

Task and Vision Revisited: Two Conversations with Willem Dafoe (1984/2002)

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In the latter part of 1984, the late Michael Kirby, then the editor of *The Drama Review*, commissioned me to write an essay based on an interview with the actor Willem Dafoe for a special issue devoted to the concept of the performance persona. I no longer recall why Kirby called on me, if I ever knew. I was at a very early stage of my career – a newly minted PhD in Theatre with two articles in academic journals and two years of full-time teaching experience under my belt. Certainly, I was (and remain) very interested in actors and performers, what they do and how they think about what they do. And I had done an article on the Living Theatre, based on an interview with Judith Malina, during their not-so-triumphant return to New York City, published in *American Theatre* earlier in 1984. Whatever motivated Kirby, I owe both him and Willem Dafoe a debt of thanks. The impetus Kirby gave me to think about the concept of persona and the conversation I had with Dafoe both provided important fodder for my subsequent thinking. In much of the work I have done since – whether focused on performance art, stand-up comedy, or rock music – the idea of persona has served me well as a way of conceptualizing a performed presence that isn't a character (in the usual sense) but that also is not quite equivalent to the performer's "real" identity.

I was a young and unknown academic at the time I first interviewed Dafoe, and he was a young (we are around the same age) and not generally well-known actor who had gained some repute around the downtown New York performance scene and was just embarking on what would prove to be a highly successful parallel career as a film actor.¹

¹ At the time I first spoke with Dafoe, he had acted in several independent films and one fairly high profile feature, Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* (1983). He was about to go to work on *To Live and Die in LA* (dir. William Friedkin, 1985) and would achieve stardom with *Platoon* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1986). According to the filmography, at www.rottentomatoes.com, Dafoe has been featured in 40 films, including two

We met in his drafty, underheated lot in New York's Soho at the time the Wooster Group was performing in *L.S.D* (. . . *Just the High Points*. . .) and had a vigorous, caffeine-fueled conversation that lasted several hours. From this discussion, I distilled the article entitled "Task and Vision: Willem Dafoe in *L.S.D*." Although the special issue on persona for which I wrote it never came to fruition, an edited version of the article did appear in *TDR* in the summer of 1985, in an issue that featured a special section of essays on the Wooster Group, including pieces by Arnold Aronson and David Savran.

My 1984 conversation with Dafoe revolved around several themes. One was the particular role he played in Wooster Group performances and the way that role evolved from aspects of his own personality and his relationship to other members of the group. Although Dafoe talked about his own experience, his conception of the process by which performance personae evolved in the group's work can be gleaned from his comment on Ron Vawter:

When we make a theatre piece, we kind of accommodate what [the performers] are good at or how they read. They have functions, so it's not like we treat each other as actors and there has to be this transformation. We just put what Ron brings to a text and formalize it: it definitely comes from Ron as we know him, as he presents himself to the world and then, of course, when you formalize it and it becomes public in a performance, that ups the stakes a little bit. That's not to say Ron is just being himself, but you're taking those qualities that he has and you're kind of pumping them up and putting them in this structure. (1997: 41)

This quotation points to another issue we discussed extensively: different modes and registers of acting and performing characterized by different degrees of illusionism or anti-illusionism. Acting, Pretending, Transformation, Enacting, Presenting, and Sketching were all among the key words Dafoe used to define a range of different possibilities for describing what performers do. Placing his own performances with the Wooster Group on the anti-illusionistic end of the performance spectrum, he suggested that his satisfaction in performance, his version of catharsis, comes from the execution of a role conceived as a series of tasks. "It's just about being it and doing it," he said; my own gloss was:

This leaves the mind free – instead of trying to fill the moment with emotions analogous to the character's (Stanislavski), the performer is left to explore his own relationship to the task he is carrying out. . . .The possibility of meditateness leads to a kind of catharsis, defined entirely in terms of the performance structure: "The way I get off in the performances is when I

documentaries about cinema and one about yoga, from 1983 through the middle of 2002.

hit those moments of real pleasure and real clarity and an understanding about myself in relationship to the structure; it is work, it is an exercise of me for two hours, behaving a certain way, and it can become meditative.” The creation of persona from self results in a measure of self-understanding. (1997: 43-44)

In the article, I went on to note that “Film acting is the unavoidable point of reference for a definition of performance as the development of a persona” (1997: 44); Dafoe’s ideas concerning the relationship between live performance and film acting became another major theme of our conversation. Dafoe draws parallels between the process of making a film and that of making a theatre piece. Typecasting, “the fact that they’ve cast me in this role, is not unlike a certain kind of tailoring that we do at the [Performing] Garage” (1997: 44).² The technical requirements of film acting correspond to the score of a Wooster Group performance and provide Dafoe a similar opportunity for reflection on his relationship as a performer to an inclusive process. “When you’re doing a scene, you’ve gotta hit that little mark and if you don’t hit the mark it spoils the shot. And, somewhere, I respond to that. Most people find that distracting, but that allows the frame for something to happen; it cuts down on my options and I’m a little more sure about what I want to do at any given point” (1997: 44-45). As in Wooster Group pieces, the imposition of a specific task creates a degree of freedom within the structure. “You get no sense of having to produce anything. What you’re thinking about in a funny way is your relationship, almost literally, to this whole big thing, the 20 guys around, the black box, you’re dressed up in a suit or you’re dressed up in leather. You get some taste of what they want you to come across with, but what energizes you is the whole situation” (1997: 45).

Dafoe’s saying that there was no significant difference for him in terms of process and affect between performing in a Wooster Group piece and acting in a film was surprising and provocative to me. I was much more used to the stage actor’s ideology, according to which film acting is a different and somewhat debased form of acting, and the activist ideology of the experimental theatre of the Vietnam era, according to which participation in mainstream media was tantamount to selling out. Dafoe’s attitude seemed to me to represent a new way of thinking about the artist’s relationship to cultural politics, an idea that proved pivotal to the central argument of my essay “Toward A Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre,” first published in *Theatre Journal* in 1987.

² During our second conversation, Dafoe told me that he no longer feels typecast in films now that he’s had the opportunity to perform a wide variety of screen roles.

The seeming ease with which the post-1960s generation of American theatre experimentalists has adapted itself to the demands of commercial film and television may seem disturbing; certainly, the ability to move back and forth fluidly between commercial and political/aesthetic performance was not considered a worthy objective by the sixties generation. This is not to suggest that theatrical experimentalists of that decade did not participate in commercial projects, but only that the current generation clearly no longer feels the need to justify such work on the grounds that it makes other, politically subversive, work possible. [. . .] From a postmodernist point of view, this adaptability is arguably symptomatic of a healthy lack of distinction between high and popular art in postmodern culture; from the perspective of a more traditional analysis of political art, it could be seen as implying an alarming lack of integrity on the part of young experimental artists. Certainly, the phenomenon raises the question of whether or not the avant-garde or political artist need claim to take up a position outside of the dominant discourse; my argument here suggests that such a claim has no clear utility under postmodernism. In order to address a conception of culture as a conjunction of adversarial cultural practices, the artist must position herself among those practices. (1997: 68)

I elaborated this argument further in my book *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* and returned once again to Dafoe's comment in my later book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. This time, I argued that Dafoe's lack of interest in making distinctions between performing with the Wooster Group and acting in films is symptomatic of the closing gap between the cultural contexts of avant-gardism and mass culture – as well as the cultural categories of live and mediatized – in a media-saturated society (1999: 29). Dafoe's remarks on his relationship to live performance and film acting have been important touchstones for me in my own thinking about the relationship between live and mediatized modes of performance.

Since that first conversation with Willem Dafoe had fed my thinking about performance and its contexts in so many important ways, I seized the occasion of the Brussels Wooster Group conference (16-18 May 2002) as an opportunity to meet with him again, which we did in February 2002, once again at his loft in Soho, now a more elegant place than the one I remember from our earlier encounter. The circumstances of this conversation were considerably more formal than the first one – the interview had to fit into Dafoe's complex schedule and time for it was limited. As I had chosen to videotape the conversation, we were surrounded by equipment and camera people (a situation in which Dafoe was perfectly comfortable, of course, but I was not) and so on. We revisited many of the questions we had discussed in 1984 and talked about Dafoe's current perception of the Wooster Group, his sense of

what kind of performing he does with the group, the Wooster Group's use of technology, and his current impressions of the relationship between his work as a Wooster Group performer and a well-known movie actor.

Many of Dafoe's comments were very consistent with his earlier ones. He still describes performing, whether in theatre or film, in terms of the pleasure of carrying out tasks that gain meaning from the discursive structure that contains them; as a performer, Dafoe remains concerned primarily with the integrity of individual moments rather than their thematic relationship to a whole. He does not see performing as a form of interpretation or intentional communication; his job, rather, is to make specific images available to the audience, which is left free to interpret them. Some of his remarks clearly reflected the years of experience he has accumulated with the Wooster Group and as a film actor since we first talked, particularly when we discussed the Wooster Group's status as an institution and the importance of the opportunities and inspiration it has provided to younger performers. I thoroughly enjoyed resuming the conversation we had begun almost two decades earlier and found Dafoe to be as thoughtful and eloquent as ever.³

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A: I was thinking back on the last time we talked which, indeed, was some time in the mid-1980s and at that point the Wooster Group was hardly a fledgling operation. It had quite a few significant productions under its collective belt and was getting a fair amount of notice and respect within the experimental theatre audience and community. Here we are, almost twenty years later, and the Wooster Group is still going strong. I guess I'd like to start by getting some of your thoughts on the Wooster Group as an institution all these years later. Correct me if I'm wrong in anything that I say, but I have the sense that the Wooster Group is now very highly regarded within the world of people interested in experimental theater, as almost a matriarch of experimental theaters. Certainly, it's been mentioned to me in the last couple of years how influential the Wooster Group has been on other younger companies in other parts of the world and locally. So I thought we might begin with some reflections on that.

D: Sure, depends who you talk to. But I'm conscious that we've been around, some of us have been working together for over twenty-five

³ The text was transcribed from the edited videotape by Dawn Pendergast (who also edited the video) and edited by Philip Auslander. Material removed from the text to maintain flow and avoid redundancy is not indicated. Ellipses indicate pauses in speech, not absent words. All text that has been added to the transcribed text appears between brackets. The titles applied to sections of the interview also appear in the video.

years. Still, as I experience it personally, only up until recently, Liz [LeCompte] always approached every show like it was our last and it's sort of been a case of boy-crying-wolf or the woman-crying-wolf. We see that she does continue to work. But for many years it really felt like [the piece] we were working on was the last. This wasn't some coy way to make us concentrate. It was really very hard to make pieces. We don't work from a particular philosophy or methodology. It's a fluid thing. It evolves. It was very hard for her to project into the future. And I speak of her— I could as well speak of Kate [Valk], who figures very largely in the decisions of the group. There has been a change in that recently; I don't feel that so much. I feel like I can anticipate being very old and still making theater pieces with Kate and Liz. You're just aware of the longevity and you're also aware that some people that are making work started out as interns for us or worked with us for a while. There's quite a few groups in New York City that actually do quite good work that came through our *system*, our interning system. I'm aware of that, but beyond that, I get a little self-conscious because you know you're half blowing your horn. The word institution makes me nervous because I don't think of us as an institution.

A: Okay. Why don't we talk about your personal involvement in terms of your having done this for twenty-five years. What is it that keeps you doing it?

D: I think I still love to perform. And I love to perform in these pieces. Certainly my ideas about what I do and how I approach what I do have changed through the years but the thing that remains is that I like the sensation that I have when I'm performing. I like the sort of single purpose feeling that you have, the kind of concentration, the kind of grace that can be possible that you can accomplish through gesture. You feel useful. You feel unified. It's a state of being that I like a lot. It's a very selfish thing. It's a way to get away from myself to get to myself. It's a state that I like. It's a physical state. It's a mental state. And I can only find that...only certain situations present those opportunities. And the Wooster Group's work is one where I continually find it. I've always maintained that I'm more interested in dance than acting. That still holds true.

A: In other words, in the physical.

D: In the physical. The sensation. I think I'm interested in sensation.

On Acting

D: I find when you talk about approaching performing through task or you talk about action and you kind of get away from personality and psychology and interpretation, people get very cold and say "oh I get it,

you're like a technician or a craftsman." It's not true; I think it's true in task that emotion comes, just like a character's revealed through the story. Sometimes I feel like an athlete. The task is very simple. Do you want to tell me that watching a guy or a woman run a 100-meter race isn't emotional? What are they doing? They don't want you to think in a particular way. What are they concentrating on? They're concentrating on getting from here to there. But to watch them in the task can be a very emotional thing.

A: There are certain things that interested me a lot [in the earlier interview]. One of them was your saying on that occasion that in the live performances you felt that your relationship to the audience was a very abstract relationship, that you didn't have the same need for audience or connection to audience as some performers do. I was wondering if you continue to feel that way.

D: I think that's sort of true because I'm not charming and I don't want to learn how to be charming. And I think that if you think about the audience too much you get into this personality game of charming them. Also, there's this feeling that with a certain kind of contact with the audience, it's an unfair social relationship. Because they're sitting there and you're presenting something to them and it's as if you know something and you're going to impart this experience or this idea to them. I don't think in terms of that, particularly; the Wooster Group work doesn't work that way either. These are constructs that I can't quite account for. They interest me and they may have a point of view, but as an actor I don't have to know what that is necessarily. So I'm not an interpreter, I'm more like someone who is performing these tasks in front of these people in these different frames. And the audience will watch it. So that's a lot different than, I think, a lot of traditional theater. Sometimes when you do interviews, people ask you, what do you want the audience to feel? What do you want the audience to get from this? I never think in those terms.

A: They get what they get.

D: Yeah. Which sounds kind of glib or snotty, but I wouldn't presume to know what they need. I just assume that I'm a human being and they're human beings and we're coming together which has the great dynamic which I do love. It's not like I'm cold to people watching. It gives you great energy. But specifically, do they feed me? It's still an abstraction. Because if I start to get in their heads then I start to be too concerned with the *value* of things and the *meaning* of things.

On Technology

D: People will tell you different things but, for example in this piece [*To You, The Birdie! (Phèdre)*], our video stuff is home video stuff. Our sound stuff is home sound stuff. We started our quite humbly. Our computer stuff is home computer stuff. It was stuff that we had around. And when we get in a room and we make a piece, we bring our stuff with us. And it really doesn't involve ideas as much as these are wonderful tools to use to help us problem solve. The impulse is basically to get something on the stage. In some cases, to tell a story or work out something that we're playing around with to find our relationship to the text. But, as a performer, they're just tools, and sometimes we use them to actually take us away from ourselves, to take the control away from us. We have to cooperate with them. In this piece in particular, there are video screens that the audience does not see and there's a video that we use as subtext basically, physical subtext. They aren't things that we necessarily copy but they inform how we're doing something. It's like if I'm talking to you, I'm talking to you but I may be looking at a Bugs Bunny cartoon. That's going to affect how I'm talking to you and particularly if we play around with some imitations, some dialogue, with that unseen technology. If I'm watching, you know, a porno film, it's going to change how I talk to you. So we play around with that. We do a lot of mix of live and prerecorded stuff and that really is interesting because you have to figure in the mix all the time. You're a little off-balance. You're always a little fluid. You can't hunker down and absolutely control the performance because you've always got to reconsider the mix. Because even though you're working maybe with the same tracks, how it gets mixed each night by the technicians, who are basically performers – unseen performers, and how you feel that according to your feelings and how it comes to you. That's the tension and that's the play of performing in one of the theater pieces. So technology is just a . . . it's a wonderful go-between that helps us bounce stuff off of each other.

A: Just to go back a few minutes to what you just said with respect to the sort of dynamic of the actor behaving as if they had something to impart to the audience. I'm not sure if this is really connected, but I was thinking as I was going over things in my mind, of the frontal presentation of the Wooster Group.

D: Well, one thing [that] is very specific about the Wooster group is [that] we work with a lot of technology and it's never hidden, which is an enormous difference than most theater. Particularly now that the commercial theater uses more technology, they make great efforts to hide it more and more.

On Theatre and Film

A: Another thing you said the last time we met which really interested me and which I got, truthfully, a lot of mileage out of in terms of my own thinking about things was when we were talking about how you feel about theater performance versus film performance. Now that you've made a *lot* more movies than you had when we first met, I'd like to talk some more about that... how you see the process of acting in films. At the time you basically said to me that you saw no difference, in terms of process, between what you do in the Wooster Group and what you do in films.

D: I'm a little bit still there.

A: It's okay. It's not a problem. I'm just curious.

D: I'm a little bit there and all the films have such different...they've got their own rules. Each film kind of makes its own rules and makes its own process. You know the huge difference that I feel, the useful way to think about it, the simple way, is film is like a musician in a recording studio. Stage: you're performing in a bar. You know, that's what it comes down to. Film, of course, is totally fragmented and you're basically making these things and then someone else orders them. But the biggest difference lately that I keep on thinking about is in film you're often addressing, basically, your first impulses, you're hitting a scene. Okay, you rehearse and all that stuff, *maybe*. But basically, on most films you walk in the room, you check it out, you block the scene, you maybe talk about it, you do some things, and then you shoot it. And that's it. And you never visit it again. Of course, the editor visits the material but you as an actor never visit it again. Where, in theater, no matter how loosely structured the performance you're doing is, you keep on revisiting the same things over and over and over and over again. And you have to develop a way to receive and to reinvest and not only is that a helpful talent to learn in life, but that's the magic of the theater. That never gets tested in film because basically you're dealing with everything for the first time. So sometimes we joke that what we do is the New Naturalism in the Wooster group. Because basically we're traditional in that even though the scenic elements and a lot of things [are] anti-illusionistic, let's say, we still have that thing that everything is created for the first time. There is that illusion and it's not really an illusion because usually the mix, no matter how tight, how meticulous the score, the mix always shifts around. Your investment in it always shifts around and that's the pleasure of performing for me.

D: What's interesting about film is that constantly, you're always anticipating what it's going to be *later* when you first start out and try to craft the performance with those things considered. And after a while

you realize you can never anticipate so you might as well deal with what's in front of you. It's like if I decide that... I'm trying to think of a clever little example... Let's say if we know that I'm going to kill you at the end of the movie, I may say "well it'd really be cool to do some kind of gesture or something" so when you see me kill him you can say "Oh yes! I saw that in that scene because there was that moment where he grabbed his hand a little too hard or something." It gets into kind of schticky bullshit stuff because then you're anticipating the effect of things. I mean it's like when I go back to that thing about identifying with being an athlete. I trust sort of biological truth. When the guy runs from here to here, you know, he runs and stuff happens to him and that's what you see.

A: I think you've been clear on what the pleasure [is] for you in performing in the Wooster group, but what is the pleasure for you in acting in film?

D: Similar. It's also the life adventure stuff. I've really always been attracted to location movies. I've attended to my *career*, let's say, less than I have to working with interesting people. I like the adventure of it. And there's something beautiful about a bunch of people getting together with this equipment, with this General. You know, I always think of it like an invading army, it's so single purpose. Even on a low budget movie with very few resources, it has a schedule. It has deadlines. These people have to come together [in] different roles... It's a real collaboration. Each person comes, bringing their expertise to this event that's happening right before your eyes. You figure into that event. It's romantic. It's more like how we make our theater pieces. A bunch of people come into a room and make this thing. And I like that kind of community that comes together to make a thing. And I think that's true in a more personal way in the Wooster group because we own the place. We tell our stories. Our impulses are ours. And although we have economic concerns, [we] don't have the same kinds of business concerns that film does because it's such a popular medium and it's such an expensive medium. I think the pleasure has to do with the adventure and in the crudest way, once again, the pleasure of being an actor is to experience these different things. It's a great exercise in empathy. It's a great exercise in the possibility of transformation. I mean, I argue with people that know me whether I'm a narcissist or not. But you know, I'm always fascinated by this – you got to get away from yourself in order to find the commonality, to find yourself. It all sounds like so much New Age stuff, but I am interested in this stuff because it keeps on occurring to me. I just finished a movie in December. They said "Where are you going? What are you doing next?" And I said "Well, I'm going to work with this company that I've worked with for quite a while." And the guy

said [condescendingly] “That’s *great*. You’re doin’ some theater. That’s *great*.” You know, that’s the attitude. If they don’t know, they don’t know, that’s all I can say.

A: Well, there are a lot of different dimensions to this, but there is this weird way of thinking in this country, particularly from the film industry point of view, about going *back* into the theater.

D: Well, yeah. I mean, nobody does it. I mean I’m lucky because I had this company before and it functions and it’s functioned all the way through. People have been dedicated to keeping it together. We’re still functioning. Most people will only go to theater when there’s nothing interesting going on in film where that’s not the case with me. The only thing that I’m conscious of is, once again: I’ve been doing this for long enough that I always felt like I was the young kid passing through and now, all of a sudden, overnight, I’ve become the old man. I’m only forty-six years old, but this kind of theater is a young person’s game. Because there’s no money in it. It’s a very poor theater. It’s very uncertain. There’s not a lot of social cachet so people that are ambitious, they have to really do it for the work. So if there’s a persona, I’m conscious of the life persona of a guy that’s chosen to stay in this young man’s game.

A: I was also thinking, in terms of the idea of community, [of] the films as being sort of temporary communities and the Wooster Group as an ongoing...

D: Yes, that’s very true.

A: Can I say permanent community? I don’t know.

D: It’s true. Film is a series of one-night stands and the Wooster Group is my wife. With all that’s great and horrible about the difference
b e t w e e n t h o s e t w o things.

