roof, their feet next to the boys' necks & in their jock-strapped crotches. A powerful impression of bare bodies, notably the men's—vulnerable male flesh. The women on top, standing separate & self-contained in ecstasy. The men on the floor are undulating, a wave-motion in masturbatory or coital flexions, the women above them in the pelvic thrusts of coitus or orgasm. The two sets of flesh-undulations add up to the birth-giving rhythm of a womb. Putting the womb on center-

stage, director Schechner ritualizes an adoration though one tinged with anxiety (the cave looks to afford dangerous passage) of Woman as mother & cunt. The boys are sacrificed to Flesh, here non-individuated like Dubuffet's *matière brut*: the originality of this *mise-en-scène*. We are shown individuation as incidental to humanity, humanity as a block of self-procreating spasmic meat. The message seems to be: let us not deny within us or within others this origin, our true identity—flesh out of flesh, issue of sperm, orgasm, spasm. But this identity is defined by its opposition to arrogant male individuality. A saint- or hippie-type emerges: Dionysus (William Finley) proclaims his own divinity & intentions of establishing a feminine cult for himself, demands worship from the audience. And Pentheus, an antifeminist politician: he proclaims against the ritual celebration of his own origins.

A remarkable & poignant scene added by Schechner. The god offers the tyrant any woman in the room in exchange for recognition, as if to say: partake of my spirit & anxiety will leave you & others will just naturally take to you. But Pentheus wants

to make it on his own. He cruises around, picks a female from the audience, starts to make love to her (at some point obviously, after all it's a public place), is turned down & takes a fit. He acts out the cramp of his armor, the wound of rejection, by a series of stomach-leaps. A man-child in extremity, he allows the god to soothe him, a gentle massage resolves his tenseness. This is not acted as symbol of spiritual redemption but as communication between bodies, a matter of the flesh. The god now proposes a deal: in exchange for a blow job, he will give peace. Meaning 1: be sexually open & you'll be sexually free. Meaning 2: realize yourself as physical being among physical beings & your mind will be free. Meaning 3: allow the erotic its unbounded access to all your sociability. Meaning 4: don't be afraid to be queer & you won't be. The former tyrant painfully acquiesces—with murder on his mind. And the spectators know that the gentle seducer has murder in his heart. The seduction into love is a betrayal into death.

Pentheus, now an innocent wordy young fellow, commences his career of love. Sev-



eral women together make love to him, slowly, carefully. He is passive, appreciative. They tear him to pieces.

By & large, with the exception of William Finley (Dionysus), the actors seem innocent or rather naive, somewhat awkward young persons of good will—about as far removed from spontaneous physicality as one could well be, earnest devotees of making a good effort—the opposite of Dionysiac in any sense whatever. This very quality means that so much more credit must be given Schechner for the powerful effect they achieve. It may actually contribute: by providing an abstraction from the themes, from the theme of emotion as state of the body. I mean that if we had here tenderer boys & wilder, funkier women, willowier people—an orgiastic cast really doing it—instead of nice young people earnestly creating in themselves states of mind that never really could possess them, the net impact might be simply that of insanity. Perhaps effect in this sense depends on a certain phoniness, a certain academic air.

Schechner's objective seems a physical theatre of love, liberating basic emotions. Though this is not attained, something like it & strong is. We get the idea—of a theatrical experience consisting of direct emotional responses, not structured into images & ideas relating to such, responses to body-gestures, vocal pitch & timbre, directly meaningful & only incidentally functional in terms of the play. The major moods which Schechner has analyzed the play into & what he is most concerned to produce arise powerfully out of this, wash over the spectators—gentleness, the immersion of spirit in body, ferocity & fear, collective hysteria . . . Dimly & as though surprisedly one hears the lines of a play, glimpses a story of a rigid man victimized by a fall into sensitivity. But there is a persistent air of imitative effort. Pure basic emotions are ideal artifacts.

Euripides' play is an important conservative statement. Like all such it is dishonest. Its ambiguities have given rise to a literature. It is a family tragedy. A woman is destroyed by her nephew revenging aspersions she cast on his mother's honor. He induces her to filicide by powers proving

those aspersions groundless. On the face of it, the boy is salvaging his mother's honor but the story is theology in the guileful Greek manner: a god establishes his divinity by destroying his human descent on his mother's side.

Ostensibly it is an injunction to piety: a great family is ruined because of impiety. But the god is Dionysos & the play in fact a denunciation of him, a moralistic warning against the excesses of a certain type of religious enthusiasm, telling us that the principle & the temper of this god are a danger to public morality, civic order, the state. Euripides' Tiresias tells us that the god is a swindle but his cult is a valuable sublimation. Euripides' Dionysos is most ancient. After decades of office culture, centuries of bourgeois urbanism & millenia of heavy-footed peasant toil, we are troubled to identify his temper & apt to confound him with Wilhelm Reich. His spirit is that of the hunt. What Euripides is inveighing against is the glorious bestiality of the hunting societies, of nature-integrated hence predatory humanity—wild men. He is speaking of an original maleness in which the mind is of the body & the body "I"—the body a muscular thing destructively flung against other bodies—a primitive state in which sexual pursuit is a sub-variant of the hunt. The domestication of grains by women insidiously domesticated this animal. Euripides' play represents repression (self-repression & the State) as essential to tranquil sociability & humane intercourse by alleging that this animal is still alive within us & must be restrained. Without the super-ego, no ego. Outside of repressive society no social relations are possible at all—not even those of the family, of mother to child.

The dishonesty of this conservative statement lies not in its indication of our generic savagery but (as always with conservative statements) in its exaggeration of what is needed to restrain it. The play's horrors are in the service of this exaggeration. After all, savage society worked. Euripides is not really concerned with senseless joyous violence: he drags it in to render the exuberant sociality of natural man suspect.

In the abstract, the play is a cry for control. Specifically it is anti-feminist. It associates the spirit of nature-integrated body-loving anarchy with women. They are the

enemy within the gates. The conservatism of this stance is also pre-historic: it carries on the classic Greek fight against the stubborn traditions of the matriarchal societies. Women are ironically pilloried as would-be hunters. In upholding the decorously pious restraints of civic reason & morality, Euripides is upholding male rule. Like all conservatives, he mobilizes the male fear of women on behalf of repression—another piece of dishonesty. What I call dishonesties are to the conservative pedagogic devices which his position makes honorable: he is faced by savage children.

The Bacchae could be seriously done today only as grotesque farce: Cant versus Those Wild Wild Women.

Schechner's version turns out to be a kind of response to the old man. Keeping most lines, he drops the plot & gives him an argument: the dialectic of the hip as illustrated by the story of the seduction & destruction of a prig. Variation of theme dominates the fable & seems to conform to the Hegelian triad. It is a gesture of rejection—but a *cautious* gesture. It refuses to define position. That's how the argument is dialectical.

The dialectical progression of the show is from a thesis affirmatively presenting the hip, through an antithesis exposing its negative side, to an ambiguous conclusion which seems either the reaffirmation of the thesis in negative form (stressing the greater evils of the non-hip), or a kind of synthesis of the true & ultimately evil form of the hip when its positive & negative sides are combined in one conscious attitude. The hip as gentle, as nasty, as domineering.

In the hip pointedly incidental manner, the play is also political. We are shown (a) the hip in successful opposition to authority though not in rebellion against it, (b) the hip in its own true type of exercise of authority (a ritual act of passionate savagery substituted for rebellion), & (c) hip authority: facism.

By the content of his version, Schechner deliberately refuses commitment to the hip, in fact renders it so suspect that one is tempted to call the show anti-hip. However, by the form of the theatrical event, he seems existentially committed to the hip, a hippie & engaged in converting the spectators to it. Since the medium is the message,

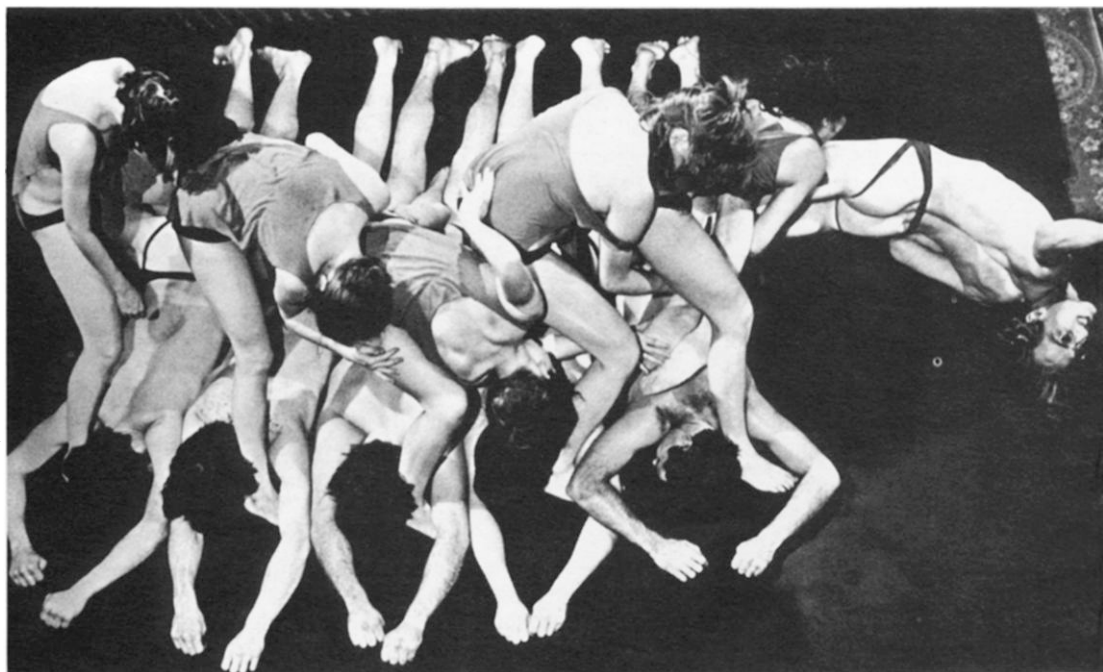
the show turns out effectively pro-hip.

The modern dialectic claims that everything contains in its essence an inconsistency dooming it to contention with its negative. The dialectic poses as alternatives: (a) suppression of internal contradictions, rejection of the negative, destruction by the negative, & (b) coping with internal contradictions, incorporation of the negative, corrupt survival in evolution. Only whatsoever can incorporate its own negations is viable. Thus the two forms of dialectical drama: the tragedy of the destruction of the impotent because would-be pure, & the tragicomedy of the self-assertion of the potentially corruptible.

Since identification is evaluation, the dialectical dramatist is in any event partisan of the positive, his ideal. If he is altogether hung-up on it, he can always glorify its self-destruction in a defence of innocence. But he will share in the tragedy if by a failure of nerve he fails to show its essential flaw or that its corrupt but survival-fit form is as it really is.

The thesis of this production defines the dionysiac temper as one of cool lovingness—easy, gentle, gay, not so much abandoned as serenely relaxed, ironic, permissively concerned with others. Common sense & good humor characterize this temper, not frenzied will-to action but abandonment of willful purpose in favor of felt inclination playfully pursued. Its mode (though not its essence) is an undifferentiated eroticism ambiguously auto- & other-directed, not distinguishing the gender of its object, neither genitally nor orgasm-oriented, avoiding libidinal fixations—an infantile tenderness of the skin.

As in Euripides, dionysianism defines itself in a relationship of opposition to authority, an opposition which *authority* instigates—so that dionysianism itself does not define itself as rebellious. Dionysus offers a condescending nonviolent resistance to Pentheus who comes on as blustering prick, weakly willful, up-tight, in fact wanting to straighten out his mother. Dionysus deals with the man, not with his function. Euripides reproved Pentheus' impiety as unwise exercise of authority; this production ridicules his outward projection of self-repression as the essence of authority. Euripides represented the god as most powerful, but



the magical powers of Dionysus here consist merely in a total lack of hang-ups. Authority can get no grip. Dionysus evades jail by accepting it, gaily. He gets with it.

The hippie's attitude toward authority is that it is an incidental nuisance, something that those in authority happen to be hung-up on. He will not be defined as anti. But in fact the adolescent rejection of authority is the basis of his attitude. In refusing to work through or act out this opposition which generates him, the hippie *cops out*. His lovingness is the cover-up for copping-out of rebellion. This production accepts this cover-up as genuine unconcern. It suppresses the contradiction between essential oppositionism (a primordial negativity) & the pretense of treating it as incidental. Thus *Dionysus in 69* is itself pro-hip.

The interpersonal games of the hippie are not the languorous devolutions of the id but power plays of the ego. Their dialectical evolution into manifestly destructive aggression (the slaying of Pentheus) thus makes sense psychologically, is intrinsic. But Schechner's production fails to mark this point, so its dialectic seems arbitrary. While Euripides' Pentheus is never converted but overcome (by magic at that), Schechner's is seduced, his super-ego succumbs to his id, he is overcome from within, attains liberation by frank homosexuality, becomes a dionysian. Is Schechner proposing that, authoritarians being latent

homosexuals, the state be brought to wither away by seducing those in power? In any event this brings an entirely new element into the play, for the cause of Pentheus' subsequent downfall is now not the cleverness of the god or his own voyeurism but the dionysian temper within him which betrays him into the motherly love of women, the ferociously womanly love of his mother. The dionysian endangers not only the state but himself. Also, since Pentheus is no longer Authority, his ensuing dismemberment is not rebellion.

There is no transition to the negative in *Dionysus in 69*. For there is not passion, aggression, appropriation, domination or contention in this lovingness. The anxiety is not acted out, nor is the closure of a group in need to define itself negatively relative to Them—let alone the emptiness of intra-group relations generating such a need. Nor is it clear that the joy in these people arises out of a rejection of authority tainted by failure to rebel. The Group's failure to operate this transition (meaningful in terms of hippie ideology) betrays its willfully innocent *parti pris* for the flower child. So the act of aggression becomes *acte gratuit*. At the call of a god these gentle people are changed into beasts.

There is something funny about this. The *women* express antagonistically the passion missing in their dancing & love-making.

The *men fade out* of the picture & are then all slain. Earlier, they shared in the dionysiac good far more emphatically than in Euripides, then Schechner absolves them of the dionysiac bad. When gentleness turns to fury, the *women*, all Agaves, murdering mothers (an invention of Schechner's) emerge into the forefront, bloody-clawed aggressors. The specific tenderness of *women*, here assimilated not to the typical post-coital manifestation but to the tenderness of a mother caressing her baby, turns into cruel destruction—of the male. This is a young mother-lover's nightmare; the inexplicable change is a trauma.

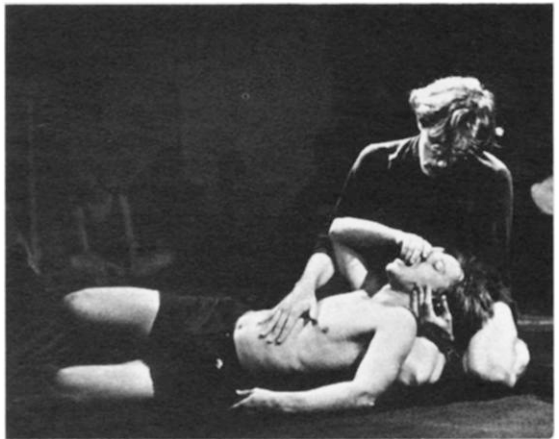
An intruder is killed, a man is dealt with as an animal, there is gang action, blind passion. Crime in the streets, riot, lynch justice, the slaying of lovers in boiler rooms, the stabbing of a pusher, ghetto programs—all that's as American as cherry pie. It's not a rebellion. It's a ritual & a release. Interpretation: the antagonistic energies not finding release in rebellion nor in the lovingness by which that failure is rationalized (but which is hollowed by that failure) find release in ritual acts of savagery, substitutes for rebellion. But the staging & acting hardly prepare us for this: the slaying is a shocking surprise & as allegory a puzzle. In any case, a passionate visceral a- & anti-social (though intensely communal) violence is shown & though the spectators are supposed to empathize they are not to sympathize with the maenads—which distinguishes Schechner's liberal anarchism from Genet's or Tavel's radical anarchism.

There is a military finale to the tune of "From the Shores of Tripoli" played with a nihilist jeer. The Group enthusiastically marching out into the street has been unified into a spontaneous collective, disciplined by the ideology of lovingness: the aggressive violence is now based on & fused with the cooperative sociability of the beginning of the show. Schechner here gives us the image of an inwardly conformist outwardly brutal society, based on & intending murder, its citizens loving Pentheus but as a corporate entity dionysiac: exuberant, lawless, irrational, appetitive & active—his exposure of the rational, moral, pious society idealized by Euripides. This finale presents a synthesis of the loving & the destructive elements of the hip. Call it fas-

cism. The close, emotional, open & cynical (quite hippiesque) comradeship of SS, cops, Marines informs the vicious hatred of the Others, the authorized aggressions & open coercions within the community. A mobilization of the directionless energies of basic emotions, the *élan* of a life force, unreason, hatred of reason, a great deal of gaiety unites them. The end of this production presents a dionysiac spirit in something like Nietzsche's sense. Schechner & the Group don't like it.

But this conclusion is ambiguous in its implications as regards the hippie dionysiac. One interpretation would be: "since the positive hip turns into the negative hip & by nature is both, its true & obviously evil form is the fascist spirit in which the two are combined & conscious." If this were Schechner's argument, the show would be anti-hip content-wise. To my mind this argument is valid. The spirit of the Hitlerjugend is an example of such a synthesis, the hip complete & conscious in both its forms. The spirit of love in opposition to authority but failing to rebel & instead copping-out into nihilism not only flips out into gratuitous destructions of self & others but fuses into loving communality—authoritarian & in the service of the authorities.

But there is an alternative interpretation which I think the show more nearly seems to intend: that fascism is the essence of societies which repress hip anarchic individualism, irresponsible spontaneity, the free flow of love. Under this interpretation, the show presents the argument: "though it is true that the flower child & the Hell's Angel are two sides of a coin, that the loving hip is (or is apt to turn into) the vicious hip, yet unorganized spontaneous individualistic nihilist violence is a price worth paying for personal liberty &



authenticity because the repression of them both—law & order it's called—leads to worse violence." Hence pro-hip.

The production seems to exhort us to risk a life of gentle unrestrained lovingness even though it entails the inexplicable threat of turning into murderous destructiveness. This complex position seems to be concretized in terms of the relations between the sexes: urging men to abandon themselves to heterosexuality even though this is dangerous (women being prone to hate & hurt men, to penis envy)—exhorting us to cut the oedipal strings even so, faced by the worse alternative of sterile joyless violence.

So much for the messages. As to the form: the theatrical event, a small-scale social universe, is intended to be hip. It so works out. But in the sense of the dialectic: the purely gentle reveals itself as viciousness, then both turn out elements of the domineering. The spectator finds himself placed in a proto-fascist universe. (Do remember that fascism—e.g., the military life—is idealist, comradely & often enthusiastic!) Thus this production suggests that the first of the alternative arguments on the hippie dionysiac is the true one.

We freely choose our seats. The group does not come on as a phalanx. They approach us on individual terms, themselves disunited. Individual actors do their thing right next to this or that spectator. We are let in on their confusions, hesitations, hang-ups. The manner of line-delivery & the freedom of timing support this picture. Inter-action grows out of individual exercise, group-action out of inter-action. Until the end, the scattering of props, actors, audience symbolizes effectively a looseness of group-structure indicative of individual spontaneity. The activity is in the manner of gut-action tempered by heart.

But the authoritarian element dominates as it by its nature must if it is to be present at all. It is not delivered in a distinct package—it is the structure of the theatrical event which is shaped into a *closed-off universe*. It throws out the real lives, the outside existence of both actors & spectators, their chance to express what they are—i.e., have already become. It expresses the objective of a self-contained experience, *pre-*

arranged by the producers. It renders spontaneity & authenticity impossible. It is analogous to the totalitarian state's attempt to eliminate the private by assimilating it into the public.

The dispersed seating exposes the spectators to the physical aggressions of the performers—the actors were prepared to use force to move uncooperative spectators. The indifference to plausibility in the show's transition to homicidal bestiality is an emotional & intellectual aggression on us. The verbal & erotic approaches to us (audience-participation) operate as embarrassing challenges, the personal approaches of the actors to one another evolve into hurtful ego-biting.

Schechner's *mise-en-scène* is a staging of the whole theatrical event, the reactions or rather predicaments of the audience included. He has directed the Group with a view to controlling the audience. A peculiar interaction between it & the Group is such that the audience can only be *responsive* & that only feebly & making a fool of itself. No stimuli for audience initiative, no opportunities for creative participation or spontaneous interference; the fervent *élan* of the event & the acrobatic aptitudes & collective intensity of the Group all work in the opposite direction. The audience is a heavy, older, seated, idealless, passive mass exposed to the leaping crowd of good-looking young athletes. They are in the position of the spectator whose watch is pounded to bits by the magician. Such theatre is the opposite of *street theatre*, in which the preoccupations of the public structure the theatrical event, integrate it, open it up.

The choice of the European classic with its metric language imposes an extrinsic traditionalist culture-order on the event. The original is present to mind restrictively. So nobody is doing their own thing in the simple *thetic* sense. Not having written the play, Schechner himself is not quite doing his own thing. It isn't just that the actors & the director are limited by the plot & the lines but that they & the audience are placed in an event rendered authoritative by classic prestructuration. The social order of this little universe is pre-ordained.

The demand of unreserved niceness made by & on the actors & the spectators is not nice but fantastic: the only possible re-

sponses are torturedness & phoniness. In the context of the large injunction to cool lovingness, the breakdown into viciousness is inevitably experienced as a defeat: time limitations of a performance proscribe resolutions which in psychotherapy take weeks, months, longer. The purity of the hip ideal is presented as challenge but cannot possibly be realized in feeling or action. The benign demand of an impossibly unreserved fellowship is a key-gambit of totalitarianism to shatter the subject's ego, generate the dionysiac energies of the collective. Thus in fact the actors were incapable of going beyond a shallow pretense & perfunctory enactments of goodwill & ease. Their aggressions are restrained by the limiting ordinations of the play & its production—and governed by them. This weakens their nastiness & ipso facto their purgative value. The aggressions have a character of guided group violence, of tolerated, half-official bullying.

It is obvious that the lovingness would naturally if genuine develop into a sexual orgy with everyone participating & the aggression into actual fighting. Both tendencies are subverted into the ritual of theatre. This ritual could be viewed as sublimation except that the gymnastic intensity of the performance, the mobilization of gut-emotions, presumably do generate some tendency toward these actual actings-out which the ritual represses. The breakdowns of lovingness into viciousness call for control. If that control suppresses them both we have a conservative society or theatre. If it stimulates & uses them, a fascist society or theatre.

In this show, the gently permissive cool lovingness of the hippie—the goal of a physical theatre purely of lovingness—has created on the small scale of a theatrical event a fascist type of universe, a situation structured by oppression & repression, by the stimulation of basic emotions coerced into fake non-liberative (in fact tense-making) expression, in the service of a collective enterprise of propaganda for an abstract ideal, in the service of welding spectators & Group into a passionate but inauthentic community. America, inspired by the high ideals of individualism & service, hip, is on the same road.

FALL, 1968

The hip combination of relaxed flippancy & uncommitted sincerity has changed into humor, putting the passionate goings-on (the make-believe character of which it certifies) into perspective for the spectators. Hip lovingness is wedded to humor, made dispassionate & uncoercive by it—but humor is divorced from the free hormonal flow which lovingness has become since last spring. The change is due to better timing & delivery, & to Dionysus turning away from the Thebans & toward the audience.

The end of the play is now meaningless but humorous. While the Thebans are scrubbing their blood off the mat, Dionysus, their new ruler, casts himself as a candidate for office in a jolly speech to the audience, presenting his platform & asking for votes. He asks them to acknowledge that they would like nothing better than to go home & fuck. He scatters "Dionysus in 69" campaign buttons, but whereas in the spring version this intimated the Group's anticipation of fascism it now suggests only that platform: "let's make this country free—sexually." The Group forms a military formation & marches out into empty Wooster St. & around the corner, shouting. Good fun.

Humor is a reaction to the guilt-induced dread that shadows & vivifies desire—a way of coping which suppresses rather than diminishes it. At the end of this production, humor provides relief, does not so much nuance the emotional experience as dilute it. The spectator is left off the hook.

The lovemaking is now intimate & passionate, muscular and to the point. Except for Finley-Dionysus' seduction of Shephard-Pentheus, it is neither tender nor personal, without indication of character. The choreography of these anonymous couplings suggests the impersonality of street prostitution. Their intensity, duration, realism (from brief foreplay to orgasm) *makes the play a sex show*: a play of unsentimental enthusiasm. They are unbridled, glandular, safely harmonious—everyone pursues his proper orgasm. Dionysus now arouses rather than soothes Pentheus. Thus an *abstract ideal*, remote from reality & psychology, is being demonstrated: androgyny.

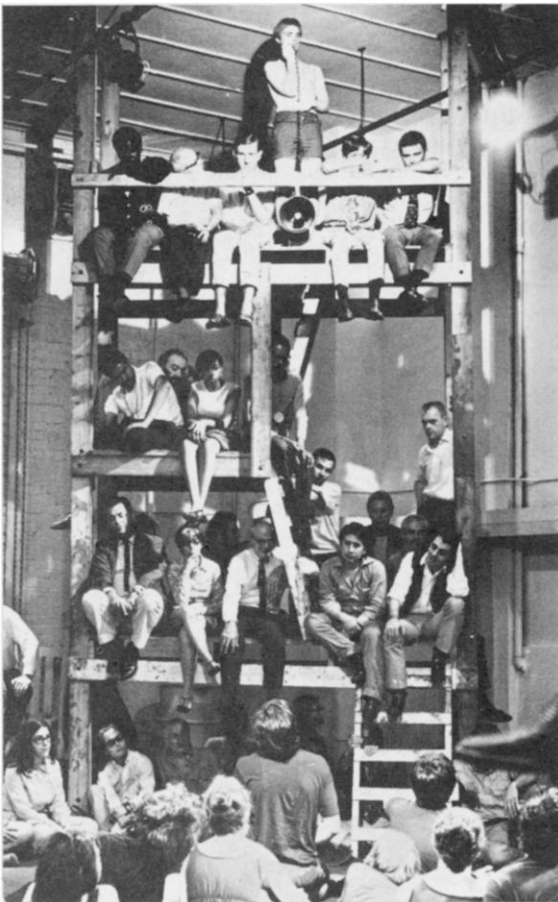
nous promiscuity, a riskless loss of self. Play, adventure & love are left out. The performers' idealism & devotion to the ideal are evident—touching if chilling. The play passes in a flash of thighs, its primary impact (hetero) sexual. It has become a simulated enactment/glorification of erotic passion, counterposing it to repressive authority & telling the spectator to free himself "as a person" by fucking—fucking freely—the telling hopefully consisting in a putting-in-evidence within him or her emotionally & the ambiguity of the exhortation hopefully resolved in the act. The spectators of course are unfree & fuck unfreely.

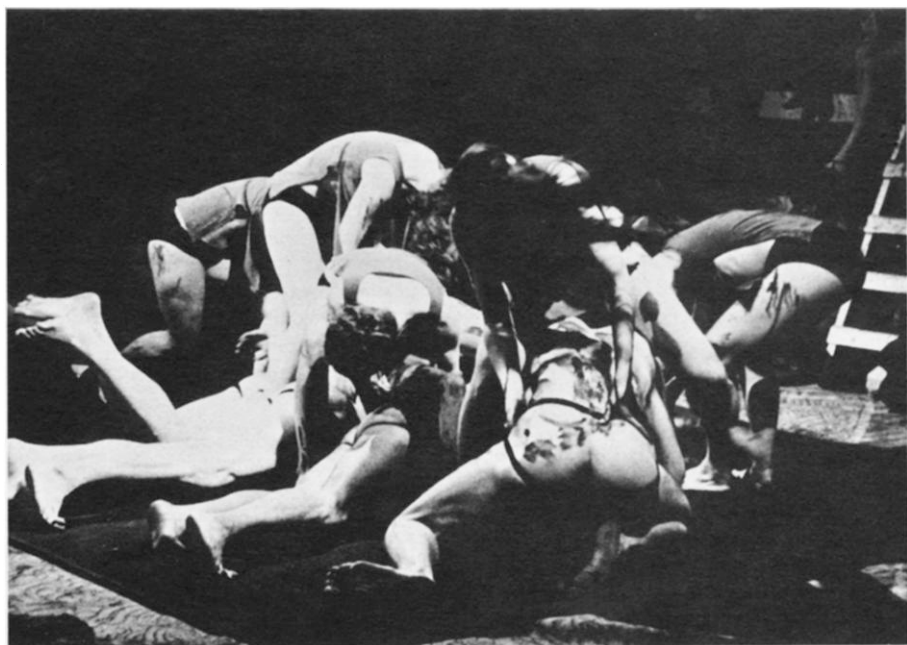
The humor does not mitigate the show's enthusiastic endorsement of screwing; it specifies the ideal: easy fucks...the Heffner-Krassner thing. We are made voyeurs but not allowed the real-life voyeur's sense of superiority. We are *invited* to see & know there is no real passion to share. Since they are not doing it for real it's not a dirty show: there are some attractive bellies, thighs, buttocks to stare at—but here an aura of principle, of hang-ups, keeps you down & anyway we don't have to go to the theatre for image-fodder these days.

Yet the intently sincere euphoria of the coital propaganda strikes home. Frustrated lovers, we are reminded of our deficiencies & failures & find it hard to refuse allegiance to the ideal promoted; we are almost forced to discount as priggish ego-defense our finding it second-rate & its promotion suspect. Though some few may appreciate the show as a romp & anybody may get a little randy in the usual (compulsive, anxious) way, the general effect is stunned introspection, the sadness, the desperation of taking stock of oneself. The attitude promoted—other than self-deprecation—is frantic lust for lust. The strength of the inhibitions impoverishing our life-life is not diminished. The exposure to the ideal is apt to strengthen the fears that stymie us. As on hearing the party noises across the hall, we are apt to feel jealous self-pity—left out.

In part because of the artistry of the directing & ensemble-acting, the hold of the show has increased considerably. A careful orchestration of leaping, contortions, shouting & whispering all about you & through a wide register of intensities maintains a tensing disorganization of the space into sensory surprises—as well as an incantatory hypnotism. This form communicates fear. Both effects are heightened by the closure of the Group against the audience which encloses the audience in their fearful universe. Both the way the spectators are soon abandoned by the actors after having been invited onto the dance floor & the way the blouseless girls tend to a segregationist choreography with the male actors are manipulatory. They destroy the illusion of participation they create. Presupposed: the willingness of an American audience to actively cooperate in producing an appearance of participation. This willingness to fake co-managerial status is indispensable to the democratic processes & corporate economy of this country. The production's calling on them is not fascist but simply modern American.

The same applies to the lines addressed to individual spectators by individual performers. The only free reaction & thus the only genuine participation possible is a gesture of refusal to participate. If genuine audience participation is excluded, is a liberative effect possible?





But the show is powerful, essentially because it activates an (or the most) important personal concern, everybody's: it frightens our ego by reminding it of our non-conformity to its two principles of reality & pleasure. This effect is altogether admirable.

But the production's conceptions of reality and pleasure are trivial: those of a compulsive anxious insecure ego. If it did activate us to a stronger pursuit of the ideal it proposes, this would make us neither happier nor freer. Secondly, it does not so activate us—it reenforces inhibition. This inhibition is not the result of a lack of orgasmic fulfillment (of which it is rather one cause); it results from a failure of self-affirmation in turn due to a failure to rebel against authority (cf. Reich). Not only does the show not incite to a clean break with parent, law, order: it is conciliatory. It proposes a substitute—screwing.

The serious idealization of sex is a comic middle-class hang-up: the willed rejection of already interiorized middle-class inhibitory values, the ultimate adherence to which forces this reflection on drive & act & their sublimation into right conduct—it is *proper* to get in as much fucking as you can. It is *all right*. They not only (like part of the lower classes) feel that sex is dirty, but feel obliged to combat this feeling for the sake of a consistent personality.

The lovingness of the spring version was a shield against contained violence. The Don Juanism into which it has matured lacks

this internal relation to violence but like it is to make up for a failure to love. Stunted by a failure to purge itself of violence by turning it against coercive authority, the hip naturally degenerates into the egoism of rut—a sterile & vulnerable egoism prone to *victimization*. The theme of gynophobia & a mythoform exhortation to frank homosexuality have over the summer emerged as this production's *latent content*. This has further reduced the relevance of the verbal plot & fable. But this weakening of the show's dramatic line & power on the verbal level could have been made up for by so directing the elements conveying that latent content as to make it overt. The Group backed off.

The theme of gynophobia is carried by the slaying. Though the love-making has now become passionate rather than gentle, the transformation of passionate caresses into castratory gestures of dismemberment is a purely visual device. The scene does not so much project the wildness of women as *the fear of the victims*. Its kinetics intimate the apprehensions of combat missions & the orgiastic *mise-en-scène* submerges the fable-nexus between death & orgiastic ecstasy. This carries the emotional nexus to the fore & we respond to it—but weakly. Weakly, because *mise-en-scène* & acting, being hopelessly concerned with making the women seem predatory, fail to compel either a dominant mood of terror or an evolution of mood from passion to terror. Instead we have a mere succession; the anxiety is not what desire grows into & traps you in, but only an ineffectual codicil. The de-

velopment is further confused by incomprehensible references to Columbia & Watts, irrelevantly seeming to condemn all violence—they throw us off into a search for political meaning rendered hopeless by the personal & biological tenor of the rest of the show.

The efficacious staging of fear & of the transmutation of desire into fear would have achieved dramatic power in spite of the jettisoning of the fable. It would have transformed the jejune hedonism by showing its complement of panic—making the play a metaphysically if not in every case psychologically sound commentary on it: the rush to woman covering the fear of death even where its blind haste is not sped on by fear of achievement. That the Group has not grasped this opportunity for drama & truth can only be explained by a shying away from insight. By fear.

The theme of guilt is potentially carried by the scene in which the Agaves, changing from females to daughters to mothers (a change the production neglects), realize what they have done. But they act this scene in a mildly pathetic manner as grieving

widows. If they did it strongly enough to move us strongly enough to forget about the fable in which it has no relation to any male fear of women, we could sense its nexus to sexual desire. The progression of emotions would be psychologically valid & dramatic: guilt is the basis of the fear stunting sexual desire (& making it interesting).

The story of Pentheus has become central to the production. Bill Shephard from being no actor has become a good one; his experiences over the summer led him to reject his initial authoritarian interpretation of Pentheus. He now starts out playing him as a reasonable, responsible, mildly conservative ruler. His counselors Cadmus & Tiresias have become strident rebels. This sets Pentheus up as juvenile victim. Thus the play has become apolitical. The theme of resistance to authority has been dropped. Rejected by woman, Pentheus no longer acts out existential anguish but is merely shattered. Catching him on the rebound, Dionysus turns him on. While the failure with woman is played in a corner, the seduction into homosexuality is center-stage: a graphic

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distribution of emphasis. The text here suggests he goes down on Dionysus but Dionysus' later "you have done nothing for me" may indicate the reverse & in any event Shepard then beautifully plays not only gratification but giddy infatuation with Dionysus (to the extent that his compliance when Dionysus sends him to woman is a little hard to understand). Remaining passive, he is loved to death by women unmindful of him, intent on their own satisfaction. The plot told by the text is submerged by a fate brought home to us in events of emotional impact: joyful liberation by sex with an older man is foiled by conformist submission to the mortal horrors of intercourse with women. The story's abstraction from the Euripidean plot's verbiage gives it an archetypal air. It expresses not just gynophobia but a homosexual experience of life.

By the extent to which they stick to the verbal plot & by focussing on what the women do, the Group covers up this homosexual myth of redemption foiled, sacrificing drama as well as personal insight.

WINTER, 1968-69

Since Grotowski saw it, salient parts of the show are in the nude. The girls' pubic hair is incredibly pretty. This total exposure cuts down on the puerile sexology, gets us back to a weakened, delicately pink-& white version of the Birth Ritual's adoration of the flesh. The Living Theatre's cacophonies have been drawn on for some pretty antiphony. The recasting of the two main male parts suggests an admirable community spirit. New text elaborates on the fearful poetry of seduction into homosexuality. The latent gynophobia of the slaying has been verbally dramatized into overt misogyny. But this latter has been made to seem merely ostensible by increased stress on Dionysus' manipulation of the women—a contextually meaningless plot-theme, residue of the lost political message. Everything has been changed. Nothing is changed.

SUMMATION/EXPLANATION

What was intended as a conservatively liberal friendly critique of the New Left (Schechner: "I wanted to warn the New Left of its leaders.") turned out a seemingly hip defense of the hip & warning of fascism. Over the summer this developed into what seemed on the surface an apolitical eulogy to



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sex, but underneath seemed the opposite: a gynophobic even homosexual theatre of fear.

Frightened by the increasing orientation of the Left toward power, violence & discipline (interpreted as generically Dionysiac & as shared with fascism), the Group decided to put on a show combining the endorsement of libertarianism with a warning against wildness. Ideologically, this identification of serious & militant leftism with fascism (by way of confusing it with the hip & identifying aspects of the hip with fascism—an identification of libertarian with repressive violence, of libertarian with repressive organization) is an apology for not committing oneself to revolution against repressions experienced as insufferable. Because of their anxiety to emphasize the endorsement more than the withdrawal (the fear-reaction), first the pro-hip then the pro-erotic theme came to overglare the anti-violence theme which they were ashamed to bear down on. Disheartened by the agony of non-violent civil-disobedience, scared by its transformation among some middle-class white youth & the Negroes into more aggressive, power- & violence-oriented forms, the Group transformed what had turned out a manual for (hip) civil disobedience into a sex manual: a retreat from politics into the personal. But personal life is also a place of fear & violence—particularly for those fleeing to it from the aggressions of instituted repression (parental, economic, or political). Divorcing from the militant Left, the Group had to hold up the personal (specifically sexuality) as an ideal without examining its sterilities & pathologies—which, by focussing their art on it, they had their noses ground into. This conflict of ideological idealism & personal insight might explain *Dionysus in 69's* bizarre combination of overt puerile hedonism & latent timidity (guilt, dread, gynophobia, homosexuality).

The libertarian liberal experiences this society as *horrible* & fascism as a *threat*. The same lack of guts (fear of life) that keeps him from opposing these experienced horrors existentially by a commitment to the violence, power & discipline (& the irrational faith) of revolution keep him from self-analysis, from feeding his horror into authentic action. It reduces his lust for life

to an abstract, joyless, fearful vitalism. Fear is the authentic content of his idealist action & ambiguity its authentic form.

The resulting theatre was powerful, a theatre of fear disguised—not a fascist theatre, but a theatre by & for victims. The Group had withdrawn from the audience as from the world but exercised power over it by enclosing it in the fearful universe of its intimate horrors, a universe of joylessly egoist obsession acted out in endless repetition in an atmosphere of dread, guilt & defensive humor & (formally) of incessant shocks organizing into compulsive rhythm. We were made to share the Group's anxiety.

Now, threat theatre which had become theatre of anxiety is degenerating into entertainment. As in Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, the many changes mean organic development. The production lives. This may be a breakthrough for modern theatre. It certainly is exemplary. But it's also a desperate thrashing about in search of an authenticity that the Group has so far denied itself, settling instead for a socially & commercially successful appealingness.